

KATHERINE GUSTAFSON

*Parijaat*

Parijaat was born under a dull gray sky the color of bus terminals. Her mother, a hippie of the worst kind, went to squat under a tangled crabapple tree behind the house, intending to be one with nature. Alarmed midwives flurried, cleared twigs and pinecones from under her heaving thighs. Crammed a clean white sheet beneath the child's emerging head, squashed cone-shaped and thick with curls. The midwives were from Uganda, had themselves been born in precisely this way, their mothers clawing bark with fingernails. Exchanged glances with their tar-black eyes, thinking the woman was making fun of them.

But she didn't even know where Uganda was, used the word "Africa" as if she were talking about a country. Thought instead, as she squatted, vaguely about Earth Mothers, butterflies, the cycle of seasons, mossy rocks. Tried to hold stillness and love in her heart, to feel the radiating heat of new life envelop her. But couldn't help from screaming bloody murder, cursing her husband's name. The midwives stifled smiles, rolled eyes discreetly. A Ugandan woman would never scream in such a way.

The crabapple tree shuddered with the jolts of Parijaat's mother's body, scraped its branches together like the legs of a giant cricket, calling out with a moaning chirp. Leaves jostled madly in the still air as if a phantom breeze touched only this tree and no others. The sky hovered deeper and darker over her cries, which ordered her godforsaken husband back to India. Raindrops fell heavy and cold.

Later she would tell her tie-dyed friends that the Earth Mother had reached down and touched her in the moment her baby was born. It was a miracle, she would say, fingering the dried chip of placenta that she wore around her neck on a string. What the Ugandan midwives saw, however, was the quick trajectory of a dislodged crabapple. The groaning of the woman, the splatter of a fat raindrop on her rotund belly, the thwack of a hard, green, worm-gouged apple smacking her on the forehead. Immediately the child slithered out into the cold world as if coming down a waterslide, arriving into the rough comfort of their waiting hands. Wet. Shivering. Screaming

bloody murder just like her mother. The midwives were efficient in the bathing, the snipping, the swaddling. Imposing hygiene that they themselves had not had the fortune to experience.

The baby was red and wrinkled like a raisin, had the bunched-up face of a very old person, eyes the icy color of antifreeze. The mother gazed into its eyes, trying to feel the spiritual union between mother and child. The all-powerful moment of connection to the Higher Plane when one sees oneself in the eyes of another being. But didn't feel anything special. Turned away from the squalling thing with a sense of revulsion. Swallowing the deep shame of this, she braided her long, lank hair, letting the infant kick in howling despair on her lap. The discomfort of being born: the worst shock of a person's life.

It fell to the father, Manesh, a quiet man of below-average height and sparse mustache, to provide the warm cradle of affection for the baby's first days. From the moment she was born, he loved her. Held her. Smelled her. A soft scent of seeds, nuts, apples. Changed diapers. Mixed formula in warm glass bottles with rubber nipples. Her tender, toothless gums the color of strawberries.

His wife, as always "emotional and unpredictable," as he preferred to put it, gave suspicious sidelong glances. Meditated obsessively. Trying to regain her balance, she said. Though she meant: trying to keep a distance from the puking little creature. Was disgusted at the process of screaming, sweating, pushing. At the slimy mucus covering the spastic little body in the first moments. A process so squirming and fetid, reminding her of algae, bogs, bulrushes. The pathetic humanity of it all.

"We should name her after a tree," she said, looking at the child with an air of someone sizing up an item she is about to purchase. "Crabapple, like the tree she was born under. Her tie to the Earth."

"Crabapple is not a name," Manesh said firmly. He would not give in on such a thing. Was tired of giving in on such things.

"Fine then, what about Willow? Willow is perfect." She nodded decisively at the baby sleeping in the crook of Manesh's arm.

"Can't we name her something normal? A regular, normal name?" Somehow the tone of whining had crept into his voice. Pleading. Cleared his throat deeply, touched the tough hairs of his mustache.

"She was born under the arms of a tree, she should be named after a tree. Manesh, what's happened to you? You used to *under-*

stand what I'm talking about. We don't want her to drift without anchor."

What had happened to him? Met this woman at college, his second year in the U.S. with the thrill of folk music, theater people, women in short skirts and tall boots coursing through him. She adored his Indian accent, his nominal Hinduism, the way his lean body looked in too-small boxer shorts. *Love. Peace. Wholeness.* He repeated like a student learning a lesson. She acted as if these had been his ideas, fawned over her personal mystic guru. Manesh had loved the attention then, at age twenty, the adoration of this pretty girl. A girl from New Jersey.

"We will be her anchor, Pamela," he said. "We are the parents. A name is just a name, not an anchor." When he said the word "parents," felt a spasm of excitement in his body. Suspected that Pamela did not.

Manesh was born in a small village in Uttar Pradesh to a man who sold thousands of tiny beads on strings from a wooden stall in a market. Women tied these strings around their necks, wrists, ankles, sparkled in the sunlight like living jewels. Beads were everywhere in Manesh's father's house, dropping out randomly from where they stuck in the folds of his clothing. The cow-dung floor of the kitchen would be speckled in yellow beads, the courtyard littered with green. Eating rice, they would break their teeth not on overlooked stones but on misplaced beads, red, the color worn by married women. Manesh collected them in a jar, imagined he was a sultan with his treasure. Hoarded, counted.

The jar had every color of the rainbow, a riot of excitement like a carnival. It was big, glass, as round as the circle of a child's arms. Beads as tiny as the footprint of a spider took the place of large deli pickles with the girth of sausages. The lid of the jar screwed on tight, took little Manesh two hands to twist it off, as if it were the gauge on some steam-powered machine. As a sun-darkened child in that small village, had kept the jar under his bed, next to the cricket bat, worked until the layers of brilliant colors filled it to the brim.

Looking at his new daughter, he thought about the jar. Wondered what had become of it. Thought that she would fit inside that jar, if it wasn't full of beads. Three of her would fit, she was so small. Angry little fists like balls of chewed gum, feet the size of his thumb. Crying

like a fire engine, anguished mouth gaping like a hungry baby bird. He balanced her on his palms, held her up to the sunlight.

"You'll drop her," Pamela said, prostrate in a beach chair. Sallow in the clear New England air.

"Please," he snapped. The woman hadn't yet held the child more than was necessary for breastfeeding, gave her back to Manesh as soon as it was over, as if handing over a parcel that had arrived addressed to somebody else. Sat on the back deck braiding her hair over and over in different styles.

New Jersey had seemed to him, the few times he had visited her family there, a soulless, claustrophobic place. In India, places had a feel to them, a tangible sense like the texture on fabric. Almost like a taste. This town almond, that village cherry. One big city vanilla, the next orange. One could make, he supposed, a range of lollipops named after locales in India, a geography of the tongue.

His village, Kintur, would be cinnamon: rich, spicy, sweet, earthy. There was something spiritual about cinnamon, he found, something about the way it came in sticks that one could put in steaming beverages. Twigs in your afternoon cider; such a thing brings one closer to God. In future years, would drink cider with his daughter, stirring with twigs of cinnamon, tell her about India, about Kintur and its magic tree.

"Manesh, it has to be a tree name," said Pamela. "I buried her placenta under the same tree where I gave birth to her. She has to be *connected*. What about Magnolia?"

"If it has to be a tree, it will be Parijaat," Manesh said quietly. Remembered the massive, gnarled trunk, the white flowers that bloomed rarely with a scent like the perfume of angels. From the kitchen where his mother had cooked, he would watch the occasional tourist peering into its branches, asking for the fulfillment of wishes. Thousands of years old. Had felt the fingers of Krishna and Arjun on its branches.

"Never heard of it. Is that even a tree?"

There were no such trees in New Jersey.

"It's only in India. In Kintur. Unique. No other tree like it in the world. It's a unisex male tree, totally unique, can't be reproduced. They say it came from the heavens, Krishna brought it for his queen. Shiva used to be crowned with the flowers."

Pamela loved Hindu gods. Eyes sparkled in the sunshine at the possibility of such a spiritual, heavenly tree. Of such a name for her child.

“Any wish made underneath is granted. Local people say it’s their protector.”

“Parijaat.” Pamela rolled the sound on her tongue, smiled the smile that made him still love her sometimes.

“The trunk is fifty feet around. It’s enormous, like a house.”

“Okay, Parijaat Hinkley-Sharma. I like it.” She looked at the baby contemplatively for a moment, fitting the name on it like a set of clothes. Parijaat smacked her tiny lips in her sleep, jammed a little thumb between them.

Manesh longed for India. For its smelly hubbub, for its spicy food. Hadn’t seen his mother in seven years. When he left, said he would never come back to the clawing nosiness of his big family, the dirt and dust of squalid northern towns. Now swore to himself that he would someday return. Would allow Parijaat to make a wish on her tree. The tree of the gods. Despite a penchant for yoga and the plinking tunes of ragas, Pamela would not move to such a wanting place. A place where beggars with leprosy held out palms with no fingers, implored with toothless mouths. He had known this when he married her. Had considered this a good excuse.

So Parijaat grew up there, in Vermont, wearing the patchwork clothing of a hippie’s child. Played with the children of Pamela’s friends, kids named Cedar, Rainbow, Sunny, whose parents disapproved of their penchants for trucks, dolls, war games. Offered instead pastel-colored scarves, rough-hewn wooden blocks, little African-looking drums. Their children begged for trips to McDonalds, gifts of Barbie and G.I. Joe. Manesh was the only one who gave in to such appeals, was looked upon with disgusted superiority. Was forced over and over to sleep on the couch, Pamela outraged over Parijaat’s love of Chicken McNuggets and French fries.

Manesh could, in fact, do nothing right when it came to Parijaat. As soon as the baby had its name, Pamela had belatedly claimed it for her own, became an intense and possessive mother. Forgot her original revulsion, was overcome by the satisfaction of the perfect name they had chosen. She imagined the baby smelled like musty incense, was a symbol of the sacred mysteries of Hinduism, would in time reveal to Pamela the secrets of life, love, monsoon rain.

Manesh became to his wife an interference, a distraction, a creature whose life of cubicles and neckties was contrary to the very nature of the sacred bond between this mother and child.

He was an engineer. Designed pedestrian bridges that spanned highways, wheelchair access ramps for large buildings.

Tried to impress the value of this work upon Parijaat, to counter the attitudes of her mother. "See that little bridge, Pari? I made it." Zooming under the concrete structure on the way somewhere. Parijaat kicking her car seat with the backs of her sneakers.

"How'd you make it daddy? Did you hammer?" Having watched the workmen restoring the front porch of their house, slamming floorboards into place.

"I planned how it would look so other people could hammer it."

"Oh." Plainly disappointed. Stuck with a daddy who didn't hammer.

He longed to be close to her, to slip for a moment between Pamela and the child. But he felt like a fish out of water in the Earth-loving atmosphere of their friends' houses. Felt trapped in a green cage of forest and mountains, pacing the streets of this quaint American town, dreading the onset of snow. Didn't know how to be an American dad, a father who hammered and grilled in the back yard. He orbited on the edges of Parijaat's universe, not quite sure of its geography, the path inside to the center, to the inside places of his child's heart.

But then a package arrived in the mail. It had been sent months before, had made its way across the oceans of the world on a slow boat from India. Was a rectangular box, heavy as if filled with wet sand. Did not realize his brother knew his address, could not remember giving it out.

Inside: a letter in Hindi, the characters scrawled. "Manesh, mother has died. Wanted us to send this to you. She said she had been saving it to give you when you returned. You never returned. We hope you are well. Sangita and I now have five children. Would love for you to visit us. Your brother, Santosh."

Also inside: a big pickle jar filled with colored beads the size of pinheads.

He cried all night, hating himself for abandoning his family. Shame upon him. To have never gone back to see his own mother.

The yearning for India closed over him like a wave of brackish seawater, choking him, making him cough.

Parijaat approached him in the morning, tears in her eyes. He was still on the sofa where he had finally collapsed in Pamela's arms, plunging into a punishing sleep that pummeled him with hectic dreams of black and white cows in filthy streets, leafy green trees the size of houses, mothers in blood-red saris, the blue skin of the god Krishna. Awoke to the timid poking of Parijaat's finger on his cheek, the snuffle of her crying.

"Mommy says you were crying because your mommy died," she said, regarding him accusatorily. Grayish-green eyes the color of river rocks.

"Mommy is right, honey. My mommy died. Do you know what that means? Is that why you're crying?"

Nodding. "It means she becomes like the dirt. She goes into the ground and gets brown and dirty."

"Well, yes, but it also means she doesn't get to open her eyes anymore to see anybody. She doesn't get to get up anymore or walk anywhere. She doesn't even breathe anymore. She's like a car that ran out of gas."

"Why don't they give her more gas?"

"There is no type of gas that will make her go again." He pictured a hearse at a gas station, the attendant shaking his head regretfully at the inquiring driver. Supposed Parijaat was picturing her grandmother as a Volkswagen. Had a feeling he shouldn't be explaining such things to a five-year-old.

Instead: "I have a present for you, sweetie. Your grandma sent you something before she died." Was thinking that the beads would pass right through her system if she ate them. Too small to choke on, too small to hurt her. Like eating grains of sand, as every child does.

According to Pamela, the jar of beads was the first successful thing Manesh had done for Parijaat, after giving her that name. Manesh would agree with this assessment, though he detested agreeing with Pamela. Parijaat inspected the jar as if looking at a trove of sunken treasure, eyes the size of quarters, mouth an "O" of wonderment.

"What is it daddy? Is it food?" Rapped on the glass with her knuckles, as if it was a terrarium with an animal inside.

So he explained to her about the beads, about his father with his wooden stall in the market, about the red beads hidden in the rice, about the jar under the bed next to the cricket bat. As he spoke he could taste the cinnamon flavor of his village, could feel the hot breath of his mother's paraffin stove, hear her humming in the kitchen. He could picture the tourists peering up into the branches of the Parijaat tree near his house, could feel the rough bark scraping his legs as he climbed into its spreading limbs. He told Pari about her tree, about the magic of its very existence in the mortal world. Told her about the heavenly fragrance of its yawning, white flowers.

"How do I open it, daddy?" she responded, tugging at the lid of the jar. "Is it candy?"

They filled a wide and shallow box, let her play in it like a sand-box. Shoveling, sifting, filling buckets with rainbow-colored beads. With Sunny she filled dainty cups for a bead tea party. With Cedar constructed mountains, rivers, lakes. Their mothers approved of this plaything, looked at Manesh with newfound respect. Not only beads, but beads *from India*, they said to each other. Beads worn by Indian women in saris, women who worshipped blue-skinned gods by the light of butter lamps. Hoped that Sunny and Cedar would soak up something of this culture from the beads, would feel the special power of such an exotic place.

Manesh was just happy he had reached Parijaat's heart. Because the beads became the love of her young life, and so, by extension, did Manesh.

"Daddy, today I made a bead pie." Over dinner, poking at her tofu loaf with the tip of her small fork.

"What flavor was it, sweetie?"

"Bluecherry."

"You mean blueberry?" said Pamela.

"Yeah. It had all the colors. And it had ice cream on top."

"Sounds delicious," said Manesh. Raised his eyebrows to show how exciting it was.

"Yeah. Sunny and I ate it. Like this." Pretended to eat her dinner, gulping bites of air.

"Yum!"

"Those beads are the best beads in the world." Reaching across the table to hold his hand in her little hand. Ate with his left hand

until she let go, not wanting the moment to end. They *were* the best beads in the world, thought Manesh. Brought the two of them close together, as they had been in the week of her birth. His daughter, Parijaat. And he, her anchor.

Pamela scowled at him from across the table. Not used to not getting what she wanted. Not used to orbiting on the edges like Manesh usually did.

“Eat your dinner, Pari,” she said crisply. “That’s a good girl, eat it up.”

Manesh called his brother, at a phone number in Lucknow scribbled at the bottom of the letter in the box. Through a bad connection heard the familiar voice, wiped tears from his eyes at the memories that crowded in. Heard how his mother had asked for him at the very last moment, had inquired of Santosh why Manesh had never returned.

“I told her it was because your wife is a cripple,” Santosh said. “I told her you couldn’t return because your wife cannot walk and you will not leave her.”

“But you know that’s not true.”

“I didn’t have another answer, Manesh. I couldn’t break her heart as she lay dying. I could not tell her you wanted to run away because you were young and foolish and thought you wanted other things out in the big world. That is no reason. That’s no reason a mother will understand.” Santosh sounded angry through the phone, indignant for the injury done to their mother, to himself.

“I wish I had known she was ill.”

“She was not ill. Not until the last minute. Then boom, all at once, falling down like a cut tree. It was cancer in her pancreas. Besides, I couldn’t reach you. All I had was an address.”

“I’m sorry, Santosh.”

“Yes.”

“How is Sangita?”

“Very well. Our fifth child was born recently.” Listed off five female names, each the name of a goddess. “Lakshmi is the new one. She is six months now. Getting very big.”

“I have a daughter too,” said Manesh, surprised to remember his brother did not yet know this. That they hadn’t spoken for five entire years. “Parijaat.”

“Like the tree in Kintur?”

“Yes, just like the tree.”

“But that’s not a good name for a girl. That is the name for a tree.”

“This girl is magic like that tree, Santosh. From the heavens.”

“I’d like to meet her, Manesh. Bring her here, brother. Bring her home.”

Manesh began saving that same day. Started with a penny, found stray in his pocket. Dropped, with a resounding smack, into the pickle jar that used to hold the beads. That day, he also took the thinnest needle out of Pamela’s sewing kit and began to spear tiny beads onto thread the width of two hairs. Remembered the days of his childhood spent spearing and threading, making necklaces for women to buy in the market. Twisting and braiding sparkling strands of blue, green, red, his fingertips sore from needle pricks.

Parijaat observed with interest, stuck her finger, cried. Ran away from him to add a found penny to the big, glass jar. Became the most ardent banker, the least enthusiastic seamstress.

“She’s becoming obsessed with money,” observed Pamela. Accusing Manesh. “She’s become a regular Rockefeller.”

The only thing that had the power, eventually, to draw Parijaat’s attention away from the beads and the pennies was the trees. She grew into a gangly tomboy, all skinned knees and high-top sneakers, tangled hair in a ponytail. Climbed into trees like she was the child of monkeys, totally fearless, a grubby circus acrobat. Rainbow and Sunny stayed below, brushing the corn silk hair of their dolls. Cedar raced her to the top, grabbing at her ankles as she out-climbed him. Sticking out her tongue at him from above, laughing like a hyena.

Her favorite tree to climb was the crabapple in the back yard, under which she had been born years before. Pamela was smug, told Manesh she had known in her bones that the child would have a love of trees, a desire to climb to high places, sit cradled by branches. Congratulated herself on the intuition that told her to squat underneath the crabapple, to bear the baby in a place it would feel at home. To give the baby the name of a tree.

“All kids like climbing trees,” said Manesh, rolling his eyes. “I *loved* climbing trees when I was young. And I wasn’t born under a tree.”

“But look at Sunny, she doesn’t climb. Or Rainbow. Or Lillian’s daughter Emerald.” Manesh was getting tired of not laughing when

Pamela listed these names. Tired of holding back joke after joke to avoid hurting Pamela's feelings.

"Yes, you are right," he replied, killing the argument before it began. Which was the best way to argue with Pamela.

After three years the jar was full, heavy with coins threaded through with twenty, fifty, hundred dollar bills. Manesh visited the bank, the travel agent, felt his teeth grit with the unspeakable excitement of it, his jaw clenched tight to keep from yelping with joy. India floated like a golden cloud in the sky of his imagination. He hadn't been home for fifteen years.

Held Parijaat's hand during take-off as much for his sake as for hers. Felt the deafening rush of the engine mimic his own urgent anticipation, the shake of the airplane racing down the runway reflect his own tremulous excitement. In the air, Parijaat snapping her gum, pressing her nose to the window white with clouds like cotton.

"So why did you leave then, Dad, if you want to go back so much?" Asking the way children do, as if the answer will be easy, just a matter of speaking the words.

He didn't know the answer, but started talking. "I wanted to travel. Wanted to see new things. I got a scholarship to go to college in America." The explanation felt weak to him, unconvincing. Were these reasons really what drove him? At the time, yes, but now, after so many years yearning for what he had lost, they seemed insubstantial. Not possibly good enough reasons. No reason good enough.

But Parijaat nodded, comprehending. "Like the time we went to Montreal?" she asked. "We wanted to see new things in Montreal. We wanted to see Canadian people, and see things written in French."

"Yes, Pari, just like that. I wanted to see America."

"Vermont." Having rarely been out of her state, her town.

"Yes, Vermont and New York and New Jersey and California."

"But you got tired of it? You wanted to go back where you started?"

Manesh, with a feeling of disclosing secrets, nodded. "Yes, sweetie." Whispering, almost afraid to say these words. "I want to see where I started."

But first to his brother's smallish house in Lucknow, the front walk etched in marigolds. The daughters regarding Parijaat with

ardent curiosity: Saraswati, Maya, Sita, Parvati, Lakshmi. Each with long brown hair like the mane of a horse, each nose pierced with a twinkling jewel.

“Where is your wife, brother?” asked Santosh, pressing Manesh to him.

“She is crippled, remember? She couldn’t come.” Smiling, remembering what it is like to be a bratty little brother. Didn’t want to tell his brother that she had refused, had sulked in the bedroom for days at the perceived abandonment. Felt Santosh’s brotherly palm smack the back of his head.

Manesh was dizzy with joy. Left Parijaat playing marbles with her cousins while he roamed the streets, buying snacks from peddlers on bicycles, odds and ends from teeming markets. Smelled the rich, thick odors of India, the grime and spice and sweat. Took a ride in a honking, belching taxicab, the driver talking rapidly about politics, weather, his children scattered in Delhi, Bangalore, Mumbai.

Returned to find Parijaat’s nose pierced with a simple needle heated over the stove, a loop of red string dangling through the tender flesh of her nostril.

“It is about time someone did that,” said Sangita, washing the needle in the sink. And Manesh could not disagree. Watched Parijaat’s cousins wrapping her in a gold and purple sari, giggling in a tangle of expensive fabric. The first time she had worn anything but blue jeans in an entire year. Wondered vaguely what Pamela would think. Realized he didn’t really care.

What he really wanted was the tree. The Parijaat. They went the next day, jerking over rutted roads in Santosh’s car, coming across landmarks he recognized. A bookstore in a shack, a moss-covered temple, a rock with a shape like a hunchbacked man. Feeling his past wash over him like a warm summer rain. Pari in the front seat silently watching, catching eyes with dirty children on the roadside, tugging gently on her nostril’s red string. In the backseat, a heavy suitcase dragged from Vermont, loaded with a precious burden.

“We’re going to see the tree you’re named after, Pari,” he told her, hoping she would understand the significance of this journey. “It’s in the town where I was born. Where I lived when I was a little boy.”

“Oh,” said Parijaat, staring out the window. “A Parijaat tree?” Smiled, picturing herself with leaves growing from her fingertips.

“Yup. And they say the tree was brought to the Earth by gods. Thousands of years ago. You can make a wish on it, and the wish will come true.”

“Even if I wish for a new bike?”

“Yes, even that. But think carefully. You can only wish once.”

“I only want one bike.”

And rounding a bend, there it was. As big as a house. As green as a jungle. White flowers like giant doves nestled in its branches. What a happy fate, thought Manesh, to have his visit coincide with its rare blooming. Upon exiting the car, intoxicated by an aroma as sweet as love. A tree unfit for this mortal world.

“There’s your tree, Pari,” Manesh said, squeezing her little hand. “The Parijaat Tree, tree of the gods. Brought from the heavens by Krishna himself.”

And she was off, scrambling in her turquoise Converse All-Star high top sneakers. Bounding up into the giant tree as if it were a staircase, within seconds twenty feet off the ground. Looking down at him, hands on her hips.

“Dad! This is the biggest tree I’ve ever seen! What are you doing?” Slithered back down through the branches to help him drag the heavy suitcase from the car to the base of the tree. “What’s in here, Dad? Why’s it so heavy?”

Beads. Thousands of beads the size of pinheads, strung together on a single thread the width of two hairs. In places braided, in places twisted, and all over shining like a shimmering rainbow, color upon color.

“My beads!” said Parijaat, and watched open-mouthed as her father marched into her tree with the end of the strand in his hand, tied it around a low-hanging limb curved like a monstrous tusk. Feeding the beads through gentle hands, he began to slowly climb, draping his work of three years loosely over and around branches, dangling it onto leaves and festooning blossoms. His humble offering to the gods of his long-ago childhood. The announcement of his return.