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Inside the stone cottage, in the centre of the floor lay the dead man, stretched out on an iron bier.

Nearby, a small fire crackled in a thurible on a silver tray. The cleansing smell of smoke and incense and sandal was everywhere. Three sides of the room—Buchia was right: the mourners, present and waiting—were crowded with women of various ages draped in freshly laundered white saris: swans, elegant in their grief. They sat shoulder to shoulder in closely arranged wooden chairs, their hair covered by scarves or the bob-pinned trains of saris, contained, like their grief, in an orderly, well-adjusted decorum. Some of them conferred in whispers.

The men wore spotless white as well, but ambled outside or stood around in random clusters on the crowded veranda. Some of them wore tall, brooding headgear. Most knew each other, and exchanged pleasantries or condolences in muted murmurs. Everyone's head was covered, and many were bent in prayer. Must have been an important bawa, this big man, I thought to myself, to have attracted such a large and well-decked retinue of mourners.

Standing outside the funeral chamber, I hurriedly untied and re-knotted the sacred girdle around my waist. Fardoon was already there, waiting. He's a nussesalar, too, though at least twenty years my senior. Presently, we entered the stone cottage together.

Gripping a hefty, three-inch-long iron nail I had collected from the storeroom on my way up, I got down on my haunches, and described a circle on the floor at a radius of about three feet around the supine body in an anticlockwise direction. Fardoon tagged behind me at the end of a long white cloth tape, both of us softly reciting, in tandem, thirty-three Yatha Ahu Vairiyos—one of the prescribed ancient hymns that keep the demon of foulness at bay. This magic circle, once drawn, firmly seals in the invisible contamination emanating from the corpse,

or so it is believed. This was all pretty much routine. I wasn't going to be needed again, until it was time to carry the corpse up to the tower. And I was thinking, perhaps there might be just enough time to catch a nap...? One of the khandhias—Bomi or Fali perhaps—would have been assigned the task of bringing up Moti the bitch on a leash, to show her the corpse once the priests were through.

But before we could make our exit through the crowded funeral cottage, two robed priests padded in, not willing to wait anymore. They seemed to be sulking, impatient about the delay I had presumably been responsible for.

Holding a long white handkerchief between them, they swayed from side to side, chanting a prayer of penitence beseeching forgiveness from the Almighty on behalf of the large, dead man whose name was Peshotan Pavri.

Meanwhile, a young girl, possibly a granddaughter of the deceased, began wailing. An older woman sitting beside her put an arm around the young girl and squeezed her comfortingly, while another, in front of them, turned in her chair and began whispering urgently:

'No, no, my dear, mustn't cry like that...'

'Papa's happy, darling, what's there to cry about?' said the other woman.

'If you shed tears, they'll only become like heavy boulders pinning his soul down to earth... Let him go, let him soar up, Ruby...'

Presently, the young girl's sobbing softened to a whimper, became more sibilant, elegiac.

People never give a thought to death while there's still time, I reflected, as the priests droned on... And when it comes upon you unannounced, there's shock and disbelief, and a great gnashing of teeth.

As Fardoon and I withdrew from the crowded funeral hall, the congregated mourners shrank perceptibly, leaving a clear, if narrow,

passage for us to walk through. I was thinking of my own little girl, who must be awake now, perhaps sitting in her grandpa's lap munching on those two slices of bread... Despite my misgivings about the man, I felt grateful that Temoo was there to keep her company; that Coyaji had allowed the dotard to stay on in his quarters even though he's too old for any real work.

Lost in thought, I didn't notice a particularly lean, cadaverous man with a large mole on his forehead seated on the veranda among crowds of family and friends; nor did he see me approach. Perhaps he was merely inattentive or too abstracted from long hours of prayer? One leg hoisted over the other, vigorously wagging his cocked foot at the ankle while silently moving his lips, he was completely engrossed in a thick but diminutive prayer book.

As I passed him, my leg brushed against his oscillating shoe. Accidentally, of course, but the man who had seemed so lost in prayer, so oblivious of his surroundings, suddenly sprang to life. With the suddenness of a spring-operated toy he leapt to his feet, and began trembling like a leaf. A few other mourners noticed that something out of the ordinary was going on. Now the bony figure started making loud and insistent buzzing noises, like an incensed bee. He was saying something to me, abusing me in all probability, protesting his defilement at my hands—but all of it wordlessly, without parting his lips which remained tightly pressed together.

Having once trained for the priesthood myself, I was familiar with this routine practised by the most devout: the hallowed chain of prayer they have been so diligently weaving must not be interrupted by the profane utterances of everyday speech: hence, the buzzing. In a ferocious dumb charade, the man was urging me to keep my distance, to take my unholy self out of his sight, disappear from the very face of the earth (if I read him correctly)—all the while flailing his arms



Cyrus Mistry's new novel shines a light on a little-known segment of the Parsi community. It is brilliant and unsettling.
—KHUSHWANT SINGH

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To those who've followed his work, Cyrus Mistry has long been known as perhaps the best writer of his generation. Set in Bombay in the first half of the last century, against the backdrop of the independence movement, his riveting new novel takes us into the hidden world of a Parsi 'untouchable', the corpse bearer of the title, who is employed to bring the Parsi dead to the Towers of Silence. The subject is unusual and the telling, as sad as it is funny and irreverent, starkly real. There's more magic in Mistry's realism than in magic realism.
—ARVIND KRISHNA MEHROTRA

and fists in the air like one possessed. Other mourners stood up too, shocked. The man whom I had thus desecrated by the graze of my shin against his polished leather shoe seemed angry enough to strike me, but fear of further despoilment rendered him impotent, and apoplectic with rage.

I felt an urge to break into guffaws of laughter. I felt like embracing this strangely awkward man so terrified of the 'demon' of putrefaction, smothering him in a friendly bear hug and saying:

Do you seriously believe you won't need me one day? Astride those emaciated shoulders rides the ghost of a corpse. You don't see him now, but it's only a matter of time, believe me, before your blood turns to ice, your limbs harden like wood. Then, ask yourself, will your near and dear ones wash and clothe you for the final goodbye? No, sweet man, you'll have to depend on one of us. And then, we'll have to rub you all over...

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Of course, I didn't dare deliver that tirade; instead, only mumbled contritely:

'Forgive me, please. My mistake, bawaji, please forgive...' and bowing low, quickly took my leave of him, as the rest of the grim congregation on the veranda glared at me.

Chronicle of a Corpse Bearer, Cyrus Mistry's second novel, is set in his native Mumbai. Mistry began his writing career as a playwright, freelance journalist and short-story writer. His play *Doongaji House*, written in 1977 when he was twenty-one, has acquired classic status in contemporary Indian theatre in English. One of his short stories was made into a Gujarati feature film. His plays and screenplays have won several awards. His first novel, *The Radiance of Ashes*, was published in 2005.

