

Part One

Jamshed

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 offence. 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 farther 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. In its place 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 as shockingly painful as the first. Oh yes, he still expels it in short order with the best little warrior cry his 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, opportunities! All right, 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 *dastur* 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 coconut-scented rose water, and was actually feeling quite fine until she and her mother were sitting on the veranda 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 midmonth, 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 Soona returned to her mother and said nothing, just pointed at her belly and 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 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 3:23 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 things, and the labour was easy at first, but that was because, Soona 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 midday, 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 3:29 a.m. (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 midforties dastur 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 dastur 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 ever 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 never, eventually, born), and she thought of how this had been pleasant but would have been more so if it had happened when the sun wasn't so hot. 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 and, of course, to me, but that in itself is a story so strange that it will take some time to come around to it. So I shall just have to be patient.

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 of the room a *divo* was lit, and it was in that room that mother and child happily remained for six days, since it was the coolest room in the house, and finally gave Soona 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*.

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 Mona-Lisa-ly, 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 of 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 dastur, 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. 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! It’s bad luck 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.”