BONE AND BREAD

SALEEMA NAWAZ

ANANSI

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If you listen, you can almost hear the sound of my son's heart breaking. In the backyard, under the drone of the lawnmower, there's a dull clanking, a sick rasp of metal like iron on bone, the chafing of something serrated. It could be a fallen branch from the lilac bush or a stray rock caught against the blade, but from where I sit looking out the kitchen window, the muted noise of the mowing comes through like a throbbing ache.

Since my sister, Sadhana, died, we move through the house like tenants awaiting eviction, silent and worn with guilt, nerves frayed. I buy the groceries alone and unpack them in stealth, going slowly to keep the plastic from rustling, the cupboards from slamming closed. Our grief is distended, sluggish as Sadhana's illness, so that talking or eating—eating above all things—still seems like an affront to its fragile sanctity.

The sun on Quinn's face is giving him a squint that looks like closed eyes; with the mower he is like a blind man feeling his way through the world, an electric cutter before him for a cane. The yard is small, but the mowing seems to take forever. When Quinn leaves for university at the end of the summer, I will think about planting a garden, though it might be more work, not less. Maybe concrete. Maybe I'll be the one paving paradise. But the lilacs that line the inside of the fence are my heaven, so I remind myself to look into what else can

be put in that will bring itself up and earn me no disgrace or ire from the neighbours.

If we were speaking more, it might be a project for Quinn, but in the past six months we've been like bad reproductions of ourselves, our conversations only shadow plays of the dialogues we used to have. Even before the unthinkable happened, we used to keep it light. No family-drama-sharing circles, only the diversions, the drippings, the scuff and froth of everyday life: pop culture, homework, occasionally the news. Now there is not even that. At nearly eighteen, he is tall and independent, and his inner world is mostly a secret from me, a fact that at alternating times makes me resentful and relieved.

He's a good kid. We are never taken for mother and son, rarely but more often for cousins, or brother and sister. He is thinner than me, and darker, with Sadhana's deep liveliness of expression and grace of movement. When he turns to push the lawnmower back into the peeling shed, his red T-shirt reveals patches of sweat across his broadening back. For his birthday last year, Sadhana bought him a gym membership. Coming back to the house, he returns my smile when I catch his eye, but he slips in through the screen door and up to the second floor without a word.

And that quiet inhalation, audible as he pushes past? That's the sound of him blaming me.

When I am sure that Quinn is upstairs, can imagine I hear his fingers skimming in a light patter over his keyboard, I bring out the notebook where I've taken down the message. Three days alone with it, held secret like a key around my neck. The

woman with the lilting voice and the strange request. She says she wants us to meet.

Hello, this is Libby Carr calling. I'm hoping to get ahold of Beena Singh. I found this number online. Ms. Singh, if this is you, I'm not sure if Sadhana ever mentioned me, and maybe you wouldn't remember, anyway. But your sister—well, she was a very dear friend of mine, and I was hoping you wouldn't mind getting in touch. I'm sorry to be calling out of the blue like this. It's selfish, but I've been wishing I had someone to talk to. About Sadhana. I miss her all the time, really. And there's something else I think you ought to know.

She left a Montreal number. I wonder how long she had been waiting to call. It has been almost six months since the funeral. The name Carr doesn't ring a bell, though Sadhana had legions of friends and even more acquaintances, or so it seemed from my vantage point in Ottawa, where I'd hear about them only as a string of names over the phone line, first names, drizzled over a tale of a night out.

It seems as though the woman has found my name on the internet, on the modest web page for freelance editing services that Andrew, an old boyfriend, set up for me, with clean graphics and a couple of testimonials. I listened to the message three times before deleting it, taking it down along with the name and number, and I have stopped myself from mentioning it to Quinn. In his hands, everything is a puzzle to be teased out to its solution. Even Sadhana.

I hold the cordless phone in my palm, its smooth black case feeling heavier than usual, weighted with possibility. With its small antenna, sticking out like a pinky finger at tea, it reminds me of a walkie-talkie, of the ones Sadhana and I had as girls. Of trying to whisper from either end of the apartment, still so close together that we could hear the other

speaking without needing to listen through the receiver. And of the newer, long-range ones that Sadhana bought when Quinn was thirteen, driving him out to the Gatineau Hills, where they used borrowed GPS units to play at geocaching, hiding and finding buried capsules at specific coordinates, radioing to each other as they hurried along the trails.

I remember Quinn coming home from that excursion filthy and exhausted. I could tell by the way he scratched and wrinkled up his nose that, even through the shelter of the trees, he'd gotten a bit of a sunburn, invisible on his brown skin.

Sadhana herself was giddy, exultant. This was during one of her good periods. She was thin but energetic, even more so around Quinn. She sat before me at the kitchen table and ate a plate of pasta and pesto I put before her. "That kid of ours is something else," she said between mouthfuls. "Wading through muck. Climbing trees. You should have come with us."

But we both knew that I hadn't been invited.

As I stare at the page where I've written the number, the name blurs in and out of focus. I blink, noticing the doodles I've scribbled around it, loops and triangles. Capital letters shaded in thick double strokes. I haven't really spoken to anyone about Sadhana, or about the hollow in our lives she left behind. Even Sadhana's things are still untouched, exactly as she left them in her Montreal apartment. I've been putting off the task of sorting through all her worldly belongings. Packing up, throwing out, *contending* with those things—my dread assignment.

After a moment, I return the phone to the cradle. There is nothing for me to say to this woman. At least not yet.

Tilting forward and back on the legs of the kitchen stool, I sigh aloud, a bad habit I've given way to in recent months. I've traced it to Uncle, whose chest often heaved with theatrical exhalations, usually to express irritation with me and Sadhana. If we were chattering across the table to each other at dinner, he would say, "Give a man some peace," the thick fingers of his right hand curled against his brow. Uncle preferred to eat in silence. When we were teenagers, we viewed this as a mark of his misanthropy, but more and more I've found myself cultivating moments of perfect solitude, falling into them gratefully, becoming protective of my small preferences and routines. And the sighs just happen. So far, Quinn hasn't noticed. He hasn't been around enough. Then again, it could be that my new enjoyment of isolation is just a reaction to my circumstances, taking the path of least resistance towards self-preservation.

As usual, thoughts like this send me reaching for the phone. Thirty-four is too young to embrace seclusion, so I call Evan, the man I've been seeing. He is, of all improbable things, a cop.

"Hi," I say. "You busy?"

"Sweet cheeks," he says. This is a joke. "Beena. I'm glad you called."

"How's it going? What are you doing?"

"I'm just pulling up to the gas station, then I'm heading into work."

"Too bad. I'm feeling lonely."

"That *is* too bad. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Just looking for some diversion from my melancholy."

"I might fall into melancholy myself if I hear any more

about this. You make it hard for a man to go to work."

"Sorry," I say.

"No, you're not," says Evan. "You just want to make sure I'm thinking about you all shift."

"Well."

"Can I call you when I'm off? I should finish around midnight."

"I'll be up," I say. "Call my cell so it doesn't wake Quinn." As if Quinn would be asleep.

"Sure thing," he says, and hangs up.

Evan is twenty-six, halfway between my age and Quinn's. He seems older, though—something about the uniform. I find myself getting defensive when I think about him, preparing arguments to counter whatever teasing assault Sadhana might choose to set in motion, but of course there is no need. Even Quinn hasn't met him yet. We have decided for the time being to keep things quiet.

As if on cue, Quinn turns up behind me, close over my shoulder. I can smell the fresh scent of cut grass, along with something soapier and the peculiar odour of his loft bedroom, like sweaty sheets and dust piled and scorching on a hard drive.

"Calling your secret boyfriend?" he asks, seeing my hand on the phone, and I wonder for a moment whether he knows, until I remember that he has always used this term for my boyfriends, a jibe at all my failed attempts at discretion in the past.

"You bet."

He's over my head, grabbing a glass from the cupboard, then he's in the fridge, pouring the orange juice with the door resting against his hip. "Hot up there," he says, meaning his

room. He closes the fridge and follows up the juice with cold water from the tap.

"If you say so. Hungry?"

"Nah. Later."

I try to evaluate whether there's a new looseness here, something like our old easiness coming back. I wonder how he would react if I told him about the message, said Sadhana's name out loud, let it float at last through the air between us, its syllables finally turned into something that could be measured. Sound wavelengths in peaks and valleys like a chart of our memories, all the highs and lows.

"Want to go for a walk?" I ask. "Grab a coffee?"

"No thanks." Quinn puts down his glass by the sink and in a moment he is back at the stairs, some barely contained energy propelling him up two at a time.

I pour my own glass of cold water. "I'm going out," I call. "To work." I grab my purse, a voluminous orange shoulder bag, tucking into its largest compartment the black padded pouch with my laptop.

"Bye," I call again, and this time I hear a faint echo of it coming down to me from Quinn's bedroom.

The computer is heavy enough that I never go far. There's no need. It's enough to be out in the air. There's a diner I go to a couple of blocks up, with an inclined cobblestone patio and sloping green plastic chairs and tables, where after the lunch rush they don't mind if you linger for hours over two cups of coffee.

I head in that direction, closing my eyes for a moment to feel the sun warming my cheeks. The woman's voice from the message is still with me, her throaty civility, the exigent trace I think I can detect: an insistence in the chosen

words that tells me how much she wants me to return her call. I can sense she shares some of our deep sorrow, that she is sensitive to the consuming occupation of grief. How she might have checked off the weeks as they passed, tracing an imagined progression of healing, how six months by her reckoning should have brought us all to an equilibrium, a weary peace. Instead of our fractured channels, the swooping pain. Insulating silence.

There's a tranquility in the city in the early afternoon. The streets are busier than at mid-morning but less frenetic, as though the people venturing out after lunch are doing so at their leisure, in pursuit of personal, rather than occupational, ends. Pleasure, in other words, instead of business. The luxury of being partly self-employed has never left me, and on the days I'm not doing my impression of a paralegal, I try to remain conscious of its simple enjoyments, like this—unfiltered light on my face in the afternoon, wrists free of any timepiece. I sometimes scan the faces of the people I see out at this hour, try to pinpoint the source of their workaday freedom. Students, some parents with children, usually mothers. The odd high school student cutting class, whose look of grateful freedom and barely suppressed glee most closely mirrors my own state of mind.

At the corner I make an abrupt right, away from my destination, curling back around my own block. I'm too distracted and the mechanical allure of work isn't pulling me today. I know already I won't concentrate on the editing, will have to read every sentence four times over instead of twice. My bag is digging into my shoulder and I give it a one-handed heave, curling my thumb in between to hold it. I pass a father and two children, little girls chattering as they skip along,

peppering back and forth a piece of yellow chalk, leaping over it as it falls, ad hoc hopscotch on the run. The father, following them at several paces, left out of the game even as commentator, gives me a brief nod as I pass, and it hits me that I'm responsible for the silences in my house. A deep quiet has stolen in like the tide, insistent and stealthy, and, like any rocky shore, I've acquiesced. But however mature Quinn might be, however close in age we really are, it still falls to me to give the cues. Especially with this, with Sadhana.

When I burst in the door, I call out, "We're going to Montreal." And though at first I can't hear a response, in a moment there are his footsteps on the stairs, springing to life.

On the deck later, Evan clinks his glass to mine, scotch and water. For me, scotch and soda. Sadhana's drink. I don't have a taste for it yet, still tend to find the burn bitter as it goes down. Evan claims to have a nose for whisky, an interest he and a few cop buddies have been trying to cultivate with a couple of weekend classes and practice sessions before their poker nights. He swishes his glass, coating the sides, sips slowly, breathes through his nose as he swallows.

"Smooth," he says. "Biscuity." Then, "If anyone from my hometown saw this, I'd be locked in the trunk of a car." He's from a farm town in Saskatchewan with fewer people than my old high school. He's self-conscious about giving himself airs.

He slaps my knee from the next lawn chair, sets its springs creaking, my leg tingling from his hearty affection. He has changed out of his uniform, showered at the police station, as he sometimes does, slipping this time into jeans

and a fitted grey T-shirt. His blond hair falls soft and flat without gel, which makes his face look sweeter, younger, rounding out the strong angles of his jaw and cheekbones. It is almost one in the morning and we are talking in low voices. He parked around the corner and met me out back, tapping on the window. Quinn's windows face front. I wonder how much longer I can keep things secret.

"So you're leaving for the weekend," he says.

"Yep."

"Quinn going with you?"

"Yes." I take a sip of my drink, and a lone cricket sounds loud and insistent from somewhere near the lilac bushes. A mating call. "The idea is for him to check out the university, see the campus. And it's been a while since he's seen his uncle."

"Your uncle, right? His great-uncle." These little moments of fact-checking warm me like the scotch. Each one like its own little promise: *I'm learning you by heart.* We've known each other exactly two months, have been dating just under that, though there have been fewer dates and more moments like this, of talking and sitting close. A few frantic afternoons at his apartment, where we wore down each other's deep needs until we became languid and still. Interludes. I like him very much, though in a tentative way, with a tremor of danger humming at its base. The danger, I think, is to my own heart, for he is both good-looking and seemingly very decent. A catch.

"Yeah, my uncle. Harinder." With Quinn almost grown up and seemingly still a credit to me, my relationship with Uncle has shifted, grown a new layer of sediment, like a softer sand washed back onto shore. Things moving, slipping away underfoot, some replaced altogether. Contempt on both sides giving way bit by bit to respect.

"That'll be good. It'll give you a chance to take care of some things, eh?"

I nod, avoid his gaze in my glass. Evan knows that I have yet to go through Sadhana's things. On one of our first dates, I had to explain the unexplainable—that my younger sister had died of a heart attack at age thirty-two. That she had spent half of her life starving herself, or trying not to. That after the funeral we had flung her ashes into the St. Lawrence River, and part of me had been scattered then, too. In his own way, he's been urging me to go clear out her apartment. Two weekends ago he offered to drive me to Montreal himself. "We could go for a nice dinner," he said. "Stay in a hotel. You could do some shopping."

Tonight he says, "It feels good to put some things to rest." He is being direct, and though my instinct is to shrink away, I'm grateful for his concern. Being younger, he doesn't defer to me as he might, except concerning Quinn. I know Evan wants to stop sneaking around, though only once has he hinted as much. Last night, one side of his mouth had twitched up, acknowledging the cliché, as he'd said, "He's not a kid anymore."

Now I say, "You're right about the apartment. I'm going to take care of it." But even saying the words spins me into a moment of distraction, a spilling out of my agitation, and my gaze drifts to the edge of the yard, where the bushes meet the fence in a perimeter of darkness.

"Good." Evan leans over and cups his hand on my cheek, startling me back to him with his touch. "You're in need of some rest yourself, you know, Beena. You're pale as a ghost."

A cloud passes in front of the moon, as swift and eerie as a movie backdrop, and the suddenness of its shadow makes

the earth beneath us seem tired and old. I want to say that ghosts don't need to rest—or they can't, or they won't—but I don't know if I mean myself or my sister.

If Sadhana's a ghost, I haven't seen her. I haven't spotted any signs of her shading my footsteps or tracing my name across a rain-soaked window. In a way, though, I'm not surprised. I spent so many years watching her disappear, little by little, that it is impossible for me to believe that there could be any of her left over.

ONE

THE HUKAM

Ghosts ought to have been my specialty. There were enough dearly departed in my family to haunt a dozen Gothic novels, and if I never stopped to listen for a telling knock or squinted through the darkness for a hazy outline, it was only because doubt flowed through my veins more palpably than the blood of any continent. My sister and I were skeptics. Angry and cynical as only skeptics who have waded (who have swum, who have been given water births) into belief truly can be. But that was later. At the beginning, there was me, and there was Sadhana. There were Papa and Mama. And there were the things that Mama told us.

Mama was a very theoretical woman. I mean, she was a real woman, who was interested in theories of all kinds. When she showed us the stars, she held my sister Sadhana on her lap and pointed up at the thin strip of night sky. What we could see from our balcony was bounded by the roofs of other buildings crowding up in one direction towards the slope of the mountain, the other sides shunting back our perspective with an excess of light, street lamps brightening the darkness

to a grey glow in every distance.

"The stars that we see are in the past," said Mama. "It takes thousands of years for their shining to reach the Earth."

With her pale face as a guide, a moon in my field of vision, I struggled to make out the points of light, stretching myself flat on the wine-coloured rug. Mama's voice above the street sounds was solemn and full of wonder.

"There's a theory," Mama said, "that the universe is getting bigger. It will keep expanding, like a huge loaf of bread rising, like a great fat belly, until there's nothing left to make it out of, no more heat. It will be like a day that is so long it goes on forever, until time is a substance and it is made out of ice."

Sadhana was only four, two years younger than me, and she was falling asleep on Mama's skirt, her fat brown chin drooping onto Mama's freckled arm. Sometimes Mama would get started on something and she'd tell us all about it, even when there was no way we'd understand. I sat up to pay attention, to draw myself towards them. Mama pointed out a constellation that I couldn't see, the Big Dipper just a name for a stretch of sky between one wave of her hand and another.

"There's also a theory," said Mama, "that the universe is getting smaller. Millions of years from now it's going to start shrinking and heating, like fat and flesh melting into bone, because it is the destiny of things to come together. All that there is will get closer and closer until there's no space anymore between anything, even between the things themselves."

"Like soup?"

"Like cosmic soup," said Mama, "that boils away into nothing."

She pointed to a faint spot that was hard to make out. "My lucky star," she said.

I leaned my head on her knee and felt her fingers threading through my black hair, as she murmured more about the legacy of dying stars, their nighttime brilliance. It seems to me now that all my memories are like this—points of light in a dark field, now clear and now slipping away, and no matter how much I look, I still can't spot for certain where I should be joining them up in patterns, constellations of what a life could mean.

In theory, when a person dies, they're gone forever. At least that's what I think now. Before she died, Mama always talked about reincarnation, but it got to be too troubling for me and Sadhana, sizing up every cat and dog that looked as if it might be coaxed into following us home, the babies with blue eyes grasping air in their fists from their strollers. The hummingbird we spotted on the balcony, skimming forward and back before the feeder, its wings beating as many times per second as our hearts might in a minute. When I watched it, looking for signs of my mother, my pulse felt faster, as though the bird itself was skittering around inside and had taken up the place where my heart should be, where Mama told us she would keep on living forever and ever.

My sister and I were born exactly two years apart at the same hospital. Named for a queen no longer revered, the hospital stood on the side of the mountain that was the volcanic heart of our island city. It had been more than two hundred years since the English took the city from the French as the spoils of war, but the battle was still being waged whenever people forgot that most of the time we all got along just fine. That

the French were the true victors and had claimed an ancient gathering place in the name of their lord and kingdom was obvious in the hundred-foot cross erected on the top of the mountain—once a real wooden cross that Maisonneuve planted to thank the Virgin for saving Montreal from a flood, but by our time a giant hulk of steel that lit up the city's night skyline for a distance of forty miles.

In our little neighbourhood north of the mountain, it was just as common to hear Greek or Yiddish or Italian as it was to hear French or English. At our family's store, famous for making wood-fired bagels in an oven that devoured trees like the furnace of hell itself, nearly every day was brightened by the chime of tourists with the hard shine of American accents.

It would have been to our mother's perpetual regret, if she had believed in such a fruitless notion, that we were born at the hospital and not at home in our little apartment above the shop. Mama told us that Papa had insisted. "He said if anything went wrong, almost all he knew about was making bagels, which could hardly be of very much help. Same thing with pie crust."

Papa also thought that the bathtub was too small for such momentous events. He had been born in India, in the Punjab, and he had arrived with such admirable rapidity that he was very nearly delivered in the central courtyard of his village where they kept the livestock. As it was, the woman who helped bring him into the world had also attended at the births of the healthiest local cows, which was considered by his extended relatives to be a fortunate circumstance. But for his own children, there could be no greater distinction than to greet the universe in a hospital where the doctors were paid to look after human beings and nothing else. He wrote

to his parents in India, announcing each addition to the family, but nothing ever came in return except for overexposed photographs of the young Indian daughters of their friends. All the women he might still be able to marry if he tried.

Our parents rarely spoke of how they met and fell in love, ignoring our questions with the same implacable front they presented to bedtime negotiations or fussy standoffs over unpalatable foods. Papa would get stern, his thick lips pressed together as he turned his back on us to indicate there were some things we had no share in. Mama, for her part, said we would be making our own love stories soon enough, that there was no call to get greedy for theirs as well. We found this ridiculous considering how often she talked to us about her lost draft dodger whom she'd followed to Canada, or the other men, presumably lovers, who had brought her important messages from the universe.

I tried to imagine her through Papa's eyes, a pale sprite at the gurdwara, the white of her turban setting off her fair skin to disadvantage, her pink eyelids and blue-veined temples standing out in the absence of any other colour. Her chin lifted at an angle, revealing an awareness of glances from the people around her. Papa said once, when pressed, that he fell in love with Mama's purity of soul before he cherished her as a woman, but I think it might just as easily have been that touch of defiance in her jaw—the rebelliousness that so often made my heart sink towards my shoes—that first caught his attention and lured him away from the traditions of his strict upbringing. Or it could have been the look of her nipples, just barely visible through her layered white cotton shirts, or her

toes peeking out below her skirts, small and rounded like tiny pearl onions. Or her perfume of patchouli and musk oil, spicy like sex and old religions.

Or it could have been that Papa had always been different. He came from a place where the details of his birth might have constricted his life, his love, and even his thoughts. But they didn't. He followed the rules the way he followed a recipe: carefully, thoughtfully, and sometimes, at the last moment, with an inspired change.

But contrary to the opinion shared by his brother and the rest of the family back in India, Papa remained a believer. He wrote to his father about the equality of all human beings, both men and women, according to the very teachings of the holy gurus. He wrote to his mother urging her to reread the scriptures. Later, he wrote to apologize for his disrespect, but he was not cowed by his parents' fury into believing he had made a mistake by marrying a white woman. Instead, he prayed for them.

On the morning everything changed, August twenty-first, 1978, Papa announced his intention to take a *hukam* from the Guru Granth Sahib, the big holy book compiled in the age of the gurus. He often did this after breakfast, opening to a passage at random to give us insight into the day to come. Sadhana and I watched from the kitchen table with the near fanatic joy we always reserved for family rituals. I felt an unwarranted proprietorship over the practice: the first letters of our names were chosen from the first letter of special *hukams* taken after we were born. Sadhana, just three, loved it all without really understanding.

Papa was in his yellow cotton pyjamas. We were a family who breakfasted in pyjamas—another beloved point of

observance for me and my sister. In his bare feet, he stepped over to the special shelf where the book was kept and unwrapped it from its silk covering. Everything that he did was gentle and deliberate. He read aloud the first line of the hymn, the *shabad*, he had turned to. His voice was quiet but resonant, even as he covered his mouth with one of Mama's embroidered handkerchiefs as a sign of respect.

He read it in Gurmukhi before translating it into English: "The One Lord is the Creator of all things, the Cause of causes."

Mama waited until Papa had replaced the sacred book before she got up to kiss him. When she dropped back down from her tiptoes, Papa smiled at all of us, and the smile travelled up to his eyebrows and all the way into his orange turban. "I don't want to be late," he said.

"You never are," said Mama. She cupped his face with one of her small hands before he went off to the bedroom to get dressed.

And after all that, after that normal, considerate conversation that might not have happened in exactly that way but probably did, my quiet, excellent Papa went down to our bagel shop and died.