

V

Samsara

I have always been intrigued by the fact that cows in India are sacred. They roamed unmolested through the Indian towns and villages, sometimes with a bell around their necks and a jasmine topknot on their heads, or with their heads gaily painted. But mostly it was awful. Gaunt, filthy and sickly, they munched away on pounds of rotting waste, idly eating up slops, paper, or bits of fabric they found by the wayside. Drivers, rickshaw men, and pedestrians risked their necks to avoid the cows that lay sprawled in the middle of the road. The unfortunate who accidentally bumped into one must face the outrage of the crowd. Cows had power. They could bring traffic to a standstill, and people showed them respect. Yet scores of them died of starvation.

My mother would be brisk and impatient with Zam, who was as slow as a cow's digestive system with its four different stomachs – abomasum, reticulum, rumen, and omasum. By the time anything finally labored its way the length of Zam's grey cells, my mother's nerves would be jangling, but I had no problem at all with his sluggishness.

Zam would make dough out of water and dark, coarse wheat flour with a little bran. He would pinch off a bit of the dough, make it into a ball, and roll it out flat as a pancake. Then he would flip

it from one hand to the other, and that regular slapping sound was music to my ears. A ritual: chapatti. Very, very thin, but as soon as it landed across the circular opening over the firebox it inflated; Zam's skilled hand instantly turned it over; and it was done. The Indians ate chapattis with everything. They used them to scoop up sauce, they stuffed them with vegetables, and they wiped their plates clean with them. The chapatti was not just their bread but their knife, fork, and spoon—a complete place setting in one.

My father would work until he dropped. Whenever things were going badly, he would stay on at the site until he felt he had them more or less under control. Sometimes he didn't come home for days on end. The Indians were mulish, but he didn't let it get to him. He had personal experience: no one was more obstinate than his own wife.

Thomas attempted to mollify his team: the good-hearted coolies weren't lazy—they merely refused to work with anything technical, or with any new tools that they hadn't tested themselves over the course of centuries.

The sorely tried Ruda Martinec had been leveling the same site for three days, and had nothing to show for it but deep furrows and gaping holes sixty yards across and twelve feet deep.

"Sorry, boss. I really don't know what to do. I've brought in some carts so they won't wear themselves out filling the holes, but they just beg me to let them carry the stuff on their heads. I tell them hell will freeze over before they're done, but they complain that shovels make their hands and arms ache. 'We don't know how to shovel soil,' they moan, 'just let us carry it in baskets on our heads!' Yesterday they demonstrated how useless they were at shoveling—and today they're on strike."

"Hell freezing over probably doesn't mean much to them."

"How on earth am I supposed to oversee such a primitive bunch? How can I make them do what I want?"

Thomas looked serious. "You do realize what the hitch is,

don't you?"

Ruda just shrugged and made a long face.

"If you treat them like idiots, they'll act like idiots." He set aside the roll of drawings, locked the office, and accompanied Martinec back to the worksite. He picked up a shovel. "Let's show them how it's done. If the white sahib can use a shovel, the brown coolie will follow suit."

Martinec grabbed a shovel and joined in. "You're taking a bit of a chance, aren't you, boss? Suppose they don't join in? I bet they could spend hours just watching us."

"Let's wait and see who gives up first."

"Hm. I bet we'll be fit to drop, and they'll still have the strength to stand there gaping."

The Indians stuck it out long enough for both sahibs to be collapsing with exhaustion, but not long enough for Thomas to give up. After two or three hours, the knot of onlookers had grown to quite a crowd, and some of them started fidgeting and fingering the wooden handles of the shovels. Then gradually, cautiously, they yielded to the monotonous rhythm. Spade in, scoop, and heave it into the cart. Again and again and again.

Ruda stood up and, with a slap on his boss's shoulder, acknowledged he had been right. They tottered on wobbly legs like old drunkards.

Thomas was invited to pay a visit to his own boss. When he arrived, Bartoš was pacing the office and waving his arms. The open space on the riverbank was visible outside his window: piles of bricks, bamboo scaffold poles, the ground looking as though a bomb had gone off. And people everywhere: an anthill on fast forward.

"We need a three-storey building and we need it now," said Bartoš. "The old warehouse is bursting at the seams. When can you start?"

"Just as soon as we complete the loading bays at the station

and get the drains linked up. I figure two weeks.”

“What? You want to start cementing during the rainy season?”

“Yes.”

“Seriously?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, you know what you’re doing. And when are you going to start re-aligning the retaining wall? Is there any hope of speeding things up?” Bartoš waited for Thomas to answer. He had no time for deceit and false promises.

“Well, there could be, but I’d need more people from home.”

“Don’t you have enough?”

Thomas was exhausted. His neck spoke of a string of sleepless nights and his lungs complained of his forty cigarettes a day. Here was an opportunity not to be missed. He fought hard to concentrate and make his point so there could be no room for doubt.

“Martinec is busting his back, but he can’t keep up with ordering all the materials. I deal with the suppliers myself, or he’d never get any sleep. Kielkowský spends every moment of the day and night on the plans, but doesn’t have time to deal with budgets, so I do that myself too. Švarc is handling deliveries as they arrive and Zítek spends all his time doing the accounts. So there’s no one to oversee the actual site.”

“How many?”

“Two or three should be enough, but no new boys. I need men who know what they’re doing, leaders who understand construction and can keep the workmen on their toes—this needs redoing, mix that mortar properly, get this plasterwork fixed.” Worn out, he paused for breath. “I need men who can get these coolies to stop being so damn stubborn and carrying everything on their heads. Bricks, cement, mortar, all at a snail’s pace. Otherwise we’re going nowhere fast. They’d have to be people who can meet these folks’ perpetual *tomorrow* with a loud *today*.”

“I’ll ask for two foremen. You’ll have them here within eight

weeks.”

“Thanks. We’ll leave the retaining wall till after the monsoons.”

Weeks later, he stood knee-deep in muddy water, which was rising at a dizzy rate. Scaffolding strained to the limit, clay soil dissolved into a brown mush, and the endless patter of raindrops landing in puddles that never seemed to fill up.

“Where the hell are they?”

Ruda Martinec, his wild mop of hair now plastered down on his head like a custom-made helmet, bellowed through the banisters of rain. “Dunno. But if they don’t get here soon, we’ll be up shit’s creek, boss!”

Thomas took two flamingo steps closer and surveyed the scene. “Get out now! I mean it.”

“What about you?”

“Move, or we’re both screwed!”

A landslide. Great holes were opening up like bomb craters and mighty molehills were taking shape. The ground was shifting from place to place like a fretful squirrel. This was grist to the mill of the doubters and the prophets of doom. Not one company was doing any building work for miles around, except those lunatics at Baťa’s. Sinking foundations and laying concrete with the monsoon breathing down their necks—they’d have to be crazy, or suicidal.

But Thomas knew he was neither. And he knew what was needed to cope with this mess: more pumps. Many more. By the time a week had passed, he had evolved an efficient working method: a bank of pumps coped with the cloudbursts, and the mixer churned out concrete at a rate rapid enough to fill in the holes they dug before they disappeared under water. Going inch by inch, they poured the concrete into the crisscross of shuttering. The finished footings were capped with strips of reinforced concrete to deaden the shocks from earthquakes. The foundations were ready in six weeks.

One day, Ruda Martinec shouted theatrically to him over his

shoulder: "Your wife called, boss."

Thomas straightened up and stared, wondering what that meant. "Has something happened?"

"She asked the same thing. Said she hadn't heard from you for a week. She wanted to know if you're still alive."

He nodded. "Thanks, Ruda."

"You ought to go and see her. I can take care of things here."

"Thanks, Ruda."

Rachel was pouring herself a cup of tea. Her arm was bent, her fingers gripped the white handle, the pale brown liquid filled a china cup. Leaning against the doorframe, Tom watched the curve of her back.

"Did you send for me, Madam?"

Her startled cry bounced off the walls. She swung around and the teapot lid clinked. "You scared the hell out of me!"

His footsteps left visible traces of mud on this side of the doorway. "Scared?"

"I didn't recognize you." Her smile was strained with fright.

Layers of dust had turned his hair a strange grey color, half an inch of stubble betrayed his razor's weeklong absence, and his complexion was darkened by dirt and sun. The armpits of his shirt were millwheels of sweat.

"You look like a savage." She was overwhelmed by a medley of odors. Sweat, cement, tobacco, lime, mortar, rain.

He took the teacup from her hand and set it back down on the tray. The tablecloth behind her was a field of flowers and tropical fruit. He lifted her onto it. "Where is he?"

"Who? Daniel? In bed." Breathless, she tried to resist. "He isn't asleep yet. He's waiting for his story."

"Let him wait."

"Mo-mmyyyy!"

"I don't think he's going to."

Tom's eyes widened and he let go of her dress. "Can you tell him something short?"

"Can you go and wash up?" She ran her hands down the dress to smooth away his grip marks.

He turned off the dining room lights, headed for the bathroom, and reached for the soap. He left the door ajar to catch the bedtime story.

"I'm going to tell you about the brave warrior of the Mixtecs who became their first ruler," Rachel began. "One day, he climbed a hill and cried out: 'Whosoever wishes to be lord of this land must defeat me in battle.' Everyone heard, but no one wanted to pit his strength against the warrior. As he came back down the hill, the rising Sun tickled his face. The warrior thought that the Sun was challenging him to a duel. So he took his bow and shot an arrow at the Sun.

"And the Sun? He didn't even notice as he continued on his way across the sky. Still the warrior watched carefully, right until the moment the Sun set. 'I've beaten the Sun!' he shouted into the silent landscape. 'I've beaten the Sun!' And so he became the first ruler of the Mixtecs. Ever since that time, the Mixtecs have called their rulers *He Who Beat The Sun*.

"But that was only a short story!" came Dan's voice.

"I'll tell you a longer one tomorrow."

"But the Sun didn't even fight with him!"

"No, it didn't."

"So how could it win, without a fight?"

"Sometimes you can win if the other guy doesn't put up a fight. And sometimes you can win by not fighting yourself. You let the other guy think he's won. Grown-ups sometimes say that *discretion is the better part of valor*. And the Sun had the discretion not to put up a fight. You can only do that when you are so strong that you don't have to prove you're better. Now go to sleep."

When she entered the bedroom, Tom was grinning. "So how

could he win, without a fight?"

"Stop it!"

"I'm not sure he understood your definition of a victory that isn't one and a fight without fighting. I certainly didn't."

"Well, he did."

"And here I'm always wondering who he gets his brains from." He laughed and grabbed at her.

"You're roaring like a tiger; if Dan hears you he'll be afraid."

"Just as long as he doesn't come in here."

A monsoon swept across Batanagar. It was too much for the warehouse roof. The iron sheeting rolled up like wrapping paper, the roof fittings and mountings gave under the sheer weight of water. The wall of the factory collapsed, and the bamboo scaffolding on the filling station scattered all around the site like matchsticks. The skeleton frame of building 23 also had to be redone. Thomas's prospects for a decent night's sleep melted away in a rain-sodden haze.

My mother, Kavita, and I took refuge in Darjeeling for a few summer weeks to avoid the stifling heat and floods. But I looked forward to getting back to Calcutta; once the monsoon season passed, my father came to get us.

I sat in our Calcutta kitchen watching Zam's hands. He crushed cooked lentils, heated some oil in a frying pan, browned a spoonful of cumin seeds in it, and added a finely chopped onion. He waited until it turned golden-brown, then he tipped the mashed lentils into the pan and sprinkled the whole with a spoonful of turmeric, a pinch of salt, and some green chillies. In fifteen minutes it was done.

The Estates Division was given the task of refurbishing some of the larger shoe stores as quickly as possible. Yesterday was already too late. They carved India up into several unequal portions and disappeared for a couple of weeks. Thomas headed

south, to Hyderabad and Madras.

He came home late one night, tired and hungry. He crept into the bedroom, sat on the bed, and watched Rachel sleeping, her breath filling his lungs, her dreams shifting stars and planets in his sky. He fell asleep next to her, still dressed.

In the morning he woke to an empty bed and found her in the bathroom. She was sitting on the bathtub, head in hands, breathing deeply.

“Rachel, darling, what’s the matter?” He bent over her and looked at her closely. She was unusually pale. “I’ll send for Doctor Seagal.”

“He was here yesterday. I’m all right.”

“All right? Did he say that?”

She gave him an enigmatic look. “I’ve got another construction worker for you in here.”

He raised an eyebrow and let out a whistle. “I bet I’m the last to know.”

“But you’re hardly ever here.”

“You could have written, like last time.”

For my sixth birthday, they told me I would be having a little brother or a little sister. I wanted a brother. Girls in India counted for nothing. One day, Kavita had told my mother that when her cousin had a baby girl, her husband was so angry that he cut his wife’s ear off. Clearly, girls were a punishment.

There were days when my mother was all out of sorts. One morning, I came straight to the dining table from bed, and she looked at me severely. “Go and brush your teeth and get dressed, now. You’re not having breakfast in your pajamas!”

“Why do I have to brush my teeth in the morning when I haven’t eaten anything all night?”

She glanced at my father, who went on intently stirring his coffee. That made her even more annoyed. “Daddy will explain.”

“Do what Mommy says, Dan, I’ll explain afterwards.”

I huffed off towards the bathroom and listened to snatches of what they were saying.

“Darling, how am I supposed to explain why he has to brush his teeth in the morning when he hasn’t eaten all night? Besides, I’m in a rush to get to work.”

“I just haven’t got the energy to argue with either of you, Tom.”

“I know. But you look good!”

I could almost hear her rolling her eyes.

“He so takes after you, Rachel. Analyzing everything—and look out if something doesn’t make sense. He can’t stand rules for rules’ sake.”

“Don’t be silly, Tom. Brushing your teeth in the morning isn’t just some rule; it’s basic hygiene!”

“There you are! Now that you’ve given me a decent case to make, I can go and explain it to him.”

He knew how to make her laugh even if she meant to be serious. As I came back in, she was looking for something to throw at him. There was a bowl of oranges behind her. She reached for one, but my father was already at the door.

“I’ll get you some knives, the kind they use in the circus. That’ll be more fun,” he said.

One day, Martinec came hurtling into Thomas’s office, frantic. “There’s cobras in the warehouse, boss. All in a heap.”

“So, chase ’em out!”

“But...but how? The men are scared.”

“Christ! A storm system at home and cobras at work.”

A few minutes later, Tom showed up at the warehouse with a bunch of grinning natives at his heels. Each was armed with a stick and had a sack over his shoulder. “Okay, Ruda. These guys will show you how to get rid of a couple of snakes.” He marched straight inside with a stick in his hand. Ruda Martinec was wracked with doubt.

“Are the bastards poisonous?”

Tom paused at the door and treated Martinec to a lukewarm smile. “Their bite is fatal,” he responded dryly. “But people who die of a cobra bite are cleansed of their sins. They get buried whole, you know? Not cremated. It’s a kind of liberation.”

“Oh good. That makes me feel a lot better.”

The baby was stillborn.

Kavita said that my mother had had a spell cast on her by that little witch, Savitri. I didn’t really understand, but I knew something dreadful had happened. I remember my parents, their bodies wrapped up in pain, my mother’s eyes blank pages, no stories to tell. I walked through the house, silent, invisible to everyone. I overheard Kavita telling Zam that the mistress had been possessed by demons. I was frightened, but I knew my father would do everything to drive the demons out.

Something inside Rachel had turned in a circle and flown away. Thomas tried to reach her.

“Rachel?”

She was disappearing at the speed of light, somewhere he couldn’t go. He held her tight, but his arms felt empty, his voice fractured in his mouth. He kept saying her name. *Stay with me.* His fingers gripping her loose flesh. *You can’t leave me like this. Do you hear?*

Slowly her eyes came back, her face unfolded as she recognized him, reappeared in the grip of his arms.

He was shaking, his lips against her face.

“Promise me you won’t go insane!”

Through the crack in the door I watched the people in the house, Dr. Seagal and others I’d never seen before. Then they took something away in a small wooden box. I stayed with Kavita, who kept chanting her mantras, calling on her gods and good spirits, leaving me behind in a wake of broken shapes and sounds. After that, everything changed. My mother stopped telling me bedtime