

## *Darius and Xerxes*

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“CAN YOU BUILD your happiness on the unhappiness of others?” This is what I ask myself. Especially if those others are your own blood; the people you love. If I were a novelist, I would write a long intricate story of the last twenty years. I would create rounded sentences, speak with feathered flourish, giving expression to different voices and views. But I’m not a novelist, I’m a lawyer, and lawyers are trained to write with brevity and accuracy. Style and storytelling are discouraged, literally frowned upon by the judges, especially in the Bombay High Court where I work.

Chief Justice Nariman used to call me into his grand old office and say, Mr. Darius Cama, you are guilty of wasting my time with your long-winded gibbering and pleading. Stick to the point, and you will go a long way. Follow your father’s example, he knew how to write a brief. Follow the French maxim, “Zero style, my boy, zero style!” Nariman was a real scholar, an intellectual.

I’m writing this story because I want to set the record straight. It is ten days before my fiftieth birthday party. A family celebration is taking place at my flat with everyone coming except for my younger brother, Xerxes, his wife Simin, and their children. They have not been invited. Some members of my family are putting pressure on me to relent, to forgive. “Open your heart,” my sister says. They want me to put an end to the vow I made many years ago never to have anything to do with Xerxes and his new wife.

There are ten days left to go to the party. I must come to a decision. I have heard all the petitioners. Their words—forgiveness, generosity, brotherhood, family, children—affect me. But what they don’t understand is that I am constitutionally incapable of changing my stance. It is almost a physical thing. All those years ago, it was as

if I had to cut the arterial connection between Xerxes and me. In its place, I constructed a wall. An adamantine wall of moral resistance. If I give in now, everything I have built will come tumbling down. And what kind of birthday celebration would that be?

“Adamantine,” what a fine word! It brings fire to my heart, strengthens my resolve. I remember that line from English lectures in my St. Xavier’s days. Professor Sinha, what an inspiring teacher! What a scholar! These are the people to admire. I remember his way of reciting and making us learn by heart from Milton:

Him the Almighty Power  
Hurled headlong flaming from the ethereal sky,  
With hideous ruin and combustion, down  
To bottomless perdition; there to dwell  
In adamantine chains and penal fire,  
Who durst defy the omnipotent to Arms.

Satan’s fate, being flung from heaven to hell, is exactly what should have befallen my brother and his pernicious wife.

I cannot be in the same room as those people. It is as if I would be welcoming an evil spirit into my house on an auspicious day. What kind of Zoroastrian would that make me? Fundamental to our religious beliefs is to fight off the evil spirits. “The battle between good and evil is fought within the soul of man,” proclaimed our prophet Zarathustra.

It goes back to our roots, way back in the beginning of our religion—1200 BCE—on the Iranian steppes. Zarathustra defined himself and his new creed in opposition to the ancient prehistoric gods of the Iranian Aryan peoples. These old gods became false gods, deceitful gods. Zarathustra put it clearly in his poetic teachings, the Gathas: man must choose between the enforcer of truth and virtue, Ahura Mazda, and the arrogant, and destructive Anghramanyu.

It is at the heart of our religion. We were born fighting. To preserve against the dying of the light, to keep the fire that we worship burning, we had to cross the seas when Islam arrived on our Persian shores and threatened to obliterate our ancient rituals. In small

bands, our forefathers escaped by boat to India, blended in with Indians, took on some of the customs, but in our hearts we never stopped being Parsis—people of Persia.

Xerxes, my brother, named after the great Achaemenid King, 485 BCE, you broke your promises. To Mithra, to Mithra's father, and finally, most heinously, to me. You broke all those promises. For what? For love, they say. My sister, Jinny, says, "Look at Romeo and Juliet, look at Heer Ranjha, Tristan and Isolde, they couldn't help it, the forces of love took them over. I promise you," my sister says, "I have never seen Xerxes more happy than with Simin. He has blossomed! It's time for you to forgive."

I am the last one, apart from his first wife, Mithra, and her mother, of course, who has continued to shun my brother and his family. Everyone else talks to them, invites them to parties, socializes with them, condones this unnatural alliance. Simin comes to family occasions, Simin has children, Simin has friends. But she has destroyed the life of her sister and made her bed where her sister's was. The same thing that Hamlet says of his mother is true of Simin's snakelike slithering into my brother's arms, still warm as they were with the scent of her trusting sister. "O, most wicked haste, to post with such dexterity to incestuous sheets." Whilst Mithra has quietly gone into exile and no one bothers about her any more. No one even knows much about what she is doing. No one invites her to parties.

I was about sixteen when this business with the Engineer family started. We lived in Jehangir Mansions, and they were in the building right next to ours called Torino on the newly built Cuffe Parade, a causeway flanked by buildings that had been erected on land reclaimed from the sea.

The Engineers had two daughters, Simin and Mithra; Simin was three years older than Mithra and a year older than me. In our family,

we were three children; I was the first, then Xerxes, two years younger, and finally our sister Jinny, born four years after Xerxes.

Xerxes was a strong, tall boy with broad shoulders. He was good at sports, especially squash, which he excelled at because of his height and his reach. He had wavy black hair, caramel-colored skin, brown eyes with a tinge of green in them, and a big rectangular face that came alive when he smiled. People thought him extraordinarily handsome. When my mother hosted a visiting American violinist, giving a concert in Bombay, the maestro told my mother that in Xerxes she had given birth to “some kind of a Greek god!” Our mother adored Xerx, and I was aware that sometimes there was talk among our relatives of him being her favorite. I didn’t mind this too much as I was the firstborn, and this gave me a strong bond with my father, a mild-mannered, introverted, studious man who lived mostly for his work. He sometimes even worked on Sundays.

One day, on my return home from a meeting of the elocution society at school—we had been practicing Brutus’s and Mark Anthony’s speeches—I noticed that Xerxes was standing on the balcony of our shared room and just staring down below. I asked him what he was doing but got no answer. An hour later, when it was dark, I saw he was still on the balcony, and I went out to join him. He put his fingers to his lips. I followed his gaze to a lit room on the first floor of Torino. In the amber glare of a bedroom light you could see through drawn curtains a young woman moving about.

“Keep on watching,” Xerx said.

Now I noticed there were two young girls, both in nighties, talking to each other, coming in and out of view. The girls felt close to us, quite intimate, as if a spotlight was shining on them through the darkness. The way you could look into other people’s windows from one building to another made you feel as if you were almost sharing that space with them, without them knowing it.

“Who are they?” I asked.

“Mithra and Simin, Engineer girls,” said Xerxes.

We used to play with them when we were kids, but now they went to a different school from ours, Cathedral, I think, and they

had grown. I wouldn't have recognized them. One of the girls was hanging up a blue and white pinstriped dress, must have been her school uniform.

Xerx became animated. "There, look, that's the one I like, Mithra!" I could see her—the smaller one with short curly hair. "I'm going to give a little whistle then you duck, okay?" He had invented an undulating low-to-high-pitched trill that sounded like some exotic bird tweeting in a tropical forest. He said it was a code he had learned from the *National Geographic* magazine, a seductive song that birds sing to each other in the Amazon or something. When he'd finished his whistling I dropped down on my haunches with him, laughing and shielding ourselves behind the parapet of the balcony.

Every day after school, a bit like a short movie before bedtime, we watched the sisters in their bedroom. It became our nightly ritual, and soon, I think, the girls knew we were there. When they saw Xerx and me at our perch, they would giggle and then draw their curtains, though sometimes allowing for quite a long interval before they withdrew. Xerxes spent much longer out there than me, practicing his birdcall and claiming that he had heard Mithra answer with a whistle of her own.

In fact, now I recall, one night when I was on my own and keeping vigil for Xerx, I saw much more than I had expected. One of the sisters, I couldn't tell which, who was alone in the room with her back to the gaping window of light, crossed her arms above her head and pulled her dress over her head in a delicious arc that revealed to me her back and her round bottom clad in white panties. She must have been looking in a mirror because she stayed like that for some seconds. I can still feel the silver thread that moved inside my body, a mixture of fear and excitement, on witnessing a woman's nakedness and the unimaginable, incandescent delight that one day I might not just be able to see, but also to touch those curves. My imagination carried me along a path on which I arrived from behind to unhook the straps that held the weight of her breasts and lowered them into my hands.

For many nights I embellished that image in my mind. What gives me pause, as I write this, is that it never bothered me, and I never allowed myself to ponder, at the time or since, which sister I might have been looking at that night. As a matter of record, Simin is taller, has longer hair, and is more full-bodied, some even say she has a devilishly voluptuous figure.

Six days to go to the party. I seem to have unearthed strange, somewhat unsettling memories in the writing of this report: things that I had forgotten, parts of me that seem to have been in hiding. As I said before, if I were a novelist I would draw these out bit by bit, investigate further the seams of character, create different voices and threads and anecdotes, tease out motivations. But the point here is simply to give a brief account; to justify the barring of my door to my brother.

So, this is how the teenage romance between Xerxes and Mithra began, and in the days, months, and years to come it developed through courtship, infatuation, and love, genuine love, as I thought at the time, into their eventual marriage.

What heady days of fun those were! My cousins, about the same age as us, used to come and stay at Jehangir Mansions, as their parents were often traveling abroad, and the four of us would talk and joke, smoke cigarettes without inhaling, and stay up late into the night. And everyone got involved in the big flirtation between Xerx and Mithra. Sometimes the sisters were allowed to join us until the hour of their curfew at nine p.m. and then there were six of us. That was before Simin's sumptuous décolletage caught the eye of the owner of Sassanian, the big Irani restaurant on Marine Lines where we used to go for fish curry "rise" and black forest cake. He was a rich fellow built like a bear, with a sullen, belligerent expression and a thick Freddie Mercury moustache. Everyone said Simin was going to marry this thug. Sure enough, as per predictions, in front of my unbelieving eyes, Simin gave up college and tied the knot with Mr. Sleazy.

At first, I still saw the relationship between Xerxes and Mithra as some kind of passing, even humorous affair, but by the time I was nineteen and on my way to college in England, and Xerx was still occasionally doing his birdwhistle and getting from Mithra her own mellifluous reply, and I would often find them lying in our bedroom in the dark for hours, I realized that there was a strong chance of this becoming a lifetime relationship.

I grew very fond of Mithra. She was a quiet girl, but I think she felt she could trust me. Hers was a straightforward devotion to Xerxes that reminded me of my father. Xerxes, on the other hand, was quite unaware of who he was and the impact of his dazzling good looks on the people around him.

Once, in Poona, waiting for Xerxes to return from playing in a squash tournament, I remember a conversation I had with Mithra. It was muggy, we were alone, the two of us, no air-conditioning in the old Parsi house in which we were staying. Mithra had on a tight blue blouse. I felt close to her, like a sister almost. I had known her for a long time by then. She trusted me as the older brother.

“Xerxes says he’s having difficulty believing in God,” she told me. “He wears the *sudra/kusti* but he finds it hard to say his prayers any more.”

“Then he says I am his god, he needs no other god, he just needs me. I tell him he is mad. There are so many pretty women after him and all. Everyone goes on about him being so handsome and all. I don’t know why does he keep on staying with me. I’m just a simple, plump, Parsi girl.” She took the little hanky tucked into her blouse and wiped the perspiration from her neck. We lay down for a while. Then we went to the verandah at the back of the house and shared a cigarette.

“When we were boys, Xerx was so regular with his prayers, every night he would kneel down and *paghe-purr*,” I said. “I could be naughty because Xerxes was good. I could shout, be crazy, greedy, or rude, because he was quiet and well behaved and kind.”

“One time, it was late at night, Daddy and Mummy were arguing, I couldn’t tell what it was about, but Mummy was crying, we

could hear her even in our bedroom. I crept out into the corridor toward their door. Xerx came up behind me. We were in our pajamas. The cold air and their shouts came streaming toward us. ‘Every night you read and every night I am here waiting. All you care about is your books, books, books,’ my mother cried. ‘All I ask is for a little attention, if all you want is books then why don’t you go live on your own... I can’t stand this life anymore.’”

“Xerxes pulled me back from their door. I think I might have pushed in and interrupted them otherwise. When we were back in our room, he switched on the little bedside lamp and said, ‘Let’s pray together, Darius.’ I had seen him pray before. He always knelt at the bottom of the bed and tipped his big head over in a prostrate pose. I let him pray, never feeling the urge to follow. He was the good guy, he prayed for both of us.”

“That night he made me join him. ‘We’ll pray together, huh? And whilst we pray you think of Mummy and Daddy. Think of good thoughts for them to think, so they won’t fight anymore, so they will stay together and not divorce.’ He made us say our Ashem Vohû together. I mumbled the prayers along with him. We all knew Ashem Vohû by heart, but I had no idea at the time what the words meant.”

Ashem Vohû vahishtem astî  
ushtâ astî ushtâ ahmâi  
hyat ashâi vahishtâi ashem.

[Holiness (Asha) is the best of all good:  
it is also happiness. Good thoughts,  
good deeds, good words]

I remember, all that time ago in Poona, Mithra being so moved by that story that she gave me a long, close hug.

I seem to have switched professions from a lawyer into an archaeologist digging up buried artifacts.



I wish I had talked to Xerxes the time I stumbled upon him and Simin, early in the morning at the United Services Club. By that time I was twenty and studying law at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London and enjoying my own liaisons with girls. Back home, Mithra and Xerxes's relationship seemed to be setting like one of my mother's molded birthday jellies.

Despite their modernity, many Parsi parents, like my mother, wanted nothing more for their children, especially their daughters, than to find a good Parsi man and settle down to a comfortable, respectable life. So, in our homes, Xerx and Mithra were treated like heirs to the throne by both sets of parents. This was made worse when Simin's new husband, a.k.a. Freddie Mercury, turned violent. Late one night, Simin arrived at her parents' doorstep by taxi, the cabby heaving two suitcases behind her. That marriage was over as precipitously as it had begun.

One morning, a few days after landing in Bombay for my summer holidays, waking early, still jet-lagged, I suppose, I drove my mother's car down Mosque Lane to the United Services Club in Navy Nagar. I arrived there at seven-thirty, went for a short run around the golf course by the sea, showered, and made my way to the seating area around the swimming pool. I sat in a far corner under a lovely tamarind tree. After months of gray and cold in London, I was hungry for my favorite childhood breakfast, *akoori* on toast—scrambled eggs with onions and tomatoes, spiked with coriander and green chilis, followed by buttery waffles dripping with honey.

I wasn't paying attention to any of the other guests. In fact, I was rather hoping that early in the morning there wouldn't be anyone who recognized me. After ordering, I leaned back in my cane chair and lit a cigarette, basking in the slanting rays of morning light. It was then that I noticed a couple speaking intently to one another diagonally across from me on the other side of the pool. Then I recognized Xerxes's thick mop of hair, but who was he with? I rose quietly and approached them from the side, thinking I might give Xerxes a fright and make him jump; but then I noticed, though their hands were not touching, that there was something heated, even clandestine, in their

expressions, which stopped me from playing my prank. On seeing me, they looked taken aback. Simin's face turned a shade darker, her neck and shoulders all aglow in her sleeveless purple blouse. Just then, I spied my scrambled eggs being carried to my table under a shining salver. Thinking only of my splendid breakfast growing cold, I made my excuses. I was surprised that soon after I had polished off the waffles, Xerxes and Simin had gone.

Clearly, I had stumbled upon something charged between my brother and Simin. Xerxes had looked flustered. Why didn't I investigate? Why didn't I raise it properly with him later?

I subsequently discovered that ever since Simin had come out of her awful marriage experience, Mithra had asked Xerxes to be extra nice to her sister, which is why he had driven her to the club each morning for a swim while he played squash. I wish I had stayed talking with them or even joined them instead of hunkering down greedily with my scrambled eggs. I wish I had not dismissed my initial suspicion so easily. I should have looked after my brother. I should have been paying more attention. Why is it that we always look the other way?

This morning, three days before the party, I get a text from Jinny. "It's not too late to call them," she writes. "Xerx is not an evil man. You know that." I repeat to myself the answer I didn't send to my sister's message: "Yes he is, yes he is."

And so, with the passing of years, the relationship between Mithra and Xerxes steered its course steadily toward marriage. I came back from England and started practicing as a barrister at Mistry Chambers just round the corner from Sassoon Docks. During that time both my mother and Mithra's father developed cases of terminal cancer. My mother's brain tumors spread faster than Minocher's lung cancer, and her demise was horribly painful, but thankfully she went quickly. Whereas Minocher Engineer's lung cancer bore him toward his end in a slower carriage. Being abroad on work, I missed his funeral. Xerxes and my father relayed the news by

letter and phone. Living so close, Xerxes was devoted to Minocher Engineer, paying him visits twice a day. I remember being moved by his story of feeding Minocher yogurt and fruit with a spoon, as if he were a child. There was a general feeling of sadness that my mother and Mithra's father had not lived to see the marriage of their children.

As it was, coming so soon after the funeral, the wedding was a subdued affair. Later, when it all unraveled, my father said he could see at the ceremony that something on Xerxes's face was not right. My cousin Niloufer, from whom everybody had come to expect wild pronouncements, commented, "He looked like a lamb being led to the slaughterhouse." I put Xerxes's dolor down to our mother not being there.

This next part is very difficult for me to write coherently. I've tried several times to bring my lawyer's brain to the events. I shall state the facts baldly. On the 5th of August, 1989, I severed all connections with my brother and his wife. This is what made me do so.

I was working on a delicate case related to the contested will between three sons of a very wealthy Gujarati jeweler who had died in Brussels, when Xerxes called me up at the office. His voice was virtually devoid of feeling. "Darius, I need your help," he said. I recognized this deadpan tone of his from moments of crisis in our past, so he didn't need to say very much. I knew I had to get quickly over to the newly furnished flat that he and Mithra were living in.

On my arrival, he told me with little ado that his marriage had irredeemably broken down. There was no way to repair the relationship between him and Mithra. According to him, they had not been getting on for some time.

"Has this got anything to do with Mithra's recent miscarriage?" I asked.

"No," he said. The love had drained out of their relationship a long time before that, as far back, he said, as before the marriage

ceremony, but he felt he had to go through with it because of the promise he had made to the dying Minocher Engineer that he would marry his daughter.

I realized then that what my cousin Niloufer had seen at the wedding was true. We ignore the sayings of the mad at our peril. I remembered that look in Xerxes's eyes and the cold, flat tone of voice that surprised people at the wedding. Something was too pat about this story of the breakdown of his marriage. The scene I had witnessed between him and Simin at the club came flying back to me like a hawk. "Are you having an affair?" I asked.

He shook his head, but I saw that he was lying. My pulse rose. I questioned him more directly about his relationship with Simin, and the putrid truth came out. Yes, he had been having an affair, "off and on," with Mithra's sister. They had done everything they could to put an end to it. He hadn't seen Simin for two months, but just last night Mithra had found an incriminating letter from her sister pleading for another secret meeting with Xerxes. It was clear to me that his involvement with Simin had begun before his marriage to Mithra, perhaps long before.

Being a lawyer, I am used to hearing shocking things, and I'm also used to finding the best solution without getting too tangled up in the emotional side. Even though this was my brother, at least half of me went into autopilot mode. I spoke coldly. "You have done a very hurtful, cowardly, and stupid thing, but we need to think of a way of limiting the damage."

He stayed silent, but in his eyes I could see that there might be worse things to come. So I immediately said, "If you are expecting me to help you with your breakup, getting a divorce settlement, and all that, so that you can jump ship and marry Simin"—her name stuck in my throat—"I want to make it clear to you now, I don't want to have anything to do with this business. In fact, it will be hard for me not to offer my advice to Mithra on how best to clean you out." Looking into his wavering eyes, I said, "Listen to me, Xerxes, you cannot build your happiness on the unhappiness of others."

He pinched the skin on the inside of his neck, as we used to do when we were boys, and, becoming animated for the first time during our meeting, he vowed, “I swear on anything, I will never agree to marry Simin.”

I believed him, but I made him repeat his promise, adding, for the sake of clarity, that this promise should stand at the minimum for a period of three years.

“If you want, I am happy to give it to you in writing,” he said.

On the basis of his word, I helped my brother. Through all those months of chaos, humiliation, and gossip that grew around our family, I remained focused on finding a way for him.

What I regret was the part I took in convincing Mithra to give Xerxes the divorce. It was the one thing she put up a fight against. She was sure he wanted a quick divorce, so that he could marry her sister. In the end Mithra, who preserved a sense of dignity throughout, gave in, signed the papers, threw in the towel, so to speak—because her sister, out of envy perhaps, or as a result of some kind of vicious sibling rivalry, had prized from her the very thing that Simin had not been able to procure in her first marriage. I think Mithra felt it became her better to bear her loss with quiet fortitude. I admire her for that.

Within six months of the divorce, I heard from my Uncle Cyrus that preparations were being made for a quiet marriage ceremony between Xerxes and Simin at the Grant Road Fire temple. A small celebratory dinner would follow. It was on the day the invitation arrived, 5th of August, 1989, that I made my decision never to see Xerxes or Simin or any offspring of theirs as long as I could, perhaps as long as I live. It was the broken promise to me, the deceit and the pain caused to Mithra and her mother, and the shame brought on our families, that I could not bear.

I was expecting my father to support me and come up with a statement of moral clarity, but he acted with hardly any surprise.

“Darius,” he said, “you are close to Mithra, continue to be as kind to her as possible, but do not vilify Simin or Xerxes. He cannot help it. He has been bewitched.” For my father, the sorcery sprang from Simin, and he was not willing to lose his son.

I told him about Xerxes’s broken promise and about my resolve to join Simin’s mother and Mithra, who had made it clear that they never wanted to see Simin or Xerxes, or any children they might ever have. First, my father remained silent. Then he said, “Judge not lest ye be judged. Is killing bad? Then what about Arjuna, Ulysses, or even Krishna? Is adultery with your wife’s sister bad? Then what about the four Pandavas in the Mahabharata who on their mother’s instructions happily shared one wife between them? Watch, wait, see what happens. Do not make judgments or vows too soon.”

I go and sit on the large balcony outside the living room. It’s the morning of the party. Good luck chalk designs have been laid on the floor, and a string of marigolds has been hung above the doorway. Already I am surrounded by plants and bouquets of flowers sent by well-wishers. We were incredibly lucky getting this large flat when places like this were still affordable. One day, it will have to be sold. My father loved it so much, that even though he urged us to sell, rebuild, move into modern times, we held on. And I, being single, am the beneficiary for a few more years.

The cane chair is moist underneath me; sea breeze freshens my brow. A memory slips into my mind like a stream. I don’t block it.

I am awake, but it is as if I were dreaming: it’s October: hot, dry, still. The worst month in Bombay. I must have been nine years old. Xerxes and I are out in the heat. We’re playing French cricket, a game in which you use your legs as the wickets. I can see his eyes, pale green marbles catching the sun as his head and hands bob from side to side like a playful cat, trying to hit my knees with the tennis ball. Then there was a bell, the bell of the Golawala, the man who

sold crushed ice on a stick, sweetened with watermelon juice. Bat and ball flung to the ground, we ran upstairs to find some money. But no one was in. "I have some money saved up in my piggy bank," said Xerx, but when he got it out, it was only forty paise. We took it and scampered down the stairs; the thought of that ball of ice suffused with the sticky, sugary juice was all that filled my mind. What will happen if we can only have one? We tried to haggle with the fellow, but the one stick was all he would give us. Xerx took it and gave me the first lick. Then he decided we should have one lick each, which we followed meticulously, our tongues getting redder and redder with each slurp. The evening heat melted the ball and it turned smaller and smaller on its wooden stick. I remember thinking it was a little like the sun going down under the sea, when you looked at it setting at six o'clock.

Jakob, who has been with our family for thirty-two years, brings the morning papers and tea and leaves them on the table beside the phone, which stares at me inquiringly.