

## Ven Begamudré / APPA, MY FATHER

### 1: Patricide

The poet Patrick Lane once told me, "All sons kill their fathers." He knows much about such things. His own father died young, shot in the back late one night at his desk. Not by Patrick. And he is not the sort of man who goes through life guarding his own back. We met over ten years ago, when he settled in Saskatchewan with the poet Lorna Crozier. Even then I saw myself in him: the same love of beauty and truth, the same impatience with fools.

He gave me hope without trying. That's the best kind; the kind of hope that goes deep. I was watching his poetry class once, marvelling at the loving impatience in his voice, at the beauty he could impart to even technical words: *form, ghazal, villanelle, imagistic, lyric, caesura, masculine rhyme, feminine rhyme, paradigm, closure*. Words I even now don't understand: sounds to be savoured. "The only thing that separates me from him is twenty years," I thought. "If I care about writing as much as he does, if I pursue it with his singlemindedness..." Twenty years, give or take a few: only that.

Later, we discovered I was nearly as old as his eldest son. He laughed in amusement and shock, for he had forgotten he was already middle-aged. In jest I called him Dad, and he called me Son. We are as a father and son should be once the son learns life is full of betrayals. We are friends.

We even have similar dreams. Mine is to finish the basement in the house Shelley and I own, a house we bought from Patrick and Lorna. His dream is to build a greenhouse in their new backyard. Reality has forced us, he and I, to lower our sights. Not for our writing; those remain often impossibly high. We have lowered our sights on life. But to say we are like father and son is misleading, for I have never wanted to kill him. His book *Winter* begins like this:

The generosity of snow, the way it forgives transgression,  
filling in the many betrayals and leaving the world  
exactly as it was....

My father and I are not friends. In the twelve years since I stayed

with him in India during my first trip back, I have seen him only three times: once for three weeks, once for a week, once for a day and a half. Just over a month in twelve years. I often wanted to kill him. I no longer do. It's not simply that I have forgiven him. There is that. I no longer want to kill him because I discovered how easy that would be.

We were at my Uncle Nagasha's house in the Jayanagar district of Bangalore, the same district in which my grandfather Krishna had lived out his last years. Nagasha commented on how much my father resembled my grandfather. I secretly refused to believe it. I admired my grandfather. I could afford to, since I hadn't known him well. He hadn't raised me; my father had. He was standing to one side while Nagasha and his wife posed for my camera. Suddenly it struck me: how old my father looked. How frail. I could have broken his neck with one hand. Or that's how it seemed. Better yet, I could have closed one hand on his throat and slammed his head against a wall. Of course I did neither. But in that instant, his hold on me fell away. The father I had known was dead. Finally.

Until that moment, whenever I remembered him as he once had been, I remembered the bad things first. Now I remember the good. And perhaps because I learned to remember them so late, they remain with me now. It took twenty-seven years, from the time I was six until nearly thirty-three, to forgive him. Twenty-seven years, give or take a few: only that.

I will not grieve for my father when he dies. I will grieve for the man he could have been.

## 2: Promises

My mother works in Toronto, and I live with my father in Ottawa. "He will take good care of you," she promised. She promised that for two years while we waited in India to join him. I call him Appa, which means father in his mother tongue, but I don't think of him as Appa. I have only met him once before she left me with him. His visit to India, two years before, was a quick one. As quickly, I forgot him. I was only four then. Now I am six.

He is cooking supper, omelet again. Eggs congealed around onion and tomato, diced. In India I tasted egg only once. Our servant, Mary, boiled an egg because my mother wanted me to learn Canadian ways.

The experiment was not a success. Here we have omelet every second night. One night, I rebel.

"If you don't eat, you'll fall ill," he says. I refuse. He slams the table and shouts, "Eat!" I begin to cry. I get down from my chair and sit on the floor with my back to the wall. That was how we ate in India, but only on special occasions. He rises with my plate, sets it on the floor, and crouches in front of me. He is a large man with a thick neck and hairy arms. He cannot abide it when I cry.

He grabs my throat with his left hand, shoves my head back against the wall. His palm presses into my throat. My hair scratches between my scalp and the wall. He begins shovelling omelet into my mouth. I am six going on seven, but I know: I can either eat or choke.

He leaves the plate on the floor, rises and backs away. This is not the man my mother promised would take good care of me. "You're not my father!" I scream. I am only six, but I know, and I tell him again: "You are not my father."

### 3: Another One for the Evil Eye

I once asked my cousin Prakash, a psychiatrist, why I could never please my father. "It's called the evil eye," Prakash said. "Sometimes parents are afraid of praising their children in case the evil eye is watching."

Grade eleven, Vancouver. I am enrolled in a humanities course taught by two teachers, one social studies, the other art. It is based on Kenneth Clark's book *Civilisation: A Personal View*, after his series on BBC. A pilot project, the course. We watch each episode, research names and terms, watch the episode again. I lose myself in the book. Find a world I understand.

Charlemagne: "saviour of civilisation" yet unable to write

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Inquisition and Index

Leonardo (da Vinci): study of man, attitude to women

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Art patronage as "atonement"

Tulip craze of early 17th-c.



India: spiritual enlightenment in  
Odo of Metz  
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"It may be difficult to define civilisation," Clark says, "but it isn't so difficult to recognize barbarism."

I write him an aerogramme, address it to "Sir Kenneth Clark, London, U.K." Only that. Describe the pilot project, how much we are learning. How much fun. His reply is also an aerogramme, typed and signed. My teachers are delighted.

Meanwhile, my father is trying to make a fresh start. In teachers' college. We have little to say to one another, little that is personal. One day he attends a seminar on pilot projects. "It seems they're extending a course based on a series by Kenneth Clark," he says over supper. "One of the students wrote to him and he wrote back."

"Oh," I say, "that was me."

And my father says, "It couldn't have been you."

#### 4: Sportsmanship

Try to avoid questions that begin with "why."

— *Family Ties that Bind*

My father once played cricket against what later became the Pakistan National Team. He was playing gully, the most difficult spot: near the batter but off to the side. The batsman up was their best. He could hit centuries, a hundred runs, and he made only one mistake that day. He nicked the ball, and my father lunged. He missed. When he tells this story, he shakes his head.

Another time, my father's team was playing away. The host team arranged lunch, ordered out from a nearby hotel. By mid-afternoon, my father's team forfeited the match. Food poisoning. When he tells this story, he always laughs.

I am seven. Civil service teams play cricket on the grounds of Rideau Hall, the governor general's mansion. In the pavilion, a wooden building with secretive changing rooms, is a soft drink machine. Bottles hang from rows of slots, different flavours in different slots. Pure Spring ginger ale, cream soda, lemon lime. Move a bottle down its slot and into the gate. Feed in a dime and pull up. I always choose Orange Crush. Even now it tastes of green pavilions, cricket whites, mothers on the lawn in folding chairs, cries of "Well caught!" Orange

Crush is cricket.

On the way home after a match, my father says the governor general invited him to tea but my father declined. "Georges Vanier?" I ask. "We could have had tea with Georges Vanier, and you turned him down!" My father says, "I couldn't very well go in my cricketing clothes." For years I boast, "I nearly had tea with Georges Vanier."

I am nine. My father has been trying to teach me cricket for three years. We are on the grounds of RMC, the Royal Military College, and I am tiring of his orders. I want to have fun, and he is making me do drills. My cheeks feel as red as the hard leather ball he bowls. Finally I throw down my bat. "I am not learning cricket!" I declare. He slaps me. Only once. But hard.

I am twenty-five. He is spending the summer in my second-floor walk-up near the tracks. A suite too small for a father and son. I ask a question unasked for sixteen years: "Why did you hit me that time I said I didn't want to learn cricket?" He looks up from a book. "What are you talking about?" he asks. "You always hit me for every little thing," I say, "but that time you hit me so hard. Why?" He says, "That's the way we were brought up. I didn't know any better." He goes back to his book while I fume. "At any rate," he adds without looking up, "I never once hit you on a cricket pitch. That would have been poor sportsmanship."

## 5: Moving Days

I never learned to play the piano. We couldn't afford one. Even if we could, we wouldn't have had one, because we moved every year. Often within the same city. For a while our living room furniture was patio furniture, because it was easy to assemble, disassemble, re-assemble. Our addresses during the eleven years I lived with my father:

610 Montreal Road, Ottawa, in what was then called Eastview and is now called Vanier. I don't remember the apartment number. I attend Ashbury College, an exclusive school not meant for families in Eastview. He hires a man to wax the hardwood floor when we move out. My father dislikes leaving traces.

50 Selkirk Avenue, yet another apartment in Eastview but closer to the river, to Ottawa proper. I buy comic books at a corner store, the "Busy Bee." Lorna Going, my babysitter's granddaughter, tries to teach me to fish, with little success. She takes me to "Mary Poppins," and

for weeks we sing:

Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious.

He has no idea what it means.

Bowling Green One, Kingston, on the corner of Bath Road and Sir John A. McDonald Boulevard. They are always digging basements for new buildings. In winter, boys and girls skate on the frozen holes; in spring, we pole rafts made of boards meant to keep us out. My father can't get tenure at RMC because he doesn't have his doctorate.

Then a basement apartment, so I can go back to Ashbury, this time as a boarder. In spring, the basement floods. Most of his belongings, packed in boxes, escape damage. Still, he vows never to live in a basement again. He doesn't have to: I decide I prefer public schools. They seem more real.

Another building on Sir John A, across from the Kingston Shopping Centre with its Bad Boy furniture store. This is the year he begins finding fault with everything I do. The year Mrs. Farrell gives me lunch. The year he takes me to New York City for Christmas. We stay in the YMCA. One night I go to the bathroom down the hall and pass a drunk. He is sawing the round wooden ornament off a banister. I don't ask why.

Building J off Westgate Drive, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. The year I learn to play baseball and my father finally earns his doctorate. The year I play the baritone at Nitschmann Junior High. The year I learn this song:

B-e-t-h-l-e-h-e-m spells Bethlehem!  
Proud of all the years she's been a city.  
Fifty years!  
That is why we sing this pretty ditty.  
Give her a cheer!  
B-e-t-h-l-e-h-e-m so grand.  
She's the town of renown,  
Christmas City in the USA,  
Bethlehem, give her a hand!

Bowling Green Three, Kingston. I may have forgotten Two; I'm sure we lived there as well. This will be the longest we live in any one city at one time: three years. We make trips to Algonquin Park and Expo '67: "Man and His World." My father's health grows worse from the dampness and cold and the long hours in his lab. I grow



moody, so he makes me take up sailing, join air cadets. Anything to keep me out of the house.

One Thursday in August, when I am sixteen, he comes home and asks, "Do you have any library books out?" I always have library books out. "Take them back," he says. "We're leaving for Vancouver on Monday. I've quit my job." And so we pack up the car and drive. He drives. I remember the sunset on the lake at Ignace, Ont. How he curses while he unloads the patio furniture and repacks it to send by train. The forests north of Superior. Bison at the zoo in Winnipeg. The sunset at Grenfell, Sask. In Calgary he says, "What river is that?" I want to say, "Fucked if I know." Instead I say, "Beats me," and he grows annoyed. "This is your chance to learn about Canada," he says. Yeah, right. And then the mountains, oh the mountains, the gondola up Mount Norquay near Banff, Peyto Lake on the way to Jasper. Imagine: a lake that changes colour throughout the day. We see it as turquoise. Then down past the Premier Mountains of B.C. and past the whirlpool at Hell's Gate. I remember the motel at Hope, a chalet. How he keeps repeating the name *Hope* to lift my spirits. And his. Our first night in Vancouver at the YMCA. No drunk sawing at banisters here. Just a question mark after the *Y*.

Two last addresses:

A highrise on Alma Street near Broadway. Nights lying awake listening to the fountain in front. The beginnings of my insomnia. Sixteen years of insomnia. Evenings spent alone walking in the rain to the library while he attends night class. Other evenings in the army cadets. His idea again: anything to get me out of the house. He begins talking about returning to India. I lay plans for escape.

The 3800 block of Fourth Avenue West. When the caretaker, Mr. Kostiniuk, falls ill, my father burns the garbage for him. For ten dollars a week. Mrs. Kostiniuk bakes round loaves of bread for us, slips a dollar bill to me with each one. Then he gets a job, part-time, but a job. Spends his first fifty dollars on a sportscoat and trousers at the Army and Navy. A flashy yellow coat to fit his new mood. But he leaves his wallet in the changing room and returns to find it gone. He still pays for the sportscoat and trousers, later, but he never wears that coat.

The following August I leave for university in the east, back in Ottawa. Swear I will never go home again. Of course I do.

And in the ten years between my first apartment and finally buying a house, I live in eleven different places: Ottawa (three), Saskatoon and Prince Albert (one each), Regina (six). But I promise myself two things. Real wooden furniture. And a piano. Much of our furniture is second-hand, but it is wood. Even the piano is second-hand, refinished by a friend from its pink roxatone to its original oak veneer. Someday, I will learn to play it.