

The Bombay Prince

Sujata Massey

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“Well done.”

Perveen Mistry spoke aloud as she slid the signed contracts into envelopes. Lighting a candle against a wax stick, she allowed a scarlet drop to fall on the back of each envelope. The final touch was pressing down the brass stamp engraved mistry law.

It felt ridiculous to praise herself, but this rental contract had taken four months. Term sheets had passed back and forth between two men who seemed convinced that without yet another restriction, their respective honors would be stolen. The truth was, the landlord and renter needed each other. Mistry Law's client, Mr. Shah, sought an occupant for a bungalow on Cumballa Hill. Mr. Ahmad, an administrator at a shipping firm, was a well-qualified renter. Perveen had composed an agreement based on her past contracts for the landlord's properties. But suddenly, her client wanted an amendment prohibiting the butchering of meat. Mr. Ahmad had crossed that out and written in capital letters that his wife had the right to cut and cook whatever she pleased. He also insisted that Mr. Shah replace a dying mango tree in the garden.

An adequate home was hard to find, especially a free-standing one. People from all across British India and the independent princely states were streaming into Bombay looking for goodpaying work. The bungalows of the late nineteenth century were crumbling from decay, so the middle class made do with flats.

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Still, throughout the city most buildings stayed homogeneous in terms of religion, region, and language.

Perveen suspected that religious anxiety had infected her Parsi client and made the prospective Muslim renter react defensively. She'd sent each gentleman a polite letter reminding him that municipal taxes would rise in the new year, so he might wish to put a pause on all real estate activity until they saw the new rate. The prospect of having an empty house when a tax bill was due led Mr. Shah to remove the butchering clause. Mr. Ahmad

thanked him and removed his request for the landlord to replace the tree; however, he requested permission to make gardening improvements as the family saw fit. Perveen assured Mr. Shah that a tenant who made garden improvements at personal cost would improve property value and the landlord's reputation. Now the contracts were signed, sealed, and almost delivered. Taking the envelopes in hand, she went to find Mustafa. The silver-haired giant who served as Mistry Law's guard, butler, and receptionist was already coming upstairs. As he took the envelopes from her, he announced, "A young lady has come."

"Lily?" She'd been expecting a delivery of biscuits and cake from Yazdani's Café.

"No. She is named Miss Cuttingmaster." Mustafa's long, stiff mustache made an impressive show as he enunciated the name.

"What an unusual name. I suppose it is probably Muslim or Parsi," Perveen mused.

Mustafa nodded. "You are correct, and I think this one has the face of an Irani. She said that Miss Hobson-Jones referred her to you."

Perveen's interest was piqued. Alice Hobson-Jones, Perveen's best friend, was teaching mathematics at Woodburn College. Perhaps Miss Cuttingmaster was her student. "I'll be right down. Would you kindly bring us some tea?"

"Already on the table."

Perveen peeked through the half-open parlor door to observe her visitor. Miss Cuttingmaster sat on the edge of the plum velvet settee with a book in her lap. Her head was bent over it, showing a tumble of dark curls. Thin forearms peeped out from the sleeves of a crisp white cotton blouse worn under a drab tan sari. A khaki drill-cloth satchel rested against her legs.

"Kem cho." Perveen greeted her in the Gujarati that many Parsis spoke together.

Quickly, Freny Cuttingmaster closed her book. "Yes. Good morning, ma'am, how should I address you? Should it be 'esquire'?"

The young woman's use of English was surprising, given that she wore homespun cloth favored by independence activists. However, English was also the chief language of the academic world, so perhaps that was why she chose to use it.

The room had enough seating for four, but instead of taking one of the Queen Anne wing chairs, Perveen sat a few feet from the student on the settee itself. Her hope was to put the stiffseeming girl at ease. "My name is Perveen Mistry. I feel a little too young for 'ma'am,' and 'esquire' is mainly used in the United States for lawyers. May I have your good name?"

"It is Freny." As she spoke, the girl edged away slightly. "I still

don't know what to call you. 'Memsahib' is a term mostly used for the British, so I won't call you that. I don't like 'ma'am' much, either."

Perveen thought about the typical honorific used for Parsi women. "If you'd like, you may call me Perveen-bai."

Freny nodded. "Perveen-bai, I am representing Woodburn College's Student Union. We are seeking a legal consultation."

Activism was on an uptick throughout Bombay. In recent months the famous lawyer Mohandas Gandhi had been gaining adherents with his calls for protest against British rule. Perveen longed to assist freedom fighters, but she was a solicitor, so her work was mostly contracts. "I am honored you thought of Mistry Law. Would you like to tell me your concern?"

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Freny looked intently at Perveen. "We want to know if we have the right to stay away from college without being punished."

Perveen mulled over the words. "I don't think I understand.

Students are expected to attend classes as a condition of enrollment.

Do you have a conflict with one of the lecturers?"

"Not at all. I'm in my second year, and I love my college."

She gave the book in her hands a squeeze. "Actually, we students would not be missing instruction on the day I'm thinking about, because classes that day are canceled."

For this, the girl had come to Mistry Law? Trying not to sound irritated, Perveen said, "In your case, I think you would be forgiven a day off. Students often miss college for reasons of illness and family matters."

"But it's not that. It is *political*." She pronounced the last word carefully, stressing its importance. "We want to be absent from college on the day the Prince of Wales enters Bombay. Did you know that Gandhiji has called a hartal?"

"Yes. I've seen the placards advising people to boycott the prince." Perveen had noticed these renegade announcements next to the "Welcome Prince of Wales" signs posted by the government all over town. On Thursday, Edward would disembark at the Port of Bombay and begin a four-month tour of India. The arrival of the twenty-seven-year-old prince seemed like a promise of many more decades of British rule.

Freny leaned forward and spoke with hushed excitement.

"We students put up some of the placards. We don't want people attending the parade. However, the college principal said everyone must be present on the day of the prince's arrival. Workers are building a special viewing stand in front of the college. We're supposed to applaud that loathsome prince when he parades along the Kennedy Sea-Face."

Freny's passionate speech left no question of her conviction. But what would the consequences be if she held back from school? "Does your Student Union have a faculty advisor?"

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"Yes. Mr. Terrence Grady." Freny's lips turned up at the corners.

Perveen hoped that Freny didn't have a crush. "Does Mr. Grady report about your club to the administration?"

"I don't think so," Freny answered after a moment. "He is an Irishman, and many Irish are not at all keen on being part of Britain. Mr. Grady confessed that because he's an employee, he must come to school that day. He knows about the Student Union's desire to stay back and urged us to follow our conscience."

Perveen's shoulders relaxed and she said, "He sounds like a fair man. What can you tell me about the college principal?"

"His name is Horace Virgil Atherton." She spoke the name in staccato syllables, showing none of the warmth she'd had for Mr. Grady. "He's a temporary principal who joined in October. Our regular principal is away on furlough. During the Christian scripture hour, before the chaplain speaks, Mr. Atherton sometimes addresses us. I've only heard him say things like we must stop crowding and pushing past each other in the galleries and stairs. Nothing about philosophy or the nature of education."

Perveen snorted. "Your principal sounds better suited to supervising primary school. What reason does he have to talk about hallway behavior?"

Freny rewarded her with an appreciative smirk. "He thinks there is too much hustle and bustle, and someone could fall down. He said the college's females could be injured, which was very annoying to my friends and me. We aren't made of porcelain."

"No. Bombay women are at least as strong as coconuts!" After Freny laughed, Perveen added, "Why are you in a Christian scripture class?"

"It's not a mandatory course. However, roll call is taken at the start of that scripture class. So everyone goes, regardless of faith."

"Are you saying that in order to be marked present, you must sit through a religious service?" Perveen paused, wondering if

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there were grounds for some kind of suit. "Woodburn College is a missionary institution, isn't it?"

"Indeed. It was founded by Reverend Andrew Woodburn, Church of Scotland, who came to Bombay in 1810."

"How do your parents feel about you having a Presbyterian college education?"

"My father says the college's name carries weight and I will benefit from the other coursework." Smiling wistfully, she added,

“He’s the head tailor at the Hawthorn Shop. He boasts to his customers that I’m studying at Woodburn College.”

A tailor would be proud to send his daughter to one of the city’s oldest colleges. And now she understood how perfectly suited his name was. “Your father must be a tolerant person.”

“I would not say that.” Freny pointed directly at one of the wing chairs and chuckled. “My father would be annoyed by that chair.” Perveen was mystified. “Why?”

“The red banding is torn. There, on the leg.”

Perveen followed her gaze to the chair, which she hadn’t ever inspected in such a close fashion. “Goodness, you’re right. That’s my father’s favorite chair. Perhaps he snagged it with his shoe. He crosses his leg and taps his foot sometimes. Back to our topic—does your father know about your support of independence?”

Freny looked down at her book, as if the answer might lie within. When she raised her face, her expression was sober. “I wanted to tell him, but it was difficult. He thinks I’m too young to understand.”

Perveen nodded in sympathy. “Fathers are like that. Are you saying that he doesn’t know that you’re one of the leaders in the group?”

Freny shook her head vehemently. “I’m not a leader. There are only two of us in the group who are female.”

“You say you aren’t a leader, but it’s a significant responsibility to gather a legal opinion for the group,” Perveen challenged. “Be proud of yourself.”

“I can’t. I only thought helping them was the right thing. I don’t want anyone to be hurt.” Straightening the book in her lap, Freny added, “And I think, just by visiting you, it might improve things.”

Perveen didn’t want Freny to consider her a miracle worker.

“In what way could they improve?”

“Several of the boys have taunted me”—she took a deep breath—“about my father working on his knees for British and Anglo-Indians.”

“Tailors must go on their knees to hem trousers!” Perveen felt great sympathy, because the Cuttingmasters were a working-class family who had surely overcome obstacles to send a daughter to college.

“Dinesh, who is the most outspoken boy in the Student Union, said that all Parsis love the English. He was quite friendly when Lalita and I joined, but now tries to keep me out of everything.”

Perveen’s stomach tightened. “What an ignorant thing to say about our faith. What about Dadabhai Naoroji, grand old man of the freedom movement, and Madame Bhikaji Cama, who is

currently exiled in France? And we mustn't forget that a number of Parsi businessmen in South Africa and India have supported Gandhiji for years."

"Dinesh says Parsis are only thinking about money." Freny's rosebud mouth turned downward. "I'm sure they wanted me to speak with a lawyer so I'd be charged any bills."

"This is only a conversation, not a legal service. There will be no charge," Perveen assured her.

"That's very kind." Freny's frown was starting to ease. "Miss Hobson-Jones talked about having a friend who is the first woman solicitor in Bombay. I was very excited for the chance to meet you."

Perveen found Freny's approval flattering. "I am glad we've met, too. Now, when you enrolled in the college, was there a

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handbook or a contract you and your parents signed? Documents like these might list information about grounds for suspension and expulsion."

"No handbook was given. I don't recall a contract, but if there is one, my father must have it." Wrinkling her forehead, she said, "I can't ask him for it."

Perveen didn't want to trigger a family argument. "Then ask another student if he or she has a contract. Read it yourself or bring it to me."

"I will do that, Perveen-bai." Freny accepted the business card that Perveen handed her from the crystal dish on the silver tea table.

"Taking a political stance is a serious matter. For many decades Indian students who protest have been beaten up, jailed, and some even executed." Observing Freny's eyes widen, Perveen added, "You would not get a death sentence for missing a day's school, but please do not undertake a political action only for the sake of impressing your peers."

"Truly, I would vomit if I had to look at that prince. I would shame myself!" Freny declared. "I am just worried that we could have our lives changed for staying away. I was told that two years ago, some students were expelled for being Communists."

Perveen considered Freny's plight. How to avoid honoring the prince, yet not be punished by the authorities? "Did you ever think that you could stay in bed on Thursday with a stomachache, and neither your parents nor the school would know the reason?"

Freny shook her head. "That would not be truthful. You know about asha."

She was talking about the cornerstone of the Parsi theology:

the principle of rightness. To be a good Parsi was to tell the truth. This was one of the reasons that Parsi lawyers were trusted by Indians of all faiths.

“Yes, I understand *asha*—and neither of us can guess how your body and spirit will be on Thursday. Illness is a solid reason for absence.”

“Trouble comes after lies. I will not do it again.”

After Freny’s short declaration, Perveen sat in silence, hearing the gentle ticking of the grandfather clock in the room’s corner. In the pause, she understood that she’d been trying to sway a young person who had a powerful conscience.

“Freny, you must do what you believe—and each student should as well. Considering how the Student Union’s leaders asked you to speak with a lawyer, at least some share the same worries as you.”

“Yes. If we are thrown out, we might never get another college scholarship or money for education from our parents. We would ruin everything for them, and for ourselves.” The words rushed out. “I thought if I came here, you would give me the answer. I was hoping you would say no, you will be safe and able to continue in your studies. But you haven’t said that to me.”

“I don’t have enough information—and I cannot guess how Mr. Atherton will react.” Perveen was sorry she didn’t have something solid to tell Freny. “The prince doesn’t come for three days. There’s still time to discover if anyone has a contract. And I’ll gladly look at it for you.”

“Thank you.” Freny turned over the book she’d been holding and moved it toward the satchel.

Glancing at the book, Perveen saw it was *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad. She had not read the popular novel, but Alice had said it was a scathing rebuke of European colonialism in Africa. “Is that for your literature class?”

Freny tucked the book tenderly into the bag. “No. This is for world history. Mr. Grady often assigns us novels and newspaper articles because he thinks they hold truths that history books don’t. The thing is, there are so many different writers of these materials, which one is telling the trustworthy account?”

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“That is an interesting observation. I would be happy to speak with you again—but send a note or make a telephone call first. I usually have several appointments a day, and sometimes I am out of the office.”

Freny regarded her with admiring eyes. “Are you defending the innocent in the Bombay High Court?”

“Not yet. The Bombay High Court refuses to recognize women lawyers as advocates.”

Freny’s eyebrows went up. “Does that mean there is no court in India which allows women to speak on behalf of clients?”

“Outside of the high court, I’m not sure.” Perveen saw the disappointment in her face and added, “Perhaps there will be a chance for me to find out.”

“My brother was very, very good at arguing,” Freny said after a silence.

“And he isn’t anymore?”

“Darius has no way of speaking,” she answered softly.

Perveen was perplexed. “What do you mean?”

“Darius died when he was thirteen and I was eleven. Pappa always hoped he would be the first in our family not to be a tradesman. I am going to Woodburn College with a partial scholarship. The rest comes from the bank account my parents had made for my brother’s education.”

The pieces were coming together. “That’s very sad. You must miss him very much.”

“I do. And if I’m thrown out of college, I shall dishonor my late brother as well as my parents.” She blinked and straightened her shoulders. “How did you manage to get Mr. Mistry to let you become a solicitor?”

“Actually, he wished me to study law at Oxford because my brother would never have been admitted. I was the only way to fulfill my pappa’s dream of a legal legacy possible.”

“Your father could have done something else,” Freny countered.

“He could have hired men to be solicitors and barristers and made a large important firm like Wadia Ghandy, or that of Mohammed Ali Jinnah.”

Perveen nodded. “Those are important legal players in the city, yes, but my father chose to start with me. Probably he hoped he’d get a lawyer son-in-law, too, but that hasn’t happened.”

“He believed in you, all along. Yet it must have been strange to do your studies in the country that oppresses India.” Freny shifted on the settee to look directly at her.

Catching judgment in the girl’s eyes, Perveen answered, “In England, I encountered people who were prejudiced toward Indians. I also met a surprising number in favor of Indian independence. Among the most outspoken was Miss Hobson-Jones.”

Freny choked, and then broke into a smile. “Lecturers are surprising! That’s one of the best things about Woodburn College.

Although I know for a fact some of them are hiding the truth about their pasts.”

How many times had Freny mentioned truth? It seemed to be

an obsession. "In principle, I agree that we should be truthful. The trouble is that my own understanding of earlier events could be very different from another person's impression of the same." After a moment's reflection, Freny said, "Yes. How can one say which truth is the important one?"

Perveen was intrigued by her reasoning. "That is the challenge of being an advocate: to convince a judge or jurors of one explanation when there are many theories flying about."

"I'm terrible at saying what I think." Freny's voice was rueful.

"I speak out and it makes people very annoyed sometimes. Lalita says I'm turning myself into a marked person."

"I think you're very clear-spoken. By the way, if you are curious about legal education, go into the High Court during the school holidays. Sit among the public and observe. You will either be fascinated or repelled."

"Perhaps both," Freny said, and the two of them chuckled.

As Freny stood up, one of the stiff folds of her sari brushed the

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edge of the tea table, jiggling the china atop it. Perveen suddenly realized that she hadn't poured a cup of tea for her student visitor, nor had she offered any biscuits.

The rambling conversation had raised too many questions in Perveen's mind. At its end, it seemed like Freny was trying to say something more but had been too cryptic for Perveen to understand.