

A Little Distillery in Nowgong

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Draft

This excerpt is provided for distribution at the “Distillery Project” page linked to The Centre for Innovation in Culture and the Arts in Canada website (www.cicac.ca). This excerpt is from the beginning of the first section of the novel, and is intended to familiarize collaborators and others with the general precepts of the work.

All good stories begin with a birth

Jamshed takes a deep breath and feels the unfamiliar substance fill his nostrils, wave down his breathing pipes, and settle gaseously in his wet lungs. Not in the least bit fluid, the substance must be expelled, immediately and predictably, and Jamshed does this with a noise that surprises even him, a cry that is at once too loud for the occasion and not quite loud enough for the offense. What a few moments ago would have emerged from his mouth as a burble comes forth fully sounded now, travelling at a wavelength that surpasses that which he has become used to. Exhaling, he realizes, with or without sound effects, will be much easier this way. Not the comfortable, easy equilibrium of gentle external pressure on his chest cavity gracefully letting the breath from him, but a surprisingly light movement performed from somewhere beneath his diaphragm that can veritably shoot his breath further from his body than he has ever experienced. Indeed, instead of his liquid exhalations cocooning around him, his gaseous expulsion is gone from his perimeter, nowhere to be felt. Instead, of course, is the feeling of death, clammy and rough, and it is as if the world itself, the world outside of the known world anyway, has breathed its worst back on Jamshed. There is no way he should have done this, no way at all. He was fine just a moment before, and he should have resisted that unfortunate impulse that led him to this ugly, cold, and unforgivingly bright space. All this Jamshed is experiencing, loathing the world, so he is genuinely surprised when his next breath, still harsh and bitter on his lungs, is not so shockingly painful as the first. Oh, yes, he still expels it in short order with the best little warrior cry his little lungs can muster, but this

time he finds he can modulate the tone and timbre of his noises by shaping his mouth this way and that, and it is not a displeasing experience. From a world of full containment to a world of such choices, opportunity! Okay, so it comes with a load of discomfort, but what the hell. By the time little Jamshed inhales his third breath of air, he has almost forgotten what it was like to breathe fluid, and he has convinced himself that it was not inevitable that he arrived at this place (for he could have resisted, fought back, put down roots, decided to stay put), but an act of will. This will go down in history as Jamshed's first conscious act. To be born instead of being not born.

He has a set of lungs that show his health, says the midwife, an elderly Parsi lady with flaring nostrils. *A crying baby is a healthy baby*, she says to the parents, neither of whom are listening to her.

He will be a true leader, thinks his father, a source of purity and truth, a man among men who will lead his people from the darkness to the light. Look at his eyes, so clear, even as he wrinkles up his entire face to bellow and complain! Those eyes will see past any horizon, and the people will see his eyes and it will be like looking onto asha, the very purity of his people. This boy, this man, this son of mine will be a dastoori like me, no question about it, and the people will say the Khargat family are the spiritual centre of Surat.

He is finally out of me, thinks his mother, and about time. Nine months, two weeks, and three days, and this her first which everyone said would be coming quickly, yes, that's what they

said when she came to her own mother, tearily, *I am with child and so early on in my marriage, why couldn't this wait?*

Don't worry, Soona, her mother had said, *you are four months along and already you are showing like six (and besides, what's all this about early-in-married life, it's been five years hasn't it, or is it six?) Unless you're carrying twins, this one will be a bigheaded one who will pop out in eight months, mark my words, only another four months, that's sixteen weeks, and out he comes*. Soona had not appeared on her mother's doorstep to complain; rather, she had come along with her husband for her *panchmasyu* ceremony, to commemorate the end of her fourth month of pregnancy. She dutifully accepted the attention paid to her, the ritualistic placing of vermilion paste on her forehead, the sprinkling of rose water and coconut, and Soona was actually feeling quite fine until she and her mother were sitting on the verandah together and Soona broke into tears. At first, her mother's dismissive comments actually gave Soona some comfort. At first. But at eight months to the day, she had gone to her mother and said, *what of this then, eight months you said, and here it is and the baby has not dropped as you said, there is no water breaking on the ground*.

Give it time, her mother had said, *it will be a week more, maybe two, but make no doubt, this baby will be born before the month is out and we are already mid-month are we not? You will see – and we have not yet performed the agharni, that should have happened last month, or we can do that in the ninth month, but mark my words, you will not have a ninth month*. Then again, at eight months and three weeks she returned to her mother and said nothing, just pointed at her belly and

then turned the same gesturing hand palm upward, a question mark in any language. *Well, her mother had said, a baby's natural path is almost nine months, you shouldn't complain, at nine months it will be big and healthy, just think of a the scrawny boy you would have birthed three weeks ago, you should be happy to keep him inside, even it means you need assistance to go from sitting to standing. And besides, we can do the agharni now, and we will all be pleased.* And then last week she had returned to her mother a final time. *The baby will not leave me. You must do something. You must give me something.*

Like what, her mother asked, do I look like a woman who gives medical advice? I studied maths at school and I keep your father's accounts, but look here, as soon as he gets the slightest belly ache, off I send him to the doctor. Do I try to treat him at home? Am I a nurse that I should do this? Go home, put your feet up, breathe deeply. Soona had looked at her mother and said simply, *the baby will not be born and by this time you said I'd be happily nursing away. I think I should not believe you in matters involving my family.* But the next week, finally, with a little funny sensation she thought was a result of the pickle she had eaten before bedtime, Soona awoke at three-twenty-three a.m., took a breath, and said to her husband, *yes, now it is ready.* In short order, the midwife had arrived and busied herself with midwifery type things, and the labour was easy at first, but that was because, she was to find out later, the labour had not begun in earnest. Not in the first two hours, not the first six. Only when the morning light was well upon them did the pains start, and did they last, all through the morning, the mid-day, well into the evening as the light faded. And into the

night. It was fully two in the morning when the midwife told her that the baby would be born soon, although she was lying to keep her from asking when the baby would be born. It was not until three-twenty-nine (a full day and six minutes past the first warning signs) that Jamshed's crown appeared. All too late and about time.

And so Jamshed was born in the town of Surat on the west coast of India. Nine months, two weeks, and three days earlier a mid-40s Dastoor looked fondly at his wife of five years. Although very much in love, they did not make love all that often, not for any particular reason, just that it didn't occur to them to do so, neither of them being especially needy in that area of human interaction. But at that moment, the Dastoor looked at his wife and reached out to touch her cheek. She looked back at him with love, although with some alarm since it was early afternoon in the middle of the summer and surely too hot to do anything but laze about in the shade until the late afternoon when it cooled every so slightly and one could return to the work at hand – which was, of course, precisely the reason her husband was at home, waiting for the reduced heat of the evening when he could return to his duties. So it surprised even him that he reached out and stroked his wife's cheek. And, as such things go, one thing led to another, and at the end of it all they lay side by side, perspiring far more profusely than might seem warranted under the circumstances. Jamshed's mother-to-be lay on her side, her feet propped up on a pillow to keep her feet cool (who knows if that up-propping was enough to convince an overheated spermatozoa that it might as well continue on its journey since it was after all downhill, and without which effort an egg might not have been

rudely awakened and little Jamshed, eventually, never born) and she thought of how this had been pleasant but would have been more so if this had happened when the sun wasn't so hot in the sky. But they had been married for five years without so much as a thought of pregnancy, so there was no need to entertain such thoughts right now, was there, at least that's what Soona thought at the time and continued to think for two months and then beyond that even though by then it had become obvious that either she was pregnant or something was seriously wrong, but even then. And then nine months, two weeks, and three days later Jamshed was born, and another nine months, two weeks, and three days later, after Jamshed's birth, there was much celebrating in Surat as the townsfolk bid goodbye to 1899 and welcomed in the turn of the century, the turn into the twentieth century. And all this was to make a profound difference to the Khargat family.

After Jamshed was born, he and Soona were immediately sequestered in a tiny room toward the back of the house, a room normally reserved for having tea in the middle of a summer day's heat. In one corner a divo was lit, and it was there that mother and child remained for six days, happily since it was the coolest room in the house and finally Soona was allowed some privacy. On the sixth evening, of course, her mother arrived to perform the chatthi, purifying both Soona and the room and bringing with her a set of new clothes that her grandson would wear to his first trip to the agiary.

And after Soona's mother had left, Jamshed's father proudly strutted into the room, produced a piece of fine writing paper, a quill he had borrowed from his friend Rustom (a customs

official and thus a fine writer), and a pot of red ink. *When Vehmai arrives, pronounced Beramshah, he will find before him such a beautiful boy that he will write only the finest destiny for the child.* Then, declaring himself a man after all, and man enough to produce a male heir, *I have decided on his name*, said Beramshah Khargat.

Whose name? asked Soona, looking fondly at her newborn.

Whose name? Whose name? Why, his name, the little fellow here, my son. I have decided on his name.

Soona looked up disinterestedly, smiled monalially, and said, *But he already has a name.*

Beramshah sputtered. *But I have not yet named him!*

Soona smiled in response. *Fine, then let us name him. We can decide on this together, can we not?*

But I have a name.

Indeed you do, and it is a fine name for a leader such as you, but our son should have a name that distinguishes himself.

That's not what I mean. I mean I have decided on a name for my boy.

Is it Ferozsha?

Ferozsha? Ferozsha! Certainly not. That is a girl's name, and my son is – he is my son and deserves a man's name.

Fine, fine, that he shall have then. A strong man's name. Aha. Sir John Malcolm, do you remember him? Governor of Bombay, a fine man and strong supporter to us Parsis. We shall call him Malcolm.

Malcolm? Malcolm! No, never, he should have a good Parsi name, a name that will recall his family's history, his legacy. This boy will grow to be an outstanding man, my dear, and he will follow in his father's footsteps. He will be a great Dastoor, mark my words, and his name should befit someone of this stature.

Sounds a bit conceited, does it not? Yes, he will be a fine young man, whatever path he chooses, but let's not give your heir airs before his time. Let us be careful in choosing a name.

But we are not choosing. I have chosen, is that not clear?

Abundantly. But life is a compromise. You say potayto, I say potahto, that sort of thing. So I will agree to compromise as well. You had a name picked out did you say?

I have a name picked out, indeed.

And I have a name picked out too. Oh dear. With all the names around, it's unlikely that it's the same name, I suppose.

That doesn't matter! He has a name. I am his father and I have decreed.

Oh decrees and degrees, I'm tired of all that. What did we just say about compromise?

Compromise?

Indeed. Let us do our son justice. You throw out your name and I shall discard mine.

Discard a perfectly good name, one that my son was born into?

Yes, that's a sacrifice I, as only a mother can, will make.

You will make?

Yes, I discard my name for my son, you throw out your name for my son.

My son.

Indeed.

And?

And we shall choose an entirely new name for him.

Which is?

Jamshed.

Jamshed?

Yes, wonderful. See what good a compromise does a body?

But – but what was the name you had originally chosen?

Shush! Don't you see how bad luck it is to utter a name that was once chosen and is now no longer?

But –

But nothing. From this day forth, neither of us will utter our previously chosen names for little Jamshed ever again. Indeed, we must put those names out of mind entirely, for they can only come back to hurt him.

Hurt him?

Yes, you wouldn't want to do anything to harm a little hair on little Jamshed's head would you now?

No, no of course not.

Then it is settled.

But, Jamshed. Wasn't Jamshed your father's name?

Ah yes, happy coincidence. Who would have guessed. You see, compromises can bring good things to bear.

I suppose so.

Yes, indeed.

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Babies gurgle, sputter, and stare, not necessarily in that order, but necessarily. And little Jamshed was no exception. Gurgling when delighted or gaseous or distraught. Sputtering when ecstatic or despairing or constipated. And staring when a person or object was particularly inspiring. And oh how babies can stare. Some say it's no more than the unfocussed gaze of a new body trying to find stability. Others say light and colour catch the baby's attention. And still others insist it's an act of recognition, of familiarity, or perhaps of downright determined communication. Whatever the case, little Jamshed stared. He stared at mama, he stared at papa, he stared at the various visitors and comers and goers during the first few weeks of his life. He stared at red objects, blue ones, green ones, any solid colour object and a few that were striped or speckled as well. He would outstare a cat if they had one. And, as his caretakers noticed, he had a different stare for each occasion.

Look, he's looking at his mummy.

Look, he's looking at the window.

Look, he's looking at – what is he looking at there? Right beside him, see, he's looking at, at something.

Indeed, baby Jamshed, just two weeks old, developed a certain stare that was distinctive in that he appeared to focus, always to

his right, and always to a distance of three feet, three inches, on some invisible entity. This was not, clearly, an unfocussed gaze, for it would come upon him with what appeared to be great urgency, the sort of glance over that a baby makes when attentive to a sound, a loud sound, or a call of his name. Oh, certainly, some will say that a child this young can barely respond to a mother's voice, let alone an absent calling of his name, but this is where young baby Jamshed differed. Oh, his little head would seem to say, gesturing about wildly, then fixing to the right and out to thirty-nine inches away. And there he would be transfixed, sometimes for several seconds, sometimes for minutes on end, the longest recorded time (for his mother had little else to do of interest, during those first few weeks, than watch the clock and her baby) of two-and-a-half minutes exactly. Followed by which Jamshed would, inevitably, either gurgle or sputter, and immediately thereafter break off his gaze.

Whatever is he looking at? asked his great-aunt who everyone knew as Tata even though her family name was also Khargat, though there had been rumours that, in her youth, this great-aunt had travelled to Bombay and taken up with a young gentleman, but that was all talk. *He is talking to somebody, that much is sure,* she said one day.

That is nonsense, said Jamshed's father. *If there was someone there, do you not think we would all see him?* Jamshed's father was a respected man in the community, but he did lack imagination.

Good nephew, said Tata, *it is a very good thing you became a dastoor and not a politician, because while you are very good at guiding people on principle, you have no fantasy life, do you?*

And why would a politician need a fantasy life? asked Jamshed's father earnestly.

Ah, replied Tata, *because politicians must imagine what life would be like after they are elected, and then again after they are elected out. They must think of all the options and then choose the one most pleasing, even if it is one that is not evident.*

Nor visible?

Nor visible.

And so it continued, little Jamshed growing into his first year with a propensity for staring off to his right, listening to imagined conversations and, on occasion, smiling in response. It became so that adults would cease talking to Jamshed once the baby's attention was fixed on the invisible source, a cessation that was the result of a realization that, when Jamshed stared right, no amount of coaxing or coddling could bring him back until he was good and ready. It became such an ordinary thing in the city of Surat, that Parsis started using the expression *going right* to mean that someone was lost to the world, had stopped paying attention to a given conversation, or was in a state of preoccupation. *Oh, I was talking to Papaji yesterday and in the middle of it there he was going right, can*

you imagine, it's so hard to talk to him sometimes. Or, that girl there, she is a nice one to look at but you can tell she has tendency for going right, however will her family marry off one like that. Or, arra, I cannot concentrate now, something is terribly wrong, as if I have gone right for no good reason whatsoever.

And so it was that a pre-school Parsi boy's peculiar habit entered not just into the consciousness, but the vernacular, the very vocabulary of an entire community. And there would be little to be made of that, perhaps, had not such a combination of language and action created such a furor in just a few years hence.

Going Right

By the time Jamshed was four and ready to head off to primary school, he was already so well known in the community for being the little boy who goes right. If it had been just a baby thing, the sort of inexplicable baby action that babies did for no good reason, that would have been one thing. And if it had been something that toddler Jamshed did until he was terribly two or tantalizingly three, that would have been all right too. But while this going right thing was far less embarrassing (in some ways) than wetting the bed or nervous vomiting, it was distinctive and distracting and, whatever else it did, it gave Jamshed a name for himself. And it did not stop when he was one or two or three, carried forth this going right did until

Jamshed started school (and then far beyond, but that is yet to come), and so spectacular an action was this that it was at once a thrill and a threat to have young Jamshed as your student, particularly if you were one Percy Khargat (no relation) and this was only your second year of teaching. Percy was an unassuming young man, stick-like in build and sparrow-like in character, possessing that annoying habit that such people have of pushing up on the bridge of his spectacles at least once every minute and thrice that amount when the young primary teacher was nervous, which was more often than not, thereby making the glasses-up-pushing rather more regular than once per minute for most of his waking life. Now, unlike the normal movement of Parsis of the day, not exactly exodus Surat for Bombay, but certainly leaving in more than just dribbles for Bombay, Percy was born and raised in Bombay but chose to return to Surat (that is, the city where his parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents had lived) to teach. And while most young men in the Parsi community who became teachers decided to teach at the upper levels, Percy told himself early on that the most important education a Parsi child would ever have would be that first year in school. Everything a child took with him through his life, Percy would tell his friends over tea, could be traced back to that first year, and not just the first year, but that first month, perhaps even the first day of school. What influence a young teacher could have over these barely sentient minds. Think of it. After five years of teaching, with four classes per day, and twenty-five students in each class, that was five hundred new faces, five hundred new minds, and each and every one of them owing their entire future to what primary teacher Percy did in that first year, that first month, that first day. And so it was that Jamshed Khargat (again, no

relation, other than being a member of the Khargat family whose numbers had obviously extended beyond Surat to Bombay and beyond) began school one fine day in 1903.

My name, said Percy Khargat to the young and trembling assortment of four and five year olds, *is Percy Khargat*, and he pushed his glasses up his nose with vigour and turned to write his name on the blackboard with clear and distinctive strokes. *This is how my name is spelled – by the end of your first month here with me, you too shall be able to write your name on the blackboard. Do not worry. I am here to teach you. If you listen to me well, as you do your parents, you will learn and great deal and, what is more, you will learn to love learning! That is my job as a teacher, to teach. And your job, as young as you are, as students, is to mind me and to learn. Nothing more, but my young students, nothing less.*

And then that fatal moment, for Percy looked up just as Jamshed did the unfathomable, because, as eager as he was to learn and as much as he already liked his teacher, nothing could prevent young Jamshed, at that very moment, from going right. Percy Khargat stared at the boy in disbelief; classmates giggled, at the incredulous sight to begin with, then at the growing awareness that this was the first moment of trouble in their young school lives. Seconds past with no word from anyone. Classmate giggles subsided but the ensuing silence gave way to more giggles, of a more urgent nature, every ten seconds or so. Yes, a full minute passed this way, the spectacle of Percy Khargat watching Jamshed Khargat with such studied concern that the teacher forgot his own desperate need to push his glasses further up his nose. The giggles were now non-

existent and the children stared at Jamshed nervously, feeling, perhaps, that if they emulated their teacher they were less likely to endure his wrath. None of this, of course, had any effect on the going right Jamshed who was, as per usual, lost to the world, at least to any world outside his own making. And when it became apparent (in the third minute) that this was to be one of Jamshed's longer going right moments, it was then that Percy felt he had to speak. The teacher cleared his throat. As he swallowed, he remembered to push those spectacles back where they belonged and felt most comfortable. Then: *Mister...Jamshed...Khargat.* (Pause, no reaction, then louder.) *Young SIR!* And still not a bat of an eyelid from Jamshed, and Percy, a teacher given to raising his voice but rarely to bouts of anger, did what any good teacher would do at that moment, which was to reach for the blackboard and find, hanging on its own little nail as it had for the past two years, the yard-long ruler, useful for classroom measurements, occasional pointing to alphabets and pictures, and, of course, for violence. Percy cleared his throat again, grasped the ruler in his right hand, steadied his stance, and brought the ruler down as hard as possible on his own desk. Jamshed's was the fourth seat in the middle row (directly in front of the teacher's desk) and in front of him sat three children, a boy and two girls. One of the girls, Farah Merchant, sat in the very front seat of the middle row (obedient to her mother's imprecation to get to school early on the first day of class and go immediately to the seat that was closest to the teacher, for as important as religion was to Parsi children, so too was education, and if a respected dastur was to the Parsi continued faith, so was the child's first teacher to her lifelong education, and this was a message not lost on little Farah who had to squeeze by the pimply-faced Wadia boy to

get that prized seat). The choosing of this seat, however, was to be her undoing, little Farah would tell her younger sisters in years to come as she urged her siblings to find the classroom seat as far away from the teacher as possible, for as important as it is for Parsis to be close to god, and inasmuch as a first teacher is an emissary of a child's whole educational path, sometimes, she would tell her sisters, the light of truth is best beheld from a distance. As the ruler came down on Percy Khargat's table, Farah was doing what the rest of her classmates were doing, which was to stare incredulously at the going-right Jamshed, still lost in that odd world of his. But, owing to Jamshed's seat being three directly behind Farah's, and thus entailing the necessity for her to turn an entire one hundred eighty degrees to observe this childhood phenom, Farah had her back to the downswinging ruler, so when it smacked the table, while other children saw this coming, directly or peripherly, depending on how they triangulated between themselves, the teacher's desk, and Jamshed, Farah had not a clue that the loudest noise of her life was about to unleash a torrent of urine straight into her undergarments with such force that there was actually a tiny backsplash when the pee hit the seat and spurted out to the left and to the right of her, marking the trousers and dress of the young boy and girl in the seats at the front of the rows on either side of her (they, too, having being implored by their parents to get a front row view of the teacher). This explosion of child's urine had a deleterious effect on Percy, particularly so since the teacher had an unnatural aversion to all bodily fluids, especially those egressing from children. At twenty-seven years of age, Percy was not yet married and although he had yet to break the news to his parents, he had not intention of doing so since the only

logical purpose would be to have children, beings who he deemed in and of themselves to be corporeal effluent, at least at the baby stage. Not that he thought children per se to be the work of Ahriman, but it couldn't hurt to keep himself clear, at least in a direct visceral fashion, from the contamination and defilment that go hand in hand with children's bodies. Perhaps that was why Percy had decided to become a teacher, to influence young minds; if he were never to have heirs of his own, why not at the very least become a surrogate father to a classroom of four and five year olds, an age where they were at least impressionable, possessing as they were of a language, however rudimentary, and fairly good control of involuntary bodily functions. At least, such was the argument in his mind up to and including the moment when, in an attempt to discipline the errant Jamshed, he had levelled his teacher's ruler on his teacher's desk; beyond that moment, however, he was forever disabused of the notion that primary school children could willfully control their nether regions when they were shocked, scared (or, as he were to find out later, mirthful, anxious, desperate, bored, inattentive, tired, over-exercised, under-slept, or just plain and simply malicious). But perhaps the most shocking thing about this entire tableau was not that Percy's nose, wrinkling in disgust, managed to push his glasses up all by itself, nor that little Farah, after a moment of utter disbelief, erupted in a surprising variety and pitch of mournful wails (joined, chorus-like, first by the two neighbours she had pissed on, then by algorithmic succession, pupils who were closest, middling, and farthest from the urine-splashing event), but that Jamshed Khargat might just as well have been in another classroom, school, city, or country for all that he responded to this desperate set of affairs. He was going right

for nigh on three minutes and nothing, not a boom-voiced teacher, a wood-ruler-through-air whoosh culminating in a terrific smack on wood desk, not the displeasing squirt and spalsh triggering a great children's caterwauling, indeed, nothing could break him from his right-going reverie. So with children crying and screaming, Percy Khargat brandishing his ruler high in the air again as he swallowed repeatedly and began sweating from glands he didn't know he had, Jamshed continued to go right as the door flew open and Mrs. Gloria Hansen, principal of the Surat Primary School #7 district, squeezed her considerable form into the room. All the children stopped crying instantaneously for three very long seconds, then renewed and redoubled their efforts before Mrs. Hansen could utter her patented phrase, *Now then, what have we here?* It was some time before Percy could calm his class down to the point where the two adults could talk without shouting (his efforts hindered by his lack of awareness that he still brandished the ruler like a gurkha's sabre as he madly gesticulated at his young charges, renewing their fright and screaming fear until he dropped the ruler which clattered to the cement floor and lay there for the rest of the morning). *We have*, began Percy, *a situation here*, and he bubbled and frothed a bit at the mouth as he pointed, more with his blowfish eyes than any other part of his body, toward Jamshed, who, sitting at his desk, chose this moment to break away from his precipitous going right motion to look squarely at, first Percy Khargat, then Gloria Hansen.

What on earth, young man, said Mrs. Hansen sternly, *was going on here?*

Yes, yes, added Percy, *what was going on, tell me, tell me, what is it?*

Yes? queried Jamshed, so clearly oblivious to the previous goings-on that he was not the slightest bit scared or ashamed.

You were, sputtered Percy, *you were staring off in that direction, and I, the ruler, she, that is, that is, what, who, were you staring at?* And with that, he pointed at exactly the place, three feet three inches, where Jamshed had, until just recently, been focussed upon.

Indeed, young man, broke in Mrs. Hansen, *your first day at school and already breaking the law, is that it?*

No ma'am, said Jamshed, shaking his head vigorously and wondering what this would mean at home. *No, I—*

You were what? insisted Percy, now exercising authority that he hoped Mrs. Hansen would see as responsible and very mature.

I was, said Jamshed, *I was only listening.*

Listening? Listening! To whom, an invisible girlfriend? An imaginary brother? A fantasy fairy? Percy Khargat was in full swing now, hoping this last wave of scorn would help drive Mrs. Hansen out of his classroom.

No sir, Mr. Khargat, said Jamshed. *No sir, no. I was listening to my grandson.*

Go forth and intermingle

The ceiling fan is wooden with brass tips and it rotates just fast enough so the casual observer can make out each blade, not in exact detail, but enough so that each blade is distinct from the next. Any faster and the blades would blur into each other and, indeed, the fan might then be performing up to its teleological good, for at the current speed, apart from allowing bored sets of eyes discern its wooden detail, the fan does little than circulate risen warm air back from whence it came, that is, toward the floor, without even close to the desirous effect of providing a cooling breeze. This is exactly what Beramshah is thinking as he watches the blades rotate, that all the fan is succeeding in doing, miraculously, is to make the room hotter than it would be were the fan to be shut off entirely. Beramshah is sitting in a creaky wooden chair, supposedly the teacher's chair, his back straight and posture perfect except for his head which tilts upward and wonders at the fan. Directly in front of Beramshah is a large mahogany desk that has seen better days, and were Beramshah to examine this desk closely he would notice, along with various scratches and scars from years gone by and the occasional carved initials and dates inscribed under the lip of the desk, that the most recent abrasion was a long, faint mark running diagonally across the surface of the desk, approximately an inch wide and almost as long as a teacher's ruler. On the other side of the desk, squeezed uncomfortably into a desk that was used to holding the bodies of five-year-old boys and girls, sits Soona. She has been sitting like this, awkwardly, for five minutes, passing the time by watching her husband watch the ceiling fan and looking around the classroom to take note of all the items her

son will observe over the course of his first year of school – that is, of course, if the school allows him to stay and does not expel him for the very reason that she and her husband are now in Jamshed's classroom, waiting for Jamshed's teacher to return with two chairs and the school principal. Soona squirms in the tiny seat and wonders how children the age of Jamshed can possibly learn their lessons in this environment. There is one small window on the east wall, looking out onto the school compound. On the west wall are a number of maps of the region and of India and of the British commonwealth. Above the blackboard, which is on the north wall, are two portraits, one of Zoroaster and the other of Queen Victoria. Both are realistic paintings, but the one of the prophet is done in lighter tones with more highlights and a familiar halo effect around his head, while the monarch looks stoic, is dressed in dark colours, and even the crown on her head is painted with sombre, darker tones. Soona wonders why the portrait of the queen is slightly larger than that of the prophet, wonders if there is any significance to the difference in the colour of the frames (the monarch's gold versus the prophet's black) and is so engaged in that internal debate when Percy Khargat kicks open the door and penguin-walks in, carrying a large wooden chair under each arm, resting them on his hips, thus necessitating his awkward gait. Behind him enters Gloria Hansen, looking very much the part of Queen Victoria, thinks Soona, as the principal waits for Percy to place her chair at an appropriate equidistance between Soona, Beramshah, and the mahogany desk. As he does this, Mrs. Hansen sits slowly and with great grace while Percy hurriedly places his chair adjacent to Mrs. Hansen's and plops himself down.

I have summoned you, as you know, begins Mrs. Hansen, *because of a concern we have with your young Jamshed.*

Yes, yes, interrupts Percy, *we have a great concern.* Mrs Hansen glares over at Percy to indicate that her we did not really include the teacher.

As I was saying, the concern we have with young Jamshed is one of reality versus fantasy. She fixes her gaze on Beramshah. *Mr. Khargat, I am well aware that you are an extremely well-respected dastoor with your Parsi community – all the more important that we address this concern now and nip it in the bud. I believe a man of your stature will be equally concerned with the actions of his son.*

Mrs. Hansen, Beramshah begins, we greatly appreciate your concern and you must rest assured that we will talk to Jamshed about this.

Mr. Khargat, I am not sure at this stage if a parental talking-to will be sufficient. Your son's behaviour is, shall I say, disruptive and not befitting this school. Do I make myself clear, Mr. Khargat?

What Mrs. Hansen is saying, says Percy, *unable to contain himself further, is that we think it might be best if Jamshed were to be placed in a different school, entirely for his benefit of course.*

A different school? Soona is now unable to contain herself and she is surprised her voice sounds so large, coming as it is from

such a tiny desk. *Percy, you know very well that there is no other school for Jamshed in Surat. Oh, certainly, there are other schools, but none where he can have a good Parsi education and—*

And a good english education at the same time, Mrs Hansen says, finishing Soona's sentence for her. *Indeed, you are correct. When I came here, as you know, it was my intention to provide schooling for the small number of English students being raised in Surat. And as you know, after the first year, which was only three years ago now, we decided to admit Parsi children as well. Indeed, your people are a fine people, and you have leaders such as your good husband to thank for that, Mrs. Khargat. You Parsis are well-liked by us English, I think you know that, and it was for that reason I felt that Parsis and English children might be able to learn together. And I must say that I still believe that is a possibility.*

Then perhaps we can talk to Jamshed and come to an arrangement, says Beramshah.

Ah, I do not believe that is possible at this time. You see, it is one thing to have the intermingling of Parsi beliefs and Christian beliefs. We are, of course, both believers in one god are we not? It is yet another thing, and I am sure you must agree with me Mrs. Khargat, Mr. Khargat, for these eager young minds to be, ah, infected with talk of supernatural conversations with ancestors and the like.

Descendants, actually, says Soona under her breath but loud enough for all to hear.

Yes, technically that is correct, descendants I believe that is the story Jamshed gave to us, talking to future offspring – but where he gets these ideas I can only imagine. The Hindus believe in all this talking to spirits rubbish, I understand, but civilized people – and I think I can safely say that Parsis and Christians might be considered among the civilized – do no such thing. In fact, such fantasies are, I would suggest, the manifestation of a primitive mind.

A primitive mind? Soona glares at Mrs. Hansen, then looks over at her husband. Beramshah has the unique ability to shut down his face so that no emotions can be read across his expression, and it is such a face he now shows to Mrs. Hansen, Percy Khargat, and his wife.

I believe I have said quite enough. Mrs. Hansen stands to leave and gestures to both men to remain sitting, though neither show any intention of rising until she does so. *I must take my leave of you and I wish you all the very best for poor Jamshed. Percy, I believe you have other matters you wish to pursue with the Khargats. Good day Mr. Khargat, Mrs. Khargat. And with a regal turn of her head, she is gone out the door.*

Beramshah and Soona watch her leave, then turn their attention to Percy. The young teacher clears his throat and begins to speak.

Mr. Khargat, Mrs. Khargat, you have to understand that this is not just a matter of Jamshed. With respect, sir, he says looking

at Beramshah, *this is quite a larger matter of concern to the Parsis in general.*

Beramshah smiles at Percy, though it is not a smile that delivers any goodwill. *And how is that, Percy?*

Uh, Dastoorji, we Parsis are at a turning point in our relationship to the world around us. We are at once too isolated and too intermingled. I returned from Bombay specifically to teach at this school for I believe Parsi children must have a good Parsi education, but in the context of a British school system. That is where I believe our isolation must end. But we must be equally cautious of how much and in what way we intermingle. Mrs. Hansen, all she sees is that a Parsi boy, your Jamshed, may put mystic thoughts into the heads of the English pupils. But my concern is that this intermingling does not stop there.

Now you have truly lost me, says Soona. *Who is intermingling with whom? And what does it matter?*

Yes, well, that is my concern too. Who is intermingling with whom. In this case we have Jamshed claiming to talk to his grandson. Where did he learn this? I say this with great respect, dastoorji, for I know he did not learn this at home, but yet he learned this. From his playmates, perhaps? From the talk when he accompanies his ayah to the fishmarket? Who knows. We only know that he is influenced by someone. Parsis do not talk to their unborn grandchildren, I am sure you must agree. We do not reincarnate, now do we?

You mentioned the problem of intermingling, Percy, says Beramshah impatiently. Like my wife, I do not see how this has anything to do with anything beyond a child's imagination. We should be grateful that the child has an active mind, should we not?

Perhaps, perhaps, dastoorji. But my question is where does this stop? A Parsi boy not five years old is adopting the customs and beliefs of the polytheistic Hindus? Our community runs the risk of falling apart. You are aware of what happened in Bombay last year with Ranaji Dhadabhoy Tata are you not?

Beramshah looks aghast. What happens with Tata in Bombay and what happens with my son here in Surat are two different things. I am surprised at you, Percy, surprised and disappointed.

Percy sighs and pushes his glasses up on his nose fiercely and forcefully so that the lenses appear to almost touch his eyeballs. I am sorry, dastoorji, I do not wish to disappoint you. But I have a task, as a teacher, and as a boy who wants to see the Parsis flourish. What happens in Surat affects what happens in Bombay. Already my friends in Bombay, they tell me they are hearing rumours of a young boy here who talks to – well, you understand how word gets around.

I do indeed, says Beramshah. He looks at Soona. Perhaps it is time we say goodbye to small minded ideas here and move to Bombay. Both Soona and Percy look at Beramshah in amazement.

Dastoorji, I did not mean for you to—

I know perfectly well what you did and did not mean. And I too mean what I say.

Soona reaches forward and, uncharacteristically, touches her husband's wrist. Perhaps there is another way for us to resolve this.

Yes, dastoorji, Mrs. Khargat is right. There is no need to be hasty.

No, this is not a decision made in haste, says Beramshah. I have taken advice on this to be sure.

Advice?

Certainly. And Beramshah rises. I have heard from my son that it is time to move to Bombay. And I have it on very good authority that my son has heard this from my great-grandson, a Parsi gentleman who will be known throughout the land!

It is several minutes after Beramshah and Soona have left the school before either of them speaks. Finally, it is Soona who breaks the silence. Well that went well, I must say.

I have had enough, says Beramshah, not looking at her.

That's it? No argument, no fight, just we will go south to live in Bombay? What is so special in Bombay anyway that this will not happen there?

You heard Percy. He is worried that intermingling will be the death of the Parsis. Well, so be it then, if it's good enough for Tajaji, then it should be good enough for us.

So, Tata can bring back a French prostitute and call her his wife and then have her navjote done and claim she is a fine Parsi wife, that is somehow similar to Jamshed making up stories? And what of this Tata fellow, anyway? How can what he does hundreds of miles away make us have to remove Jamshed from his first year of school?

Beramshah stops walking. The school is only a ten minute walk from their home, through the market, and it here where they have stopped, in front of a silk merchant who recognizes Soona and beckons to her, new material has just arrived and it would be perfect for her, absolutely perfect. Soona ignores the merchant and looks at her husband. Tell me then, do you decide that we should move to Bombay for this Tata fellow, or for you, or for me?

Beramshah smiles at Soona and takes a deep breath. More than three thousand Parsis have signed a petition and presented this to the Panchayat, all because of what Tajaji has done. Here, there might as well be a petition by this English teacher lady and by Percy (who does not deserve the Khargat name I shall tell you that now), a petition signed by only two people, but that is enough to see our Jamshed ousted from his education. It is not right, Soona. If this is our history and our custom, perhaps it is time to reexamine that custom and jettison all that is holding us back.

Soona smiles back. Once again, you have surprised me. For a man with no imagination, you have produced not only a son with an overactive one, but you yourself sometimes show you can see into the future! But let me ask you this one thing. If Jamshed grows up and goes to France to find himself a bride. Or if he does not become a dastoor like you and your father, perhaps by choosing to chase after his grandson instead. If that happens, will you still think like you do? If that happens, if Jamshed turns his back on his faith, what then?

You asked me if we were moving to Bombay for Tata or you or me. The truth is we will move to Bombay for Jamshed. And as for your last question, I can only answer that with an assurity. Jamshed will never do any of those things, for he is my son and he is your son, and he knows which way duty lies.

Going South

Beramshah has called a family meeting. He does not call it this, for the truth is the people in attendance are a hotchpotch of relatives, friends, and other acquaintances in the Parsi community. There are nine people in the room including his brother, Adi, a learned young man who has made a name for himself as a census taker and hence a writer; his sister, Ferozha, probably the most intelligent person in the Khargat family but in spite or perhaps because of this, perpetually bored with her life and all that occurred around her; Bhika and Dinshaw Bhowndagree, a constantly bickering couple whom

everyone agreed epitomized Parsi marriage, she a fiery anti-imperialist communist who lived and breathed the expulsion of the British, and he a cotton merchant who listened patiently to his wife, nodding occasionally, while calculating silently the amount of money he was making from ongoing British rule; Soona and, of course, her mother, both taking turns fussing with Jamshed's collar; a very ancient dastoor named Kaikhasru Cama known affectionately by the shorthand name of KaCa, he a wizened and wise man with a penchant for falling asleep in the middle of his own sentences; and, of course, Jamshed himself. They are all drinking tea waiting for Beramshah to start, which is exactly what he does, standing, clearing his throat, and beginning his story.

"We are people who have always moved," he begins slowly, "when the need arises." KaCa nods in agreement and such nodding causes his eyelids to droop a bit, but not close. Everyone else in the room either allows for the corners of their lips to rise in slight acknowledgement or turns his or her head slightly in a similar gesture of yesness.

"We all know the Qissa-i Sanjan, written by the great Mobed Bahman himself, which tells how Zoroastrians wandered Persia for a hundred years and then came to Hormuz before setting sail in seven boats, landing here in India at Diu which became our temporary refuge."

"Temporary refuge," reasserts KaCa.

"We stayed at Diu for nineteen hard years, nineteen years in the dust and arid climate, before Dasturji had a dream and led us to the mainland. We suffered storms that would have destroyed us but for our faith in Ahura Mazda and Dasturji's promise that should we survive we would build an Atash

Behram at our place of landing. And this brought us to Sanjan, where the Gujarati king Jadi Rana allowed us to stay under five conditions."

"Five conditions," grunts KaCa.

"And those five conditions were?"

"The dasturs had to explain the beliefs of Zoroastrianism," says Adi, jumping into the participatory section of the speech.

"We were to adopt Gujarati as our new language," pipes up Dinshaw.

"And we were told, the women, that we must succumb to the Indian dress code of the sari," adds Bhika, hardly hiding her resentment at being told what to do by a foreign power, even if it was a millenium ago.

"And the weapons," Ferozha interjects as she inspects her fingernails. "Let's not forget the weapons. Jadi Rana said we should give up any warrior ways, not that we had them I would think."

"Yes, yes," says Beramshah, "all that is true. And lastly? Jamshed?"

Jamshed knew this was coming. As a son following in his father's footsteps he was supposed to know the history, even as he was barely six.

"Marriage," says Jamshed. "We could only marry at night."

"This is true," confirms Beramshah. "Zoroastrian weddings were to happen only after sunset. And why was this?"

Jamshed looked at his father. He did not know the answer but did not know how to tell his father this.

Beramshah lets the corners of his lips turn up ever so slightly, then turns it into a full beaming smile. “A trick question, Jamshed. We do not know. Nobody knows. It is a mystery. And from that we can learn, too. Sometimes there are actions to be taken without good reason. Sometimes there are things we must do because they are needful to do. Sometimes our good actions come from our good words which come from our good thoughts. And sometimes good words happen without thought or action, or good actions without word or thought. Do you understand this yet, Jamshed?”

“Good thoughts, Good words, Good deeds,” utters KaCa, having just dropped off to sleep and suddenly waking himself with this mantra.

“And sometimes rules are meant to be broken,” says Bhika, unable to contain herself any longer. “We must not forget that five hundred years after the imprecation by the king not to take up arms, we did, and to protect his very kingdom. We fought for what was true and just and we died for the cause. This is our lot in life.”

“Imprecation is a curse,” says Feroza, now a bit more engaged in the conversation as it slid away from practiced stories. “How did the king curse us?”

“Well, you know what I mean,” says Bhika. “He ordered us, that is what I meant.”

“But that is not what you said. Imprecate. Fine English word, Bhika, but made all the less fine by its misuse.”

“And what do you mean by that, ‘fine english word’ business,” says Bhika, now spoiling for an argument about colonial rule.

“Just what I said,” Feroza says, smiling back. “No need to imprecate me.”

“Feroza, if you feel you are being funny, you are not.”

“Now, now,” says Beramshah. “Good thoughts and good words, no?”

The two women look sullenly at him, uttering silent imprecations no doubt, but say nothing since this is Beramshah’s moment.

“And so now is like then for our Khargat family,” pronounces Beramshah. “The time has come when we must exercise our free will and make choices, difficult choices, but they are for our future, for our son’s future, and for the future of the family.”

Soona’s mother leans into her: “Nicely spoken, but where is he going with this?”

Soona shrugs her shoulders, “I can never tell. He starts on something and before you know it he has made some grand decision.”

Beramshah clears his throat once more, partly to emphasize what he is about to say and partly to attract the attention of his wife and mother-in-law who are clearly not taking this seriously. “And so, like our forebears, the Khargat family has decided to move to Bombay.”

“Bombay?” says a startled Soona.

“Bombay?” asks her mother.

“Bombay, Bombay?” each of the other attendees utters as statement or question.

“Bombay.” Beramshah places the name of the port city out there and lets it speak for itself, he thinks.

“But we talked about this,” says Soona loudly, then brings her voice down to a stage whisper, “and we decided it was a decidedly bad idea!”

“Oh yes, we talked of this, indeed, and yes, my friends, my good wife did try to reason with me, to convince me to stay. But I have done a great deal of thinking on this, a great deal, and I have thought of our ancestors and what they would have done. There must be respect for the Khargat family, and that respect must come from all quarters to all Khargats. It is not enough for Soona and I to benefit from the admiration of the community; that must also shine on Jamshed, musn't it, Jamshed?”

Jamshed, not knowing what to do, nods amiably.

“And if that is not to happen, if teachers and principals and others look askance at my son, well then, I say, we will move where there will be more respect. It is the Parsi way. We will not stay and face persecution but will find, will make, ourselves a new home.”

Soona's mother nudges her daughter. “This may be the heat talking, making him crazy like.”

Soona points to the ceiling fan and gestures to the atmosphere in the room. “It is not hot. Only his brain is on fire.”

“When will you go?” asks Adi.

“We will leave immediately,” says Beramshah.

“As soon as we first take leave of our senses,” says Soona to her mother, a bit louder than before so that Bikha and Dinshaw, sitting next to them, look over with a cross between sympathetic and disapproving looks.

“We will leave immediately and make a new home in Bombay. I have been in contact with my cousins there and have arranged a temporary place to live. When we arrive, I will find a permanent home, a place the Khargats will be proud to live.”

“Hard to be proud with your head pushed so far up your you-know,” Soona's mother says to her daughter, and this time most of the room hears this but pretends not to.

“You are our closest friends and family,” Beramshah says solemnly. “We will miss you.”

Soona puts her head in her hands. “He will miss his brain which he has clearly locked up in the safe box and lost the key.”

“Soona, there is no need for grief,” Beramshah says consolingly, either not or pretending not to hear his wife's barbs. “The Khargats will rise to prominence in Bombay. There are so many Parsis there, it is a bustling Parsi city. And we shall be part of it.”

“Oh, mummy, he will make us part of a lunatic asylum,” groans Soona.

“No, no,” comforts her mother, “he cannot drag you down. Come, smile, we will visit Beramshah in the crazy house every week. We will make khoresh and take it to him every Sunday. We will make the attendants untie his hands so he may eat this one good meal and we will wipe the drool off his face as a loving family must do.”

“And when he speaks, we must pretend he makes sense,” agrees Soona. “We must tell him that any day now he can come home even while we know he will never see the light of day outside the asylum walls, poor dear.”

“Yes, it will be difficult making ends meet, but we will persevere. We are Parsis.”

“Oh, mummy, such a great loss. Jamshed and I have such a great burden to bear.”

“That is true, my daughter, you are saints, the both of you.”

And so they went on, mother and daughter, but both knowing it was just their way of telling their sadness because they both knew once Beramshah had truly made up his mind, there was no turning back. He was a stubborn man with no imagination, and well-known for that in the community of Surat. The assorted family and friends expressed their sorrow that the Khargats would be leaving, wished them well, and the afternoon wore on and they slowly drifted out the door until only Adi and Soona's mother were remaining.

"Yaar, this is the only path do you think?" asks Adi finally.

"Yaar, yes, of course. It is a good and spiritual path."

Soona's mother glares at Beramshah. "You will leave because of a schoolteacher and a British headmaster?"

"No," says Beramshah. "We will leave so we can make a future for ourselves, one untainted by bad words."

"Then. Then I will come with you," says Soona's mother.

"Mummy?"

"It is no use, Soona. He has made up his foolish mind and if he has his way there will be no-one to look after Jamshed. Come, let us pack."

Soona looks despairingly at her mother, her husband, then over at her son and sighs.

They are moving to Bombay after all.

Moving in more ways than one

Picking up stakes and moving a household is a substantial task. But in the year 1905, this is just what the Khargat family does. It is a mishmash of tribulations, decisions, what to take and what to leave, who to meet with once they arrive, where to settle, all those things that are part of such an action. But the most decisive action is one of non-commission, one that Soona makes and does not share with anyone, not even her mother, a decision of terminal quality. Her husband will act this way over such a minor incident with their only child, she thinks, how might he act if there were more serious incidents with Jamshed's future brothers and sisters? Would he throw himself in front of trains to save his family from disaster, or would he encourage the trains to run through the family household? So it becomes an easy decision for Soona to make, this on the journey south from Surat to Bombay, that she will not, not matter what, bear any more children. She will raise Jamshed as an only child, make sure he is set for a good life, but one siblingless. Soona is sitting in the carriage and comes to this decision so suddenly and forcefully that she nods strongly, once, and crosses her arms. For the rest of her life, she will adopt this custom of a sharp nod and arm-cross when she makes decisions. But on this initial occasion it is so startling that Beramshah looks up and asks Soona if everything is all right. Oh yes, she says, smiling broadly. Everything is fine now. And when they arrive at Bombay, one of the first things Soona does is seek out a fine young Parsi doctor and tells him that she must prevent herself from ever having more children. At first, the Parsi doctor is concerned, even attempts to talk Soona out of this line of thinking, but

then when he sees her nod and arm-cross, he agrees to help her and gives her various concoctions and advices on how to remain without child forever more. As the years pass, Beramshah will sometimes wonder why he was unable to produce more offspring (for Soona will tell him unapologetically early on that his seed has gone weak), but he will not be overly concerned. His duties to the community as a dastur and his obligations to his small family of wife and single child are enough to fulfill him. Indeed, his first task, after they have settled into their temporary accommodation, is to conduct Jamshed's Navjote.

He does not wait until Jamshed turns seven, but insists on this happening just after his son's sixth birthday. His son is a bright one, advanced for his years, Beramshah argues, so he can take the responsibility of sudre and kusti earlier than other boys. This he tells Soona and she agrees wholeheartedly. It is the only Navjote she will know for any child of hers, so it might as well be sooner than later. For fully two weeks, almost- and then-six-year old Jamshed (for the training falls over his birthday) is made to learn his lines: "Praised be the most righteous, the wisest, the most holy and the best Mazdayasnian Law, which is the gift of Mazda. The good, true, and perfect religion, which God has sent to this world, is that which Prophet Zoroaster has brought in here. That religion is the religion of Zoroaster, the religion of Ahura Mazda communicated to holy Zoroaster." And the bright Jamshed learns them quickly even at the age of six. And so when the day comes, Jamshed speaks along with his father as the kusti is placed upon him: "The Omniscient God is the greatest Lord. Ahriman is the evil spirit, that keeps back the advancement of the world. May that Evil Spirit with all his accomplices remain

fallen and dejected. O Omniscient Lord! I repent of all my sins. I repent of all the evil thoughts that I may have entertained in my mind, of all the evil words that I may have spoken, of all the evil actions that I may have performed. May Ahura Mazda be praised. May Ahriman, the evil spirit, be condemned. The will of the righteous is the most praiseworthy." And then, finally, "O Almighty! Come to my help. I am a worshiper of God. I am a Zoroastrian worshiper of God. I agree to praise the Zoroastrian religion, and to believe in that religion. I praise good thoughts, good words, and good actions. I praise the good Mazdayasnian religion which curtails discussions and quarrels, which brings about kinship or brotherhood, which is holy, and which, of all the religions that have yet flourished and are likely to flourish in the future, is the greatest, the best, and the most excellent, and which is the religion given by God to Zoroaster. I believe that all good things proceed from God. May the Mazdayasnian religion be thus praised." And before Jamshed knows it, his father is speaking to him, may his son enjoy long health, may his son make Zoroastrian faith flourish, may his son be virtuous, may his son perform good deeds always, and then Jamshed looks down at himself, his sudre, his kusti, and he knows he is following the ways of his father.

But a moment if you will. Because while Jamshed freefalls into his faith, he does not do his without question, no, not even at the age of six. He knows, for he is told, that a good Parsi does not depend on the words or work of others to grow faith. He knows that he must be self-reliant, must himself practice a good moral life and that there is nothing else upon which to depend. This all seems easy enough, thinks Jamshed. But still. Who is to say, thinks Jamshed, just as the ceremony finishes and all around him beam proudly, who is to say what is good,

what is moral? And how, how can he know what to choose, which choices will lead him forward and which, back? This preoccupies him and his loved ones think this is the visage of a boy coming into his own, but in reality, it is the face of a perplexed six-year-old, his eyes, nose, and lips forming not a solid front to a sometimes adverse world — but a question mark.