

Farewell, Heidelberg

By Armeen Kapadia

Dhun squinted at the embroidery hoop. It was hard to gauge the minuscule openings in the fabric, and then jab the needle up through them, trailing its tail of colourful thread. After several unsuccessful pokes, and an exclamation as she jabbed her finger, she managed to get the needle to break surface at exactly the right coordinates. She made a mental note to hunt for her lost thimble and nudged her glasses back up the bridge of her nose. They had grown so thick in recent years; they were a weight on her frail face.

The doorbell rang. Peering through the peephole was pointless, as she could barely recognise faces anymore. At this time of day it was Jehangir, her husband. He had spent his entire life running the printing press that had been established by his grandfather.

Dhun and Jehangir greeted each other as they had for the last fifty years. At the dining table, few dishes had faint stains, testimony to her weakening eyesight. Her back was curving more every day, and her pale skin growing papery. Jehangir noticed her old embroidery hoop with its flowing cloth on the sofa, like a misplaced tiara and veil. He cleared his throat.

‘Dhun’, he began. ‘We’ve discussed this already. The doctor has said that you must stop this work!’

‘It’s no strain,’ Dhun replied. ‘I enjoy doing it. Otherwise, what will I do all day?’

‘You’ve got to stop!’ Jehangir was tearing large pieces of chapatti in anger. ‘If you

lose your eyesight, then... then there's nothing anyone can do. You won't even be able to find the needle!

'*Arey baba*, so much fuss over nothing!' she said. Jehangir finished in silence and washed his hands. As he was leaving the house, he contemplated hiding the embroidered cloth, but decided against it.

After lunch Dhun returned to the sofa. She turned on the light. Dr Khan, her ophthalmologist, had diagnosed her condition as 'age-related macular degeneration', or AMD, as he liked to call it. Funny how three little letters could alter the course of one's life. He had advised her to reduce reading, and refrain from tasks such as embroidery. But the craft had found her at a young age. When she was seven, she had mastered cross-stitch. By the time she was ten, she was creating patterns on tablecloths, or napkins, which her mother sold. At fourteen, Dhun learnt the fine art of darning from her grandmother. She extracted threads from sari borders, and used them to heal a tear in the fabric. This task required nimble fingers and a vast store of patience. At sixteen, she could embroider borders for *kor-ni-saris*. The long, narrow belt of cloth came alive under her deft hands, as she cultivated it with buds, blossoms, leaves, tendrils and birds in flight in varied hues and vignettes. At twenty, she embroidered an entire sari of deep maroon georgette, with pure white, silk thread. It was a labour of love, spread over several months, a task that would daunt a senior seamstress, but she wove her way through with ease. That first sari sold for a princely sum, which her mother saved for her marriage the next year. She continued her art on cloth, for her husband's press was a small unit with modest income.

Unknown to Dhun, Jehangir sat in his small office, worrying and staring at the silent

machines around him. In the last decade the demand for small printers had fallen. He had had to sell the letterpress unit for a pittance. Jehangir's own wedding invitation had been printed on that machine. All that remained now was the four-colour Heidelberg offset machine. It was an old, familiar behemoth, which chugged away like an engine at full steam, swallowing blank sheets and spitting them out. In its heyday, the press had produced innumerable books, wedding cards, and invitations. Now, it was just a tacky brochure here and there. Things that people didn't even glance at before throwing them away. Even the paper itself had become cheap, thin and glossy. Modern business cards were unbearable with their stubborn plastic nature. They were impossible to tear. This false sense of permanence made them uglier. Showy, without any substance, just like the times they lived in now, Jehangir rued. His solitary, faithful worker, Shirish *bhai* sat in a corner drinking tea. Shirish *bhai* had the countenance and nature of a tortoise. He killed time by counting stacks of waste paper, contemplating account books, and playing Solitaire on a boxy computer in the corner.

Jehangir's mind wandered to a conversation he had had with Dr Khan a couple of days back. There were very few things he kept secret from Dhun, and this was making him uncomfortable now. Dr Khan had mentioned a new type of laser eye surgery. It replaced the lens and restored vision. It was the very latest in medical technology from America. It came at a price that Dhun and he — childless, in their small charity flat — could ill-afford to pay. An idea had occurred to him, too intimidating to address out loud. But perhaps its time had come. The press was limping along, scarcely generating income. Often, Shirish *bhai* and he feigned activity. Jehangir glanced at the clock and returned to the present moment.

‘You can leave now,’ Jehangir told Shirish, smiling.

‘But *sahib*, it’s only three-thirty.’

‘There’s no work Shirish *bhai*. Why sit around wasting time? You can go home.’

Shirish nodded and fetched his bag. As Jehangir lowered the shutter, he broached a sensitive subject.

‘I’m thinking of selling the press.’

If Shirish felt anything, he didn’t show it. He was as stoic and reliable as the Heidelberg inside. He was the first person Jehangir dared share his heavy secret with.

‘*Sahib*, work is less I know. Maybe it’s a good time to sell.’

Jehangir patted his shoulder, ‘I will compensate you well, you don’t have to worry about anything. You won’t need to work again.’

Shirish nodded and they went their separate ways, their eyes moist and hearts feeling funny.

Dhun was surprised to see Jehangir back home.

‘What? Back so early? I’ll get tea.’ He watched her walk to the kitchen, hunched, in her lilac dress, one hand feeling its way along the wall, fingers quivering like insect feelers.

When she returned with the tray, Jehangir took a deep breath and plunged in.

‘Dhun, I’ve been thinking. We both know your eyesight is getting weaker. Dr Khan mentioned there is a new surgery, laser surgery, which can help. We can afford it if we sell the press. We’ll get good money for it. No more worries.’ He forced himself to sound light-hearted and cheerful.

Dhun regarded him solemnly. Her eyes appeared even larger in her wizened face. ‘I

don't need surgery. I'm fine, I'm telling you.'

'No you're not!' Jehangir was shouting, although he didn't know it. 'You could hardly see in that dark passage just now. And you still insist on doing embroidery all the time! How are you going to manage a few years from now? What will I do if you go blind?' As soon as the words were spoken out loud, he realised how selfish he sounded.

'So you're only bothered about yourself!' she snapped.

'No, I'm sorry. That's not what I meant, you know that.'

Dhun stared out of the window for minutes that seemed like hours, tea going tepid. She would not admit it, but during the last year the building opposite had blurred into a dark form, a silhouette. The windows and balconies became blobs with alarming speed, and there was no telling how many potted plants Mrs Marshall had, or whether Mr Ginwalla was wearing shorts or pants. Little details — that added the much-needed sprinkle of spice to life — were growing hazy. Her life's passion would be her undoing.

'Okay,' she said.

He held her hand for a long time before letting go.

The next day Jehangir placed a small classified ad in the newspaper announcing the sale of commercial property. Soon, there were offers. Fortunately, the buyer was ready to purchase the existing machinery along with the place. Jehangir would be spared the sight of the machines carried out, helpless beasts after decades of faithful service. On the day of signing the papers, he asked Dhun if she wanted to see the place for one last time. She thought about it for a moment, then declined. She was

coping with her own sense of loss, and one at a time was enough. In her mind's eye she had a detailed image of the printing press, rich with busy workers moving about; machines thundering, spewing out papers that were cut, bound, bundled and packed for dispatch; the distinct and strangely addictive smell of kerosene and ink in the air, clients in and out to commission new work, or beaming after seeing a finished piece. She wanted that vision of the press, not the present one of a cold silence, with one old worker playing Solitaire and the smell of obscurity hanging in the air.

So it was Jehangir and Shirish alone, as the former signed away the livelihood of three generations, and the latter walked around the Heidelberg, bidding it a silent farewell. It had travelled to Bombay on a ship in 1945, from its birthplace in Germany. After decades of printing, it would be laid to rest, taken apart, disembowelled, and its parts sold for a fraction of their original cost. Jehangir left the press with a fat cheque and a fatter wad of cash that weighed him down instead of uplifting his spirits.

However, two weeks later he felt glad as he watched a chatty nurse prepare Dhun for surgery. She looked calm, serene, and different without her thick glasses. She seemed to float in the hospital gown. He hugged her before they took her to the operating theatre. Jehangir prayed for ten minutes, fidgeted, drank two coffees, prayed again, and paced up and down the hospital corridor. An hour later the doctor announced all was well, and the nurse wheeled Dhun into a room. Large white bandages covered her eyes. Jehangir spent the night with her in hospital, joking that she looked like one of Gandhiji's monkeys, the see-no-evil one. The moment of truth arrived the next morning when the doctor and nurse peeled away the bandages. Dhun opened her eyes.

Tears flowed as she noticed cracks on the room wall, fine wrinkles in Jehangir's face and the hospital logo monogrammed on the doctor's coat, details which had been vague blurs to her. The doctor checked her eyes, — new ones in wrinkled old sockets — tested her reactions and pronounced it a 'great success'. Dhun clutched Jehangir in a sideways hug as Dr Khan made clucking noises and gave instructions for further care.

As the weeks melted into months, Dhun grew accustomed to the gift of sight. She noticed dirty corners in rooms, cobwebs in the window, dust devils thriving under the furniture, mustard seeds that had flown to far-flung corners of the kitchen when she had fried something. She could now see the money plants and marigolds on Mrs Marshall's balcony; she noticed that Mr Ginwalla often stepped out in shorts. Her vision was young again. She itched to hold the needle. How easily she could thread it now, in one go, but she didn't dare. Jehangir remained home most of the day, occasionally going out in the evening for a walk, or to meet his cronies. The three and half pink thread roses remained incomplete in their embroidery hoop, never to bloom again.
