

“Head Smashed in Buffalo Jump”

When Saanvi was born, her father purchased a tree to plant in the backyard. He went from one nursery to another like a pollinating bee. He was drawn to a young *Betula nigra* or river birch with its light taupe outer skin and salmon and cinnamon beneath. A salesman said, “The bark changes from flaky strips to thick plates.” He added, cryptically, as it were, “The tree grows with the family.”

Digging to commemorate his daughter’s birthday, Parminder struck a gas line with his pickaxe and cleared the neighbourhood. While the firemen did their work, his eight year old son, Rajeev, introduced his father to sibling rivalry. “Why,” he said, “didn’t I get a tree?” The question was a long rod pushed through a gutted animal hung over an open fire.

One year to the day, Saanvi died of cot death and for inexplicable reasons. Her mother had not smoked. The baby slept on its side. There were no soft objects in the crib. The family doctor shook his head dolefully and tendered a diagnosis of murder: “Perhaps,” he said, “it is God’s will.” In any event, Saanvi looked like a porcelain doll and this made her death all the more galling. For her parents, competing impulses of devotion and austerity had come a cropper.

In the aftermath, a hallway lamp was left on to light the way for the departed soul. Food was vegetarian and without onion or garlic. The river birch was decorated with Saanvi’s baby clothes and months of heretofore digital photos, each date-stamped with foreboding. Parminder put his arm around his son’s shoulders and said, “This is why you didn’t get a tree.” It was the beginning of a new habit for Parminder, spitting like a cobra, and Rajeev, the remainder of the quotient, was often a target.

Annaliese, Saanvi's mother, understood the cold trail of cause of death to be proof of her own culpability. When no one is to blame, the mother is always to blame. Her statement of fact was paradoxical but obviously self-incriminatory: "I did not see," she said, "when my daughter cried out." Be that as it may, Annaliese experienced ownership of Saanvi's death as a kind of lobotomy. She was left emotionally blunted and the complexity of psychological life had become a singularity.

After the mourning period of thirteen days, Parminder stripped the river birch of its baby clothes and photos and picked at its outer layer of curling, paper-thin scales until his own fingers bled. He then turned and held up his hands to his wife in a gesture of unambiguous bloody surrender. No one would age with this tree. Time had stopped.

But the birds had other ideas. At three o'clock in the morning, Parminder was awakened by the sound of rustling in the wind. For her part, Annaliese heard a mechanical rumble that was typically too low-pitched for the human ear, the *infrasound* of shaking tails. To this was soon added a screech and another and a caterwaul that was precisely the tone of Saanvi's cry. As Annaliese threw off her bed sheets, her eyebrows lifted hopefully. She would not overlook her daughter's cry a second time.

At the window and over his wife's shoulder, Parminder surveyed the scene with bitter reproach. Roosting in his river tree was a muster of peacocks. Of course, his battle with these birds had been going on since the beginning of time. He called them the *adversaries* or the *devils* or the *enemy*. They were forever on neighbourhood rooves or underfoot, mewling and shitting and mating and obscuring Welcome mats with their nests. City officials ignored his demands to relocate or poison the fowl. And now, of course, these speakers of tongues were mimicking the cry of his own dead daughter to

taunt him in his sleep. Parminder, the cobra, longed to spit in the eyespots of each and every peacock tail.

But the birds were a great comfort to Annaliese. She believed the peacocks to be the reincarnated soul of her dead daughter, each cry of the bird/child evidence of what she described – fitfully, it seemed – as *transmigration*. As a result, she rose each morning with the infrasound of the bird tails and sat naked in front of the window and before her easel and art supplies. She would continue as she had done with Saanvi, sketch the greatest object of beauty she had ever seen. Parminder would waken later to the wailing of the enemy, each cry a multi-barbed hook that hoisted him dockside.

The idea of a prescribed burn came from city officials and the six o'clock news. He was refused a permit to remove or cut down his own tree and told, ostensibly, that only an act of God trumped local ordinances against free will. That same day, Parminder watched news reports of the destruction of Fort McMurray by a wildfire the size and intensity of a thousand suns. If the army could evacuate 88,000 people, then, surely, he could speed the relocation of forty or fifty peacocks. The birds amplified his suffering and they must be defeated.

Even so, he was conflicted as to whether or not his plan was an act of mercy or revenge. He was comfortable with the satisfaction of either and got neither. He brought Annaliese with him to the self-serve gas on King Street. They bought two jerry cans. He filled one. She filled one. Later that afternoon, they carried the cans into the backyard and set them down in the shade of the river birch. Parminder then went to the storage shed and retrieved two large aerosol containers he typically filled with crabgrass killer. He filled one with gas. She filled the other.

Parminder instructed Annaliese to spray the hairy twigs and the dark green leaves. He, himself, would address the thickening plates of bark between him and his dead daughter. Anyway, the fire released a mushroom plume of smoke followed by a wisp, much like the camouflaged exit of a genie from a magic lantern. Said Parminder, evoking an emotional settlement, “This is for my pain and suffering. And,” he added, carefully redacting rage, bargaining and depression, “so that you may move quickly from denial to acceptance.” His wife’s response was a flower of silk or tissue, both precious and disappointing. “Oh,” she whispered.

When he opened his eyes before first light that morning, Annaliese was already at the window dragging a burnt willow stick over newsprint. Through the ribs of the chair, he saw her straight back, long, black hair and pancaked buttocks. He blinked with grudging comprehension as he listened to the cries of his daughter. These were surely bubbles of remembrance beneath the sea. He would surface and breathe and they, like the peacocks, would be gone.

But the birds had other ideas. They had populated the charred limbs of the tree, as per usual. They shook out their tails and continued to cry out in the voice of Saanvi. These birds and that stricken birch described perfectly the bereft, end-of-world setting of Parminder’s heart and the consolations for his wife of imagination and homage or, to hear Parminder, fruits of the poisonous tree. He was disconsolate as he gazed upon his wife’s breasts. They held no interest.

Parminder needed a different plan, but he was flummoxed. How might he justify extermination of the enemy and sidestep both social excommunication and stiff fines from the city? Those closest to his location described the river birch as the Tree of Singh, aural equivalent to apocalyptic hellfire. These good neighbours were sympathetic and

would look the other way. Those further from his location described the river birch as the Tree of Singh, a producer of podcasts of pastoral poems. These bad neighbours would cry for human blood if his coup did not have a leg to stand on.

But they were not alone in the house and neglect made a foursome. Rajeev was at the door in his pajamas. “I can’t sleep,” he said, screwing the balls of his fists into his eyes. “It’s the peacocks. It’s always the peacocks.” Annaliese continued with her sketch, sussing out elusive lines of perspective, while Parminder spat angrily, “Your mother is naked! How *dare* you come here and use such language!” Rajeev burst into tears and ran back to his room.

But Rajeev’s tears were not an isolated shower. Three days later, Parminder responded to a knock at the front door and discovered his son in the company of his teacher. Rajeev was only sniffing at the moment but the blue sacks beneath his brown eyes suggested a deep and protracted trauma. Miss Racheal had accompanied Rajeev on the school bus both to comfort him and to provide context to his parents.

“The field trip, I’m afraid, was not a good experience.”

Parminder said, “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Miss Racheal surfaced a pamphlet from her handbag and gave it to Parminder. Apparently, the whole class had gone to a museum called, Head Smashed in Buffalo Jump. Mrs. Singh had signed the forms.

“We were there to learn about Indigenous peoples, how they used to harvest buffalo by driving them over a cliff.”

Parminder did not blame his son for walking in on his naked mother or using a profane word. He held him close to his legs to champion his cause. “And this is what

passes for education in this country? You expose young children to this barbaric practice?”

This was a topic for secondary school and Miss Rachael was loathe to debate.

“It was a different time, Mr. Singh.”

Parminder read from the pamphlet, *“Then, at full gallop, the buffalo would fall from the weight of the herd pressing behind them, breaking their legs and rendering them immobile.”*

“The hunt met physical, emotional and spiritual needs.”

“After falling off the cliff, the injured buffalo were finished off by other warriors at the cliff base armed with spears and clubs.”

“It’s a UNESCO World Heritage Site.”

“And no one asks any questions about the pain and suffering of those poor animals waiting for death and without a leg to stand on?” Parminder’s indignation was briefly interrupted by a peculiar feeling of déjà vu.

Miss Rachael answered his question with a kind of sealed affidavit. “We don’t get to judge the history and culture of colonized peoples.”

Parminder’s eyes bulged with apoplexy. He wondered if his own brown skin belonged on a list of invisible things. In any event, the seed of an idea was planted. It grew in the shade of a black river birch and it smelled of exculpation. He closed the door on Miss Rachael and said to his son, now that they were alone, “Where were all those tears when your sister died?”

Very early the next morning, Parminder dreamed of the buffalo runners. Each was cloaked in the skin of a coyote or wolf. They pursued their quarry into drive lanes with dozens of cairns to either side. Parminder heard the snorts of the beasts and the

crashing of their hooves. As they came to the cliff's edge, those in the front were betrayed by the momentum of those in the rear, jostled and jolted and toppled and pitched.

At the bottom of the cliff was Parminder surrounded by his warrior brothers. It was his job to club the brains of the peacocks in the kill area. Effectively, the broken buffalo had become peacocks, each a twitching, screeching irregular shape of tail and claw and beak and mortification. Feathers made a kind of communal burial shroud. Peacock blood was given freely.

When Parminder got out of bed, he whispered in his wife's direction, "We will save souls tonight." And then he went into the basement to retrieve his air rifle and a few boxes of led pellets. He opened the window onto the street light and the dead tree of his heart and settled into a crouch beneath the pane. He believed it was his birthright to speed the migration of his daughter's soul to a higher plane or, failing that, to separate his wife from belief in that kind of nonsense. It was a short hop from zealot to heretic, and he would be comfortable with the satisfaction of either.

The killing of the birds was rather easy. Each arrived at irregular intervals and squatted at twenty-five feet in the crosshairs of a rifle that fired at 500 feet per second. Each struck the ground like a sandbag at the end of an antiquated rope and pulley. The cull was ceremony or the cull was theatre. It didn't matter. His needs and his rights were sacred. Who could judge?

He awoke much later than usual because of his work through the earliest hours of the morning and the absence of his baby daughter's cries. Because his wife was sketching at the window, his heart sank immediately with the only plausible prediction. Indeed, she did not see the carnage at the perimeter of that blighted tree. Instead, she

drew peacocks crouched on fulsome green limbs in the kind of detail that only the obsessions of grief and imagination can provide.

Rajeev was at the door and whispered through the crack in the jamb, "I heard noises." He added, hesitantly, "Is mama naked?"

Parminder shot his son a look that travelled at 500 feet per second.