MANOJ RUPDA

# TOWER OF SILENCE

*Translated by Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar*

TEMPTON DASTOOR REMEMBERED CLEARLY the evening when his father had taken him to the historical town of Sanjan in Gujarat, the first settlement of Parsees in India, to get him acquainted with their sacred fire. Tempton was sixteen years old at the time. His father, Romington, had told him that his father, Sohrabji, had also brought him to Sanjan when he was sixteen to impart the most important knowledge of a Parsee's life. 1,300 years ago sixteen Zoroastrian priests had, in compliance with their rituals, directed a thunderbolt from the sky to a pile of sandalwood in a receptacle placed on a round, stone platform on the ground. The fire that was thus lit burns still, immortal, not extinguished. This was the same fire in the warmth of which their ancestors had tempered their skills and brought their entrepreneurial efforts to fruition. The principles those ancestors held were ancient and traditional, but they were always open to new and modern ideas and techniques. The products they created set benchmarks for quality, and their ledgers were free of any wealth earned through corruption, for the technological and business skills of the Parsees were woven inextricably with their religious and moral beliefs. That immortal flame was the one that Tempton got to see in Sanjan when he was sixteen.

The journey was supposed to be a pilgrimage for Romington, but for Tempton it turned into an educational trip. His father, who was usually a quiet man, turned into a loquacious teacher, telling his son the history of the Parsees from the time they were uprooted from Iran 1,300 years ago until the time they crossed the sea and reached Sanjan in Gujarat.

Tempton was first taken to Pav Mahal in Sanjan, where he was informed that the sacred fire Atash Behram in the sanctum of the Agiary there had been burning since the time it was first lit 1,275 years ago. That piece of information amazed Tempton to no end. At that historical Agiary, the

father and son prayed before the sacred fire and rubbed some ash from it on their foreheads. Those rituals had all seemed quite mysterious to Tempton, whose teenage mind wasn't quite prepared for something that ancient and arcane. They then passed through the stony, narrow lanes and ruins of that historical town and reached a Parsee inn by the seashore.

Romington had chosen a sea-facing room for their stay. Thirty years ago, in the sunlight and sea wind that came through the window of that room, Romington had been initiated by his father. After all those decades, he was set to pass on the same knowledge that he had inherited from his father—and that his father had inherited from his ancestors—to his own son.

The lessons took two days, at the end of which Tempton learned the significance of his surname, Dastoor. He also learned that the sacred fire he saw at the Agiary was representative of the faith of his people and the several difficult endeavours his people had undertaken. And he learned that those sacred flames represented the various professionals from their community, like corpse-handlers, barbers, dyers, chemists, sculptors, ironsmiths, cowherds, carpenters, woodcutters, bakers, soldiers, armourers, artisans, and sharecroppers.

Those two days with his father took Tempton on a journey in time from the present day to those caves of the Stone Age where man protected the fire as their most valuable treasure. Fire is the biggest achievement of man and his most primary need. His father's words from those two days still float in tiny, discrete pieces in the pool of Tempton's memories.

"Fire inculcates discipline in man . . ."

"Fire gives man a sense of responsibility . . ."

"Fire teaches man to keep pace with time . . ."

"Man has no greater duty than to light a fire and keep it burning . . ."

"When a man works for a living, his thoughts have direct bearing with the fire in his kitchen and the fire in his smithy. A true Zoroastrian, a true follower of the fire, would never let those fires die, would never let any harm befall those fires . . ."

"If any harm to those flames is imminent, one should follow the teachings of the Zoroaster. One who does not follow the teachings of the Zoroaster and causes harm to the fires is not a true Zoroastrian . . ."

His father told him several other things about their faith and people, all of which had been preserved in Tempton's memory just the way his father had said them. At the end of that seven-day tour, after reaching the Bom-

bay Central railway station, Tempton was quite taken aback when his father called a taxi and asked to be taken not to their neighbourhood in Navroz Davar Lane but to Doongarwadi. Tempton had heard the name Doongarwadi before, but he could not immediately recall when or where. He then jogged his memory cells a bit and realized that his people mentioned Doongarwadi only when one of them died.

Even though he understood what Doongarwadi was, Tempton wasn't scared or anxious a bit, taking that trip to Doongarwadi to be same as his educational trip to Sanjan. When their taxi passed the crowds and was on an open road, he asked his father, "Why are we going to Doongarwadi?"

His father did not reply immediately. His face was moist with sweat, and his brown hair was flying in the wind. Then there came a furrow on his brow—the kind of furrow that comes when a man smiles through pain and that carries within it both pain and consolation. Gently, he pulled Tempton towards him and asked, "Do you feel scared?"

Tempton, startled, shook his head in the negative, and his father squeezed his shoulder.

They got out of the taxi at Doongarwadi, and Romington held his son's hand, leading him. They walked along a crooked path shaded by dwarf trees and vegetation. The afternoon was quiet and humid, and the silence was broken by the cawing of crows and the cries of kites from somewhere in the distance. As they walked farther, the caws and cries grew louder.

That path ended after several turns, and what stood before them was a huge, round enclosure that must have been about thirty feet tall. There were crows and kites hovering above that enclosure—so many that Tempton could not count them—and there was a staircase made of stones that led to the entrance.

"What is this?" Tempton asked.

"The Tower of Silence," his father replied. "In the language of us Parsees, this is called Dakhmu."

"What is inside this enclosure?" Tempton still had his doubts.

His father said nothing. He just grabbed Tempton's hand and walked up the stairs.

While climbing the stairs after his father, Tempton had been as curious as if he had been brought to a zoo. But the moment he climbed up to the entrance and peered inside, he was in no position to think or say anything.

Tempton covered his mouth with both his hands, but there was no way

he could beat the nausea that overcame him. He sat down right there on the stairs and threw up. Once done, he started crying. His father tried to hold him, but he shrugged his father away and climbed down the stairs, weeping. He could not believe that the denouement to a pleasant and educative journey could be that terrifying.

Tempton sat quietly on a stone bench for a long time, listening to the rustling of the leaves and the cawing of the crows. After a long silence and stillness, his father placed his hand on his son's back. That touch let go of all the hatred and repulsion, and the son loosened his body and placed his head on his father's lap. His father ran his fingers through his son's head, untangling his hair as if resolving all doubts in his son's mind.

"This is our final destination," Romington said. "Every journey of life ends here. Whichever path we take in life, we should never forget that one day we have to leave everything and end up here."

The son's breathing became normal, the agitation inside his head was quietening, and he could hear each word his father said despite the cawing of the crows.

"All religions have their distinct methods to conduct the last rites of their dead. The foundation of our religion is charity. That is why our ancestors dictated that we give away our dead to crows and vultures instead of destroying the dead bodies by burying or cremating them. In this way, the birds find something to eat, and we find peace."

Tempton, his head on his father's lap, listened to everything his father said. He was in his adolescence. He was at an age when young men sought colours and pleasure and the company of beautiful, young women. He was at an age when the mind was full of possibilities and the kind of dreams that seemed attainable despite not being pragmatic. But alas, Tempton was one of those unfortunate few who were born into families of *dastoor*—traditional Parsee priests—and were resigned to be religious and obedient right from birth.

While returning home from Doongarwadi, Tempton fidgeted with the sacred *kushti* thread he wore around his waist and became lost in thought. He was apprehensive that his father's motive for this journey and all those teachings was to make him a *dastoor* like himself. He tried to think of ways to get out of that situation. So lost was he in his thought that he did not realize that he was shaking his head and that his father was watching him shake his head, watching his unspoken refusal.

The next day, Romington left Mumbai for Nagpur. He was an expert on furnaces, chimneys, and boilers, and it was as if the furnaces at Impress Mill were calling to him, and he could not refuse the call of the fire. He said nothing before he left, and his face and bearing did not betray that he was leaving forever and would never return.

Tempton was left in the custody of Romington's elder sister, Hakku Fai, and he was grateful to his father for allowing him the freedom to make his own choices in life. He eventually chose to become a historian, and the history of the Parsees was all he ever thought of, nothing else. Hakku Fai tried her best to interest him in other things, but all her efforts—irrespective of how strong they might have been—failed, for her efforts had force but lacked direction. Anyway, she was known to be a *gayeli* case—a woman who had gone nuts. This term was coined by her lovers, the Muqadam Brothers, who were themselves, in the eyes of the world, *goyele* cases—nuts, both of them.

When Tempton looked back on his life, he found it hard to determine whether his father had left him in his aunt's custody or his aunt in his custody, for she was a wild, untameable creature who did not seem to be from this planet at all. Tempton wasn't worldly-wise, but he had gained some understanding of things by the time he turned twenty, and he knew that no law or ritual could cure Hakku Fai, as she would remain the same until the day she died. Her robust laugh would always scare pigeons away. She could kill a person with her love. She could control a man with her eager kisses. Her fearless interference in other people's matters, her rude and shameless expletives, her on-the-spot decisions, and her boldness in bringing those decisions to life—nothing on earth could change all that.

Hakku Fai had terrorized their neighbourhood right from her childhood. Their grandmother had brought her a foldable bicycle from London when she was thirteen, and that bicycle was like a tank on which she raided crowded roads, narrow alleys, and garages, attacking all those boys who disobeyed their parents or played truant from their studies and loitered around. Her favourite enemies were Romington and the Muqadam Brothers, Testor and Harjee, who were identical twins. She tormented them to no end, whether in their childhood or youth. Her younger brother shivered at the mere sound of his sister's footsteps on wooden stairs, and he would always hide away from her for fear of getting beaten up. When they became older, she caught the Muqadam Brothers at a brothel and dragged them out

while they were still tying the drawstrings of their pyjamas—a task at which they were not exactly adept. She grabbed both of them by their collars and dragged them through the alley to her car. They knew that what they had done was the greatest crime of their lives, and they were filled with shame when she dropped them at home, and they quietly got out and went inside. They looked out of the window, but Hakku Fai and her car were nowhere to be seen. They looked at each other and jumped for joy, as if they had just been spared some grave calamity. Then their door opened with a crash, and standing in the doorway was Hakku Fai wearing only her panties! The brothers screamed in unison, for her nakedness was too much for them to handle. She strode up to them, held each one's head with both her hands, pulled them to her bosom, and stuffed her nipples in their mouths, one in each, thus ensuring that she was the only woman they were to have in their lives henceforth.

Indeed, Hakku Fai was quite hard to describe. She was whimsical, furious, ultra-emotional, kind, ruthless, and determined at the same time. She was a woman who could make love with two men, both brothers, both twins at that, at the same time; who had no qualms about boxing the ears of both those lovers or beating them up with her umbrella in the middle of the road, in full view of the world; who played the radio and the gramophone at the same time; who could cook an omelette and play the piano at the same time; who could, despite her advanced age, whistle and wink like a youngster; who blushed like a teenager on seeing pigeons mate on her balcony; who fought with her milkman and grocer for a change of fifty paise or a rupee despite owning properties worth millions of rupees; who stuffed her bag with currency notes and made umpteen rounds in her car to help get the children of her domestic helper admitted in a school, her milkman's wife admitted to a labour room, or her driver's father admitted in a hospital for surgery; and who cared equally for a damaged valve in her radio as for someone's damaged kidney. One would find it quite hard to imagine that this bundle of contradictions, who could not even cook an omelette properly, had been a successful and renowned food technician in her youth. Not only this, but her half-senile and devoted lovers, the Muqadam Brothers, who still couldn't tie the drawstrings of their pyjamas properly, had, years ago, laid the foundation for the largest and most successful city bus service in the country: the BEST of Mumbai. These people have since grown old, and the histories they created have either been destroyed or changed beyond recognition. BEST

was handed over to the government, and the Impress Mill turned into a mausoleum, weeds having taken over its ruins, although Romington still lived in isolation in its staff quarters, looking over its dead power looms like an undaunted custodian.

Tempton got worried on coming to know that the mill had been closed for six months. His father hadn't informed them that it was closing down or sent any communication regarding what he planned to do further. When all efforts at contacting his father failed, Tempton set out for Nagpur. He found that the gate to the compound, which used to be lush with begonia shrubs, was now deserted, and the begonias had yielded to wild creepers that had found their way all over the walls. Tempton had to tear through those creepers to reach Quarter No. 6, where his father lived. He had some difficulty recognizing that place, as it was strewn all over with dried leaves, the wild creepers had entered the house through the doors and the windows, and there was grass growing even in the cracks in the floor. Everything was dusty and desolate with no sign of life anywhere.

Tempton hesitated before entering. He looked in all four rooms of the quarter as well as the toilet and kitchen, but there was no one to be found. He returned to the compound outside and tore through the creepers with his hands and legs to get to the other quarters, but most of them were locked. Then he spotted a quarter that was relatively clear. The doors, windows, and curtains were all in order, the courtyard had been swept clean, and washed clothes were hanging on a clothesline for drying. Tempton heaved a sigh of relief, walked up to the door, and knocked, but there was no response. He knocked again a little later, somewhat loudly, and a woman called out from inside, "Who is it?"

"I'm Romington's son," he answered.

"Who?"

"I'm Romington's son, Tempton."

"Yes, yes, I'm coming."

The door opened a little while later and a fair, skinny, old woman with short, grey hair stood before him. She had a small reel for spinning wool in one hand and a ball of Australian wool in the other. She looked intently at his face for some time. When she was sure it was him, she smiled and invited him in. "Come, son. How is your aunt? Is she well?"

Tempton had no time for formalities and came straight to the point. "Where is Papa?"

The old woman kept staring at him for some time, her hands shivering. She placed the reel and the wool on a table and both her hands on his shoulders. “Your father has gone mad.”

Tempton had heard Hakku Fai say such a thing about his father, so the old woman’s words didn’t surprise him. He just looked around the room and the things kept there. He knew this old woman had been looking after his father.

“Where is Papa?”

“He must be in the mill. Where else would he go?”

Tempton got a jolt. “In the mill? But it has been closed for months!”

“Does a madman understand all that? He still goes to work on time. Sometimes he also goes in the dead of night to do the night shift. Who knows what he does there? He gets angry at me if I tell him something. He even slapped me on my face once.”

The old woman’s eyes welled up. She took off her glasses and wiped her eyes.

“Son, it’s good that you’ve come. Now you handle your father. I cannot do it anymore.”

Tempton could not think of a way to express his gratitude. This new information had totally thrown him, and he remained rooted for some time. Then he turned around, walked outside, stopped, and turned towards the old woman. “The gate to the mill compound is locked. So how does Papa enter the mill?”

The old woman led him to the rear of the compound and showed him a track hidden under a dense undergrowth of reeds. She muttered in annoyance as she made her way through that undergrowth, and after trudging for about ten minutes they came to the boundary wall of the mill. Tempton wondered how anyone could cross a wall that high fortified with barbed wire, but when they reached the wall he noticed a hole at the base that was wide enough for a man of average build to pass through.

“This route was created by your father,” the old woman told him. “It was his secret route to enter the mill. No one knows about this except me. Go towards the right, to Shed No. 5. He must be there.”

Tempton was at a loss of words to thank that profusely sweating old woman who had, in that sweltering June heat, led him to his father. He just blinked and stood there like a fool. The old woman patted his shoulder, turned around, and left the way she had come.

Tempton kept staring at the hole in the wall, not knowing what to do. He started taking deep breaths, trying to gather some courage to be able to enter, as if the hole were not a way to cross over to the other side of the wall but a portal into a different world. A little while later, he bent, inserted his head, adjusted his body in an unpractised way, and tried to pass through. Some contortions later, he was able to enter that other world, which again, like the previous world, welcomed him with a track through the undergrowth. He began walking, clearing leaves and creepers with his hands as he surged forward, and the only marks he could see on the track were the familiar soleprints of his father's canvas shoes. He was gripped with fear when he realized that the path had been walked upon by only one person—his father—and no one else!

The track ended at Shed No. 5, which was overgrown with bushes and creepers. The creepers proved to be more powerful and tenacious than the power looms, which had spun millions of tonnes of cotton, produced immeasurable lengths of yarn, and woven millions of metres of fabric but now lay like corpses buried under a shroud.

Tempton stood standing there for a long time, lost in thought. He remembered the journey he had made with his father to Sanjan, their sacred fire in the Agiary, and what his father had said standing before the Atash Behram: "This is not a mere fire. This is our willpower. This is never to be put out."

On returning to his senses, he looked at the ruin around him, and his gaze fell on the chimney at the far end, which was half-broken with pieces of brick and plaster around it. The chimney reminded him of the Tower of Silence, and he felt the same nausea he'd felt at Doongarwadi, but he did not vomit.

Tempton realized that he had spent a lot of time inside the compound, and the yellow of the afternoon had turned red. He imagined himself standing in the dark desolation of the mill, and a chill ran up his spine. *If the evening could feel so terrifying here, how must it be at night?* He wondered how his father came into the mill at night and, most perplexing of all, what he did there!

Tempton took another look at the place. There were cables coiled with one another, crooked iron angles, broken structures, and beams and girders fallen on top of each other. There were pieces of machines that must have been cut by gas cutters but that now lay half-buried in the ground and

covered with vegetation. And there were hundreds of gloves soiled with soot, lying unclaimed without any human to work with them. Then his gaze stopped on the chimney. It did not look as intimidating to him anymore, so he walked towards it.

There was no other sound in the compound except the crackling of dried leaves under his feet, and then he noticed his father next to the furnace at the base of the chimney. He was staring intently at the cloud of smoke rising from it. There was a pile of gloves by his feet.

When the flame in the furnace grew somewhat weaker, Romington picked up some gloves and threw them into the furnace. Then he started reading their prayer loudly, as if he were standing in an Agiary. When he stopped after that brief religious ritual, Tempton placed his hand on his father's shoulder. Romington was startled by his touch and turned around. Then it was Tempton's turn to be startled, for his father's face scared him to the core. He turned around and fled, crying as he ran. His feet got entangled in some creepers, and he fell, face down, and buried his head, like an ostrich, in the dried grass.

Tempton was panting even as he lay prone on the ground. He heard the rustling of dried leaves, which stopped right by his ears, and then there was the same silence as before. He expected a hand to touch his back or a voice to ring out in that silence, and he dreaded seeing that face, which he hadn't seen for years and which had, with all the saddening changes time had brought upon it, terrified him so much.

Nothing that Tempton feared happened. He heard the rustling again, the sound of feet shuffling through the undergrowth, but now it was getting fainter. He raised his head and saw his father's weak body hobbling away. He jumped up on his feet and, despite his fears, ran after his father. He pleaded for forgiveness as he ran. At that moment he was gripped by a feeling of guilt—the guilt of not having looked after his father, the guilt of not having followed up on his father at the right time, the guilt of not having realized his duty to his father, the guilt of having abandoned him to roam these ruins like a ghost.

Tempton grabbed his father's soot-stained hands, placed his left arm on his shoulder, held his waist with his right hand, and began leading him out of the mill. He was still crying, but out of sorrow rather than fear. He had neither the experience nor the knowledge of supporting an old person's body. He had never supported anyone in his entire life. How could he do it

all of a sudden?

It was dark by the time he brought his father to the staff quarters. He switched on the light and saw his father nearly fallen on an armchair. His father's eyes were shut, and he was breathing rapidly. As Tempton held his father's emaciated fingers in his hands, he felt like he was drowning in a wave of indecision and sadness. Then he thought of something and nodded his head, as if agreeing with what he himself had thought.

"Papa," he could hear himself talking to his father. "You've done enough. There is nothing left here to do."

Romington looked up at his son, unblinking.

"Papa," he knelt before his father. "Let's leave this place. Let's go."

"No," Romington's voice was weak but resolute.

"Why do you want to stay here? What is left here?"

"Fire."

"Fire?"

"Yes," Romington's voice was lucid, the voice of a sane man. "I won't let that furnace go out."

Tempton stared dumbstruck at his father's face. It was clear to him that the fire his father was talking about was no ordinary fire. It was the fire that held the impulsive and entrepreneurial spirit of their ancestors. That fire was immortal, and that was why his father was chanting their hymns before the furnace.

Tempton brainstormed for an hour or two and came to the conclusion that it was impossible for him to take his father back to Mumbai. There was only one person who could do it: Hakku Fai. Only that fearful woman could make her brother see some sense, make him give up his stubbornness, and bring him back home. It wouldn't be the first time she would bring back her younger brother. In his childhood and youth, whenever Romington got lost in a crowd, ran away from home, or hid somewhere for fear of getting beaten up, it was always Hakku Fai, his wild elder sister, who grabbed him and dragged him home.

Hakku Fai, aged, did not have the same fire in her anymore, but somewhere within that grey-haired goddess still dwelt a tough-talking woman who could somehow make even the impossible come true. Tempton, on the phone for nearly thirty minutes, had been able to communicate into the partially deaf ears of that goddess what the situation was at the mill in Nagpur.

He did not know if he had been able to express himself well, for Hakku Fai, through that conversation, did not reveal any hint of what she would do next.

The next afternoon, at exactly three, a van stopped before the staff quarters of the mill. The door of the van opened, and out stepped the 82-year-old matriarch Hakku Fai, followed by her disciples. The first was her blunt and quarrelsome domestic helper, Usha Bai. Then came a dog whom Hakku Fai called *Usha Bai ka Jawai*—Usha Bai's Husband. After the dog came Shambhu, Hakku Fai's milkman, who was prepared to lay down his life for her. Finally, there were Hakku Fai's lovers, the Muqadam Brothers, whom she dragged along with her all over to keep them from taking advantage of her absence.

Once the platoon was out of the van, they began unloading their munitions. There was a spade, a shovel, an iron rake, a huge pair of shears, and a sickle. Then there was a suitcase made of rhinoceros skin, a 200-year-old wooden cane, a pair of gumboots, a canvas hat, and the foldable bicycle from London that Hakku Fai got painted every year in bright red in memory of her grandmother. All those objects were fine, but the one that came last made Tempton tremble. It was the iron shackle that had been used to restrict furious episodes in their family through their history of genetic psychiatric disorders.

As soon as the van left, Hakku Fai inserted two fingers into her toothless mouth, under the palate, and gave out a loud whistle that reverberated through the ruins of the mill. It was the sign for her platoon to start their mission. They all attacked the quarter Romington had been living in. Usha Bai tore through the wild begonias with one stroke of the sickle. Shambhu cut off the creepers in the courtyard with the shears and used the spade to uproot any creepers that were too stubborn for the shears. Armies of ants and insects began to emerge from the soil, and Hakku Fai's twin lovers sprayed them with insecticide.

Usha Bai's Husband—the dog—watched everything with marked curiosity. So immersed was he in his observation that he forgot even to bark or wag his tail. He was trying to find a role for himself in that frenzied human activity. Finally, unable to understand his role, he jumped upon the escaping armies of ants and insects. Some were crushed in that stampede, while others climbed upon the dog's legs or the hems of the Muqadam Brothers' pyjamas. When an insect stung Testor Muqadam on his thigh, he yelled and

dropped the insecticide spray pump on Husband's snout.

Usha Bai started cleaning the cobwebs inside the house, but she rushed to the courtyard when she heard Husband's yelp. What she saw there made her jaw drop: Testor and Harjee Muqadam had taken off their insect-infested pyjamas and were jumping naked, while Shambhu was spraying them with insecticide.

Oblivious to the scene outside, Hakku Fai was busy cleaning the toilet and the kitchen, and it did not take her long to establish a neat and clean space for items of daily use. There were also various activities taking place in two other rooms. Grass was uprooted from cracks in the floor, and those cracks were immediately filled with cement. Stuck panels on the windows were pulled out of their frames. The doors were hammered and repaired. Termites were driven out of shelves in the walls, and those shelves were given new coats of varnish. Fused bulbs were taken out of their holders and replaced with new ones. Photos of prophets on the altar were wiped clean of all the dust they had gathered.

Romington watched all that activity helplessly slumped in his armchair. There was nothing he could do, for he had been tied with the iron shackle. He had, in fact, been tied with that shackle on two previous occasions: first, when he saw his mother's dead body at the Tower of Silence, and second, when his wife, fighting against cancer, got a breast removed. He was just a mute spectator to the drama unfolding before him, but no one could tell that his attention was not on the cleaning activity but on the series of decadence that had fallen over their community and that had been brought into relief because of the cleaning activity.

Romington stared longingly at the panel of images hung on the wall before him. The first image was of Jamsetji Tata, which he looked at with wistfulness laced with respect. His gaze then moved along the other images on the panel, and by the time he reached the last image of Ratan Tata, the wistfulness and respect in his gaze had been taken over by rage.

Those images gradually faded inside Romington's mind, as memories and imagination melted into each other. He saw himself standing alone inside the compound, and then he floated through the ruins of the mill to the shed of the ginning department. There, hundreds of vultures were surrounding the remains of a giant machine that was used for ginning cotton. The vultures were leisurely nibbling on and eating away the iron body of the machine. Distracted by his presence, they stopped nibbling and looked up at

him, but they soon looked away and began nibbling and eating the machine again.

From the ginning department, he floated to the spinning department, where the vultures had finished eating everything and were snoozing, perched on iron angles. He floated through the vultures and stopped before a life-size portrait of the ex-spinning director of the mill, N. B. Saklatwala. Saklatwala looked helplessly at Romington, and Romington, in turn, looked helplessly at Saklatwala. They kept staring at each other for some time, and then they both lowered their heads, and Romington floated away.

From the spinning department, he floated to the canteen, where the workers sat holding cups of steaming tea they were unable to sip. Placed behind the workers was a jukebox, where records were spinning and changing, but no sound came out of it. Romington was engrossed in that noiseless ruin when the jukebox suddenly turned into a huge, black crow, startling him.

From the canteen, he floated above the corpse of that once-thriving enterprise. He was surrounded by so many crows, pouncing and cawing, that he did not have time to pick up a portrait of Sir Bezonji Dadabhoy Mehta that had fallen into the dirt. He did not have time even to bow before a statue of Jamsetji Tata, which had been splattered with dirt and left abandoned in the midday sun, or acknowledge a portrait of Sohrabji Bezonji Mehta.

He escaped the swarm of crows and floated towards a building. Once inside, he shut the door behind him, closed his eyes, and started taking deep breaths. Relaxed, he opened his eyes and found himself in the crèche. Several cradles were placed in rows, and he floated down the aisle between the rows and looked at babies whose mothers worked at the mill. He also looked at the nannies rocking the cradles, shaking rattles, and feeding the babies. The bell of the midday break was heard in the background, and several women entered the crèche, picked up their babies, and began breastfeeding them. He heard an ensemble of lullabies being sung in several languages. Then the mothers and babies were replaced by the officers of the mill and scrap dealers, and the lullabies were replaced by the sounds of an auctioneer, who stopped at a call for five thousand and one. The officers and the scrap dealers made a subtle, illicit gesture among themselves, and the deal was finalized. One by one, all those cradles, which had been used for 127 years, were removed from the crèche.

While Romington's mind was in the dust-filled desolation that had once been the crèche of Impress Mill, his body was still shackled to his armchair

in his quarter. He stared at Ratan Tata's image before whimpering, "This was the first mill in the country where there was a crèche for babies of women workers, and it was Jamsetji's contribution. That crèche too was auctioned off today."

Tempton, who had been observing the changing landscapes on his father's face, was puzzled by this announcement. He leaned closer to be able to hear his father's words clearly.

"Ratan, this mill was our mother concern," Romington mumbled. "The whole of Tata's empire was born of this mill, but you abandoned your old mother."

Romington, the man who barely spoke, was gripped by frenzy and went on blabbering.

"Jamsetji Tata was a true Zoroastrian. He set up this enterprise to support the unfortunate people of this country, who had been enslaved by the British. He lit up these furnaces so that this country might become self-reliant. But the Parsee progenies of today do not want to learn of the sacred history of such a great ancestor of ours. Competition has always been there, but struggling through that competition to keep the fire alive in our furnaces is a sacred deed, while liquidating the mill to get rid of it is a sin."

Tempton listened intently. He realized that his research had reached its final and decisive stage, and he had only one night to understand the stories that his father held within himself. He realized that that was the moment when he could learn which evil forces were behind the ruin of Impress Mill and which other secrets were still buried under its ruins. He had only one night to learn all of it because tomorrow his father would be taken back to Mumbai and committed to a battery of merciless doctors and tranquilizing injections.

Everything in that house was placed neatly against the wall in the front room and was being packed. Even though Tempton had been listening to his father, he was still watching the cleaning activity going on, and he could not understand why his aunt had to clean a house that they would vacate the very next morning. Thinking of Hakku Fai's whim and his father's mysterious words made him so tired that his eyelids drooped, and he rolled into a deep slumber next to his father's chair.

When he got up the next morning, Tempton felt as if his sleep had been one long blink. The day had just broken, there was a faint light outside, and

birds had started clamouring. Tempton rubbed his eyes, yawned, stretched his body, and turned towards his father's chair. His breathing nearly stopped when he realized that his father was not there! Even the arms of the chair to which he had been shackled were missing.

The sight was numbing. The very thought that Romington could break an arm of that chair was impossible. One needed enormous strength to perform such a feat. Where had this old, weak man found that kind of strength?

Tempton stood up and was unable to make sense of things for a minute or so. Then he rushed to the bedroom, where another numbing sight awaited him. Hakku Fai, naked down to her waist, lay asleep with her back resting against a pillow, while her lovers lay on each side of her, each holding one of her teats in his mouth, like two suckling goat kids.

Tempton shut the door and tried to awaken himself. He couldn't understand whether what he had just seen was real or a sleep-induced hallucination. When he was certain that he was awake and in his senses, he started knocking on the door with its latch and continued knocking until it opened.

Hakku Fai came buttoning her gown, a look of annoyance on her face for being woken up. Tempton did not wait even a second and reported his father's disappearance.

Hakku Fai walked lazily to the front room, examined the chair with the missing arms, stood akimbo for a while, and then ordered Tempton to bring out her bicycle.

Tempton was flabbergasted.

"Don't you understand what I'm saying?" Hakku Fai's voice was strong; the indolence from a few moments ago was gone.

Tempton lunged towards the red bicycle and took it out in the courtyard. Hakku Fai emerged from the house with the 200-year-old wooden cane in her hand and the canvas hat on her head. The creaking of her gumboots rang out loud in the veranda. It was the first time Tempton saw a woman wearing a gown with gumboots. Hakku Fai sat on her 70-year-old bicycle and pedalled on the same route that had taken Tempton through the hole in the wall.

Tempton woke everyone up after she left, and they completed their ablutions and set out for the mill. Upon passing through the hole, they heard Hakku Fai calling out to her brother, and they dispersed in different direc-

tions to look for him. An entire day passed, but there was no sign of the old man. Hakku Fai searched all the yards from Mill No. 1 through Mill No. 5, but she could not find any sign of her brother. Husband also sniffed and searched everywhere, but he too failed. Spent after their toil, they gathered where they had started from and quietly sat for dinner. Harjee Muqadam suggested that they file a missing person report with the police, but Hakku Fai rejected his idea.

The next day, they went back to the mill and continued their frenzied, unplanned search through the entire compound, but they returned at the end of the day, tired and disappointed.

The next day, early in the morning, Hakku Fai woke up Shambhu, asked him to carry the spade and the shovel, and led him to the furnace of the mill. The fire had gone out completely, and it was filled with tonnes of ash from before the mill closed and piles of rubber pieces and half-burnt canvas gloves that Romington had thrown into it in his effort to keep the fire alive.

Hakku Fai rummaged through the garbage and ash and got the shock of her life. There, in front of her, was Romington's *kushti*—the sacred woollen thread that a Parsee keeps tied around his waist all his life.

*Did Romington . . .?*

Hakku Fai regained her composure quite soon and ordered Shambhu to clean the pile of ash, but there was so much that it wouldn't have even been possible for ten men to clear all of it in one day. Usha Bai brought a mortar pan from somewhere, and the Muqadam Brothers also began shovelling the ash. One by one, everyone got into the furnace, quite unsure of why they were digging there. Hakku Fai stood quietly, and Tempton walked anxiously in the midst of flying ash and dust. Husband barked, circled the chimney, and wailed strangely, but no one paid him any attention.

As day turned to dusk, everyone looked like ghosts, covered with all that ash and dust. When they finally reached the bottom of the furnace, the shovel and the spade refused to dig through the fire bricks, and everyone got the hint that they should perhaps call it a day.

They looked at Hakku Fai, but Hakku Fai looked at nobody. Lost in herself, no one had ever seen her so quiet and disappointed. All her companions put down their equipment and stood defeated, their heads bowed. Even Husband hung his tail.

After they returned to Mumbai, crows circled the lonely chimney in the

ruins of the mill for a few days and then fell silent.

Romington's portrait joined the row of their ancestors' portraits in Dastoor House. Tempton sat before his father's image, lost in thought, but he did not think about his community or his father. He thought about the land vacated by the Impress Mill and about the Impress Mall, which was built on that land and whose shares had recently been issued in the stock market. He followed those shares, which had been on a constant rise.

One day, the S&P Bombay Stock Exchange Sensitive Index crossed the 10,000-point mark. On that very day, the last remaining structure of the Impress Mill was demolished. The 127-year-old chimney was pulled down in just five hours by a discharge loader manufactured by Tata Hitachi—one of India's leading construction equipment manufacturers and a joint venture between India's Tata and Japan's Hitachi.

That day, the entire country had its eyes on the stock exchange and the world record set by Sachin Tendulkar—one of the greatest batsmen in the history of cricket. That was why no one noticed that in the debris of the chimney, buried beneath crushed bricks and plaster, there was a human skeleton with its neck caught in a noose made of iron wire and its arms tied by an iron shackle to two broken arms of a wooden chair.