

## Cherry Blossom Fever by Anuja Varghese

### *Marjan*

Every year, for two weeks in mid-May, the city is struck by cherry blossom fever. In April, the city waits on the edge of spring, which should be soft like rabbit ears or tulips. More often, spring in the city is sharp, the mornings still mean and frostbitten, the grey dusks prickling with the threat of overnight snow. Maybe it's because the city has been cheated out of a proper spring that it goes a little mad by May. That collective frenzy for the surreal, storybook perfection of sakuras in full bloom something between catharsis and cliché.

It was in the midst of this feverish state that Marjan met Talia. She saw her for the first time as the sun was rising behind the trees, which was the only time the light was good and the benches empty enough to sit and sketch. Talia was sitting on the bench Marjan usually claimed for her own, in sundress and sandals, crimson-tipped fingers covering the Starbucks logo on her cup. There were other benches. Marjan could not have said why she chose to sit next to her.

No, that's not true.

Marjan sat next to Talia because she couldn't stop herself from doing it. Like a paperclip drawn to a magnet, she had no choice.

If two people could be immediately reduced to their most primal selves, to their animal brains and strongest instincts, then that is what happened between Talia and Marjan on a bench in High Park, on a Tuesday morning in May. How did they go from pleasant conversation to watching shitty daytime TV and drinking cheap champagne in Marjan's third-floor apartment at the bottom of the Junction? It was the easiest thing in the world. Then, later, when the streetcar tracks quivered in hazy August heat and even the shade in High Park felt scorched, it was just as easy to strip down to their underwear and suck on ice cubes while sweat ran down their backs

and pooled in the hollows of their throats. And it was easiest of all to dissolve the confines of friendship and finally satisfy the desire that pulsed between them, a thing as palpable and fully formed as the cherry blossoms of May.

“I think you were born a phoenix,” Marjan said to Talia, running her fingers through Talia’s hair, which by the fall, was the colour of ripe strawberries again. Its asymmetrical lines were sharp, intersecting with cheekbone, lip, and jaw.

Talia gave this serious thought before replying, “I think you were born a mermaid.”

And so, they mythologized each other with their mouths and their hands and their heat and as the leaves fluttered down to filter the apartment light in shades of red and gold, it was a dream from which Marjan never wanted to wake.

Marjan didn’t think it all that strange that Talia never mentioned her family who lived so far east they were practically in Scarborough, a world away from the Junction where they had come alive together. She didn’t question why, in the course of a year, she had only met a handful of Talia’s friends. People who stared at her with tight, silent smiles, their tongues seemingly swollen from how hard they were biting down. Marjan shrugged these things off, assuming a conservatism that came with Talia’s skin, assuming Talia’s people would eventually come to love her, just as her own mother and brother and all of her friends had immediately, unreservedly embraced Talia. That was Marjan’s understanding of love - that it expanded when you needed it to.

Marjan spent the winter planning her proposal, which she meant to make in the Park, when the cherry trees were in bloom again. Under that perfect canopy of pale pink and white, with sunlight streaming down through the blossom-laden branches, she would give Talia her great-aunt’s opal ring. She would get down on one knee and Talia would start to cry and

everyone around them aggressively seeking the perfect selfie would stop to smile and clap, sidetracked from their quest by a declaration of love born from a fever dream.

Marjan called Talia from the park on the anniversary of the day they first met. She could have texted, but she wanted to hear Talia's voice, her laughter at Marjan's suggestion: *Let's make out under the cherry trees.*

Marjan touched Talia's name on her phone and let it ring.

"Hello?"

Marjan froze and pulled the phone away from her ear to stare at it. Had she somehow called the wrong number? No, it was Talia's number and Talia's face, but not Talia's voice at the other end of the line.

"Hello?" the voice repeated. "Who is this?"

"This is Marjan, Talia's girlfriend. Who is *this*?" she asked.

There was a long pause and then the voice said, "This is Sunil. Talia's husband."

### ***Talia***

I know what you're thinking, but in my defense, it wasn't so much that I told them lies. Rather, that I told no whole truths. Is a half-truth the same as a lie?

Where are the stories about me, the ones that tell the whole truth? If I were the main character in an Alice Munro story, I would move to the country and live out my days in stoic, silent grief until I died alone. If instead I were the heroine of a Margaret Atwood story, I would wage war against my oppressors, eventually alienating myself from society and most likely dying alone. If I woke up tomorrow in a Hollywood movie, I would be sad and beautiful and get to fuck everybody, only to be murdered by one of my jilted lovers and left to die alone. If I woke

up in a Bollywood movie, I would sing a sad and beautiful song, get to fuck nobody, and then die by my own hand, nobly, dramatically, and (obviously) alone.

These were the words passed down to me by those older, wiser, whiter women who colonized the pages of the books we read in school. These were the stories I had seen reflected back at me on high-definition screens. Even when the language was different, the choices were the same. Silence, rage, violence, death. No happy endings for the deceitful, the lustful, the unfaithful ones among us. Where would be the justice in a joyful end for a character like me?

Think what you will, but just so you know, I was not the only one trading in half-truths. Sunil departed from the script we had agreed to follow years before I did. And if he could do it, if he could mold his body to fit more than one shape of love, why the hell couldn't I?

### *Silas*

Silas watched Talia's phone light up and vibrate, not for the first time that morning. It buzzed insistently against the bedside table where she had left it in her rush to get out the door. It was her apartment, her bed, her husband, but Silas had come to think of them as his own. She was never home anyway. She existed for Silas only as a shadow lurking at the edges of his happiness, a distant threat without form or feature. And when Sunil pressed a warm mouth to his, all soft need encased in hard lines and hard choices, it was easy to forget she existed at all.

Eventually, Sunil sat up, forcing Silas' head off his chest, and he picked up Talia's phone. Sunil stared at the screen, and when it vibrated again in his palm he put the phone to his ear.

"Hello?" he said. And then, "Hello? Who is this?" Silas watched Sunil's face in the mirrored wall of the closet doors. It had gone blank, only the occasional twitch of his jaw

betraying the collapse of the fragile world they had built. Silas sat motionless, uncertain of whether the moment called for compassion or privacy. In hesitating, he managed to offer neither.

Sunil said nothing to the woman coming apart on the other end of the line. Silas caught bits of what she was saying, enough of her strangled, panicked disbelief to understand who she was. When she abruptly hung up, Sunil put the phone down on the bed, and he and Silas both stared at it, slightly horrified, as if it were a dead rat on the tracks at Victoria Park Station.

*Maybe she'll leave him,* Silas thought.

“Maybe she knows,” he said. “Maybe she’s always known that you’re—”

“That I’m what?”

Silas wanted to hurl the phone off the balcony and the shadow of Talia, with her beauty and her secrets, along with it.

“—seeing someone else,” he said.

The contrast of their bodies side by side in the mirror was stark: Silas was a reed, wiry and thin, a shaggy-haired kid carved from a walnut tree; Sunil was a trophy, formed from molten honey, sculpted into the shape of a serious, broad-shouldered man.

“Go home, Silas,” Sunil said.

So, Silas got dressed and took the elevator from the 27th floor to the 22nd floor of the tower in Massey Square where they lived. He had met Sunil in that same elevator, the only one out of four that was usually working, two years ago. A friendly nod between two brown dudes became small talk, became a beer after work, become Call of Duty till 2am, then crashing on the couch, crashing in the bed, a hand on a thigh, a need, a comfort, a thing resembling love.

Or, at least it did to Silas.

At home, Silas ate a bowl of cereal on the couch and scrolled listlessly through Grindr, largely ignoring Cookie's whining and baleful stares. When the pug's circling and snuffling took on an air of desperation, Silas was finally persuaded to switch out flips-flops for socks and sneakers and load the dog into the back seat of his mom's old van. "Where should we go today, Cookie?" Silas asked, all false cheer, ignoring the chasm expanding in his chest, the growing certainty that this woman on the phone, with her questions and her breaking heart, had disrupted the unspoken order of things in some irrevocable way. Whatever he and Sunil had, whatever Talia had with the woman on the phone, whatever Sunil and Talia had together—all these things existed in a delicate balance. He knew with the heavy, wordless certainty of someone who has never been allowed to call desire by its name, that to end one was to end them all, like ridding a room of its shadows by tearing down its walls.

Talia was always gone, her days and her nights endlessly occupied, caught up in the glamour of her Toronto gallery and the chaos of a city that loomed far beyond the borders of the Square. Silas didn't know what Sunil and Talia's arrangement was, or if they had an arrangement at all. He never asked Sunil, "Are you cheating on your wife?" or "Are you gay?" or "Are we in love?" That wasn't the way they talked to each other. To ask those questions would have been pointless anyway. Silas already knew that what he called love, Sunil called a sickness.

What happens when the son of non-practicing Christians falls in love with the son of non-practicing Hindus? Nothing. Neither family can accept the possibility of love shaped like this; it is simply not what brown sons do. And they were, after all, sons first and men second. Sunil had reminded him of this on those few occasions when Silas had dared to suggest something beyond sex, a step outside the frame in which Sunil had them both locked.

“Let’s get out of this apartment. Let’s get food. Let’s go down to the Ravine, anything. Anything you want.”

Sunil had looked at Silas perplexed, as if he had suddenly slipped into a foreign language. “You know we can’t.” End of story. End of script. “I’m married, Silas. What if someone saw us? What would my parents say? What would *your* parents say? You really want to fuck up both of our families for... this?” *What is this*, Silas could have screamed, but he was easily silenced by stubble against his neck, by the pull of hands that pinned him to the floor, the wall, the bed. By a body that drew pleasure from him like water from a well.

Sometimes Silas drove to the Bluffs, or down to the Beaches, but today he took Cookie to Birkdale Ravine. His phone buzzed in his pocket and he pulled it out to read the message from a recent Grindr match. *Sorry lol not trekkin to Scarberia for brown dick*. Silas barked a laugh. What else was there to do? He walked. When he knelt on the wet ground to give Cookie a belly rub, she mashed her wrinkled nose and frantic tongue into the side of his face. Here, at least, was a language he knew how to speak, a kind of love he could understand.

They came to an open space with a few stone benches and a small grove of cherry trees lining the path to the houses beyond. These were young trees, planted only recently in a neat row. They stood in sharp, artificial contrast to the oldness and the wildness of the tangled woods that sheltered the ravine and its trails. The pale blossoms were sparse and sickly looking, forced to bloom in a place they didn’t belong. Somewhere in the city whose skyline Silas could see from Sunil’s balcony, its silver towers rising from the lake like so many jagged teeth grinning at the sky, people were losing their goddamn minds for these trees. Silas begrudged them this pleasure, this fever they could embrace, while out here in the wilderness, they burned in silence; never fully flowers, never fully ash.

Silas let the dog piss on the cherry trees and messaged his match back. *I'll come to you then. Meet in High Park?*

### ***Talia***

So you see, I'm not the only villain in this story. Oh yes, I knew about Sunil and Silas. Had known about it since it began. What was it—two years ago now? But I couldn't bring myself to confront him about it, about his "friend" from the 22nd floor. Was there somehow less room for me in his heart because someone else lived there now too? I don't know because I never asked my husband about his heart and he never asked me about mine and that's how we built a marriage in the precariously safe space of things left unknown. Or, in my case, known but unspoken.

The gallery was already open when I arrived and Ada, our intern, was sitting at the front desk, her phone in one hand, a steaming mug in the other. "Hey, Talia," Ada said, looking up with a smile. "I just made a pot of coffee. Do you want me to bring you a cup?"

"Hey, good morning," I replied. "Coffee would be great, thanks." Then, tentatively, "Any calls for me this morning? I left my phone at home."

Ada shook her head. "Just Dana and Franz checking in."

Dana and Franz, Gallery 88's longtime owners, were at a yoga retreat in Nepal, but they'd be back in time for the new show's opening. It was a bit gimmicky to do a show of cherry blossoms in Toronto in May (we all admitted that), but it would get us some buzz in the media and get the right people in the door. I didn't particularly like the massive canvases, thick with layers of garish oil colours and gleaming with gold leaf, but I knew Franz was right—they would sell. I sat at my desk and turned my computer on.



Sunil wasn't on social media at all and I had a Facebook account I barely used. Marjan, on the other hand, posted everything the moment it happened. I was all over her Instagram, our curated cuteness a magnet for likes. How long would it take for Sunil to pick up my phone, curious about who might be texting me all morning? It was all there if he went looking: pictures, texts, emails, my whole relationship with Marjan contained in the confines of a hand-held screen. Then he would know what there was to know, and I couldn't say for sure if the knowing would be a terror or a relief.

Would they talk? I tried to imagine what Marjan and Sunil might say to each other. I tried to imagine a story, where after their confusion and anger and hurt had been given space to take full shape and breathe there might still be room left inside them both for me. People do it—open their relationships and negotiate rules and write themselves into polyamorous fairy tales where even the villains get to live happily ever after. Other people. Not brown people. Not people like us. Not that I hadn't imagined the conversation before—the one I might have with Marjan, with Sunil, with Silas. And the one all four of us might have together. There was no version of that conversation that didn't end in disaster, in utter collapse. Not the way I knew how to write it anyway. Maybe one of them knew better.

“Coffee,” Ada said, knocking on my office door.

“Thanks,” I replied, taking the cup from her.

“Hey, can I ask you something? You and your husband live out in Scarborough, right?”

“Not quite, but close, yeah. Why?”

Ada shrugged. “I dunno, I'm thinking of moving. I'm bored of seeing the same people all the time, you know? Just going to the same places every night. I need, like, a change of scenery or something.”

I sipped my coffee and nodded. I sometimes forgot how insular student life could be, how it could reduce your whole life to a 3-block radius. “Well, it’s a big city.”

“I just want to be inspired,” she said with an earnestness yet unmarked by the city’s claws. Her face brightened. “Maybe I’ll move to the Junction.”

Everyone thinks proximity to High Park will change their lives, that everything will suddenly be cherry blossoms and coffee tables carved from reclaimed driftwood, but it is a manufactured magic and nothing is ever that easy. “I’ll ask my friend Marjan if she has any leads on places,” I said. “She lives in the neighbourhood.”

I never told Marjan because she so loves being my guide, the one to tell me all her city’s secrets, but I actually lived here, in the Junction, when Sunil and I first met. It wasn’t as cool then as it is now. At the time, ten years ago, the neighbourhood was unremarkable—just far enough away from Parkdale (then nicknamed “Crackdale”) to escape its ramshackle shadow, but not quite close enough to nearby Swansea to absorb its respectability. The rent on my basement bachelor on Roncesvalles was \$650 a month and my job at the gallery down the street, my first job out of school, just allowed me to pay it and eat. And that was enough. I wasn’t looking for love, but when love wandered into Gallery 88 with the swagger of a Bollywood hero and the biceps to match, I couldn’t help myself. I swooned.

High Park is our place—Marjan’s and mine. It’s where we met, where she first sat next to me and sketched me like an Anime character posed demurely between the trees; where I first started improvising new lines when the old script no longer sufficed for us. But before Marjan came along, it was Sunil’s and my place too. It’s where he proposed. What happens when the daughter of non-practicing Muslims falls in love with the son of non-practicing Hindus? Nothing. In fact, both families are delighted. We represented opposite ends of an old country, old

words and old wars, coming together on a blank page to say something new. That's how Toronto seemed to us then; a blank slate on which to write our story, fertile ground to plant fresh seeds and watch them grow. The move to Massey Square was supposed to be temporary, but it seemed that while I had been scattering my seeds in the city, planning for a fruitful future ahead, Sunil had slowly been taking root.

When Ada left, I stared at my screen, waiting for a message, a sign, a pounding on the gallery door. I looked at the small suitcase in the corner of my office, always packed and ready, in case of disaster. In case of collapse. In case of today. I wanted to say, *I'm sorry, I'm making this up as I go*. But I wasn't sorry. That shouldn't surprise you. We villains rarely are. We have fought so hard, we daughters and sons of brown parents, to be on the page at all. I am afraid that to ask for more is to ask for too much. I am afraid that not to ask is to close the book entirely. Betrayal, for me, was always a necessary cost. But today, listening to the man I love hum in the shower, getting ready to share our bed with someone else, while looking at pictures of the woman I love, laughing, trusting, sure of the shape of things in a way I am not, I felt the frame around us start to splinter. In the space of that break, the space of a split-second decision that I could never take back, I left my phone, open and vibrating, on the bedside table for Sunil to find. It would be easier if I didn't love them both. It would be easier if I didn't have to choose between them. *Silence, rage, violence, death*. It would be easier if there were more choices on the page.

I opened my email and started to type. My message began, *You don't know each other. Or maybe you do. How this story ends now is up to you.*

***Sunil***

Sunil sat on a bench in High Park, a phone in each pocket. The sun was starting to go down. The cherry blossoms were in full bloom. A boy who looked like a boy he knew appeared beyond the trees, walking along the duck pond's edge. A woman's shadow fell across his folded hands. A woman who was not his wife. A woman who loved his wife. He looked up at her and histories wrapped in questions and hurt threatened to spill out onto the grass between them, but he could not speak. His tongue felt riddled with splinters, his heart necessarily numb. The boy was leaving. The woman was waiting. Sunil stood up and it felt like rising from the rubble of a world collapsed and blooming all at once.

"Let's go," he said.

### ***Talia***

The sunset over Roncevalles had streaked the sky pink and the gallery was flooded with the day's last stubborn light, hitting the cherry blossoms mounted on the walls. They threatened to spill from their frames, the branches painted in bold strokes, snaking out sideways and skyward. Anything to escape the box in which they had been trapped. Sakuras are usually depicted in pastel shades, pretty and gentle, there to briefly please and then gone. But not these. These blossoms were magenta and fuchsia, coral and tangerine, oversized and angry against iris blue and midnight black skies, flecked with gold, shimmering and alive.

I lay down on the gallery floor. Outside, the sun went down and the city went dark, while I lay unmoving among sakuras in shadow, rejecting the colours chosen for me, the script, the frame, the story, the end. *Come for me*, I willed my loves. *Fight for me, fight over me, find space for me, and for each other*. Something burned inside me, rebellious and unremorseful. *I don't want to die alone in this grove of painted trees*. Something contagious. *Find me*, I whispered into

the air, into imagined ears and the fragrant, neon night. *Find me and together we'll write something new.*