

The Bone Game

MADELINE SONIK

TANUSHRI GIVES BIRTH TO A DAUGHTER, even though she should have given birth to a son. She obeyed her late mother's instructions and ate red, salty meat each day of her pregnancy, even though she hated the sinewy texture of animal flesh, even though the thought of any creature being killed for its carcass brought despair to her heart; but her mother wrote with such authority from her deathbed: "You must eat the meat as raw as you possibly can, remove any bones and place them in a cloth sack, then tie the sack and tuck it under the foot of your bed." It had worked for Tanushri's sisters as well as for all her aunts, but this time, obviously, it had failed.

When Tanushri's husband, Anil, arrived at the hospital, she had almost recovered from her tears, but when he expressed his grave disappointment, both in their child and in their marriage, her sobbing began again. Not only had Tanushri failed to bear a son, but since their wedding twelve months before, he pointed out, she had totally let her appearance go. She had become fat. Her face puffy, her eyes shrivelled and red from all the tears she'd shed.

"Would it hurt," Anil asked, "to comb your hair, to put on a bit of lipstick, to make yourself look presentable for your husband?"

Privately Anil laments the fact he selected a bride solely on the strength of photographs his father had assembled. He values beauty greatly in women and Tanushri was, by far, the loveliest flower in the bouquet. But the flower went to seed and there was nothing other than beauty she possessed. She is not an educated woman and cannot speak intelligently about current events or literature. When he attempts to discuss his problems, Tanushri makes the most naive remarks, demonstrating constantly her ignorance of worldly matters and her childish views on human nature. She spends her time pining for her family and grieving for her dead mother, and seems incapable of adjusting to North American life. She cannot keep house, nor can she grocery shop alone, and she sets fire to virtually every meal she cooks.

When Tanushri arrives home with the fretful baby, Anil's sorrows only multiply. The child, whom Tanushri calls Tejas, is singularly without charm. Anil has never seen an infant like it. Most babies have some beguiling quality or other—some inherent appeal that nature furnishes as fortification against parental

unkindness and neglect—but this child possesses none. It does not have the wide innocent eyes of an infant, its cheeks are not chubby and round, its nose is not a tiny jewel, and its lips are nothing like a rosebud. In fact, its features are startlingly sharp like a hawk's. But this alone is not to blame for the child's appearance—it is also the set of her eyes, the slant of her jaw, the distance between her nose and lip—all of these things conspire in bringing about an appearance that is more than simply unattractive. This baby, which Anil has fathered and which Tanushri has borne, is decidedly mean looking, and it pains Anil's heart to gaze at her, yet it fills him with guilt when he looks away.

"What kind of father am I?" he sobs, after drinking a glass of sweet grape wine. "What kind of husband?" he torments himself, falling further into wretchedness. It is as if his shame and misery are flames, and the wine the only substance that might quench them. So he sits in his small study and drinks and weeps, compulsively recounting his misfortunes and obsessively berating himself.

Anil's dejection spills beyond his study—out into the kitchen, where he finds Tanushri and beats her for his woes. At first, it is nothing more than a series of shoves—but rapidly it becomes a smack, then a punch, then a kick—for which, afterwards, he feels even more desolate and embarrassed. But it is only when Anil breaks Tanushri's nose and the copious blood makes it necessary for her to be admitted to hospital that Anil realizes his personal disgrace can no longer remain private. The police arrest him and lock him in a small concrete cell. Never has he been so ashamed and remorseful. He is forced to call his father, who calls a lawyer. Within three hours, bail is set and paid and he is free to go, but the event lingers.

"These things happen, Ani," his father consoles. "You're still newly married. A marriage is like a shoe. It gives lots of blisters at first but in time becomes wearable. And your wife ..." his father continues, "she's a traditional woman and knows how a good wife behaves. She'll say nothing and you'll be able to put all of this behind you."

But as good a traditional woman as Tanushri may be, and as ashamed as she is in having to relate even the most banal events of her personal life to a stranger, she is so deprived of warmth and so starved for the feminine voices of mother, aunts and sisters that she is completely engulfed by the compassionate words of the hospital counsellor, who encourages her only to return home long enough to collect her and Tejas' belongings and leave.

Tanushri's nostrils are packed with cotton and her nose is the size of a

turnip. Her head throbs and she finds it difficult to think. If she could think, all that would be humming in her head would be the static line of a dead heart—like the one she saw on a hospital monitor when she was admitted to Emergency. She cannot consider what she is doing. She allows the hospital counsellor to take Tejas, and a policewoman escorts her home.

“I need to speak to my wife alone,” Anil demands, but the policewoman will not allow it.

“Tanushri,” he shouts from across the room. “We need to work our differences out together . . . not with an outsider interfering. Please,” he begs, his voice cracking like the hard shell of a nut.

What Tanushri is doing is disgraceful; it will lead to her censure. Her husband and his family will disown her, but she cannot stop herself. In her discom-bobulated state, every woman’s utterance evokes the authority of her mother, and the policewoman is telling her to ignore Anil, to pack her things, to move quickly, so she does not succumb to his words.

She throws her daughter’s diapers, clothes and toys into a large green garbage bag, then begins to collect her own possessions. For the first time since Tejas’ birth, she recalls the meat bones that still reside beneath the bed, and embarrassed for her forgetfulness as well as for her failure to bear a son, she tosses them quickly in among her belongings, promising herself to discard them as soon as possible.

The shelter she is taken to is a large, grey, characterless building with an elaborate security system that renders it as intimidating as a penitentiary. Tanushri cannot see inside. Bright sunlight ricochets off its windows. They are all made of mirrored, bulletproof glass, and later she discovers they are sealed shut and rigged with an alarm that will produce a deafening screech if tampered with. Outside, under the awnings, two hidden cameras track passing movements. There is an armed security guard at the door and another in a booth full of screens who monitors every area of the building.

There are electronic doors that slide open and shut. From the inside, Tanushri can see everything that is happening in the street. She can see a man reading a newspaper as he waits for the lights to change, and a woman in a tight skirt and high-heeled shoes tottering out into the traffic, trying to hail a cab. The man unselfconsciously scratches his bottom. The woman keeps patting her windswept hair. This must be what it’s like to be invisible, Tanushri thinks—to observe others without being observed—and she wonders if her mother might be watching her from some ethereal vantage, and if so, what she must be thinking.

Tanushri already regrets coming here. It is like the severing of a limb. It can never be undone. There will always be a hideous scar, a defect. Tanushri puts Tejas down. The baby toddles to the doors and hits them with her tiny fists. The floor is polished tile and Tejas is wearing her first pair of walking shoes. Everywhere she goes the heels of her shoes leave thin black streaks. Tanushri apologizes to the security guard. She apologizes to the no-nonsense woman who arrives to be her guide. "I will clean the floor," Tanushri offers, tears brimming.

The woman tells her not to worry and takes her to her room. It is small, carpeted, and cozy. There's a flowered bedspread on the bed and at the window, ruffled curtains. There's a dresser, a desk, a crib and a changing table. Beside the bed are a nightstand and a lamp. Although her guide calls it "basic," Tanushri thinks it's very nice.

"Everyone cooks together," the woman explains, taking her along to the communal kitchen, "but you'll find out more about that tonight," she adds. Tanushri can barely suppress her sudden joy—women preparing meals together—just like in her childhood home, with her aunts and mother and grandmother all talking together, and she and her sisters, each assigned a task, taking the world in through their words, but of course, this is not the situation at all. It is all very shameful and different now, she reminds herself, and the joy evaporates.

There is a common room in the shelter where the women and their children converge in the evenings to watch TV, listen to music, and play cards. On the floor above, there are rooms where workshops on self-esteem, assertiveness, legal issues, and parenting, are conducted. "There are also lots of fun activities," the woman tells her, "like jewellery making and Latin dancing. Last week there was a fashion show—'dressing on a shoestring.' It's too bad you missed it."

Tejas struggles from her mother's arms and runs to a room she has spotted full of toys and children. It's a daycare and the woman tells Tanushri if she attends a workshop or needs to go out for an appointment at any time, she can leave Tejas there for free. Tanushri has never left Tejas with anyone but the hospital counsellor, and doesn't know how she will cope with such freedom. She feels again a sudden rush of joy, as if her life were beginning, as if the prospects of a future were spilling out before her, like a litter of stars or the colourful toys that attract Tejas, but she quells the feeling, for she knows in fact there is no light and colour. There is only darkness. Her life is ending.

She has made a choice with irrevocable consequences, and destroyed herself as certainly as if she had plunged a dagger into her heart.

Back in her room, she tries to absorb the full impact of her actions, but she is uncertain what the full impact will be. Thoughts burst into her mind like bubbles on a pot of soup. Even if Anil would take her back, could she ever overcome her shame? She begins to disperse the contents of her garbage bag, putting underwear in the dresser, hanging a blouse in the closet. She gives Tejas her favourite toy, a stuffed monkey, gnawed almost unrecognizable, but Tejas abandons it in favour of the sack of bones, which she finds on her mother's bed.

A tall lean woman, dressed in a tank top and cotton turquoise skirt, appears at the door. Her name is Melanie and she has a room across the corridor. "I see you have the same designer luggage I have," she says lightly, pointing at the garbage bag.

There is such humiliation in what has happened—so much disgrace. Laughter cannot possibly be appropriate here, Tanushri thinks, and now, to make matters worse, Tejas has dragged the sack of bones under the desk, opened it, and dispersed the contents on the floor. Drool is dripping from her chin, pooling like syrup on the carpet as she gnaws on one of them.

"Is that your ex?" Melanie asks, regarding the bones.

Tanushri doesn't like this woman who invades her solitude and makes light of her misery. She is lacking proper reserve and it's as if she's mocking her.

"Give me that bone!" Tanushri demands, and Tejas howls as Tanushri wrestles it free.

"Your baby looks forceful," Melanie offers. "Is it a boy or girl?"

"Girl," she murmurs. Even still, Tanushri feels degradation in announcing the gender of her child.

This is not the only time Melanie has been in this shelter. Her partner cracked three of her ribs, fractured her pelvis and broke her wrist the first time, but she went back. Six months later, she was in the shelter again—this time, with a punctured lung and a knife wound in her chest.

Tanushri, embarrassed by this intimate and unsolicited confession, doesn't know what to say.

"I was looking at my body from the ceiling," Melanie tells her, "seeing the blood, watching the doctors work on it, knowing I had to crawl back in there somehow, even though it hurt so much."

There are things that ought not to be spoken, things that one bears in

isolation and anonymity, Tanushri thinks, collecting the bones strewn across the floor. She is relieved Melanie has finished her story—relieved her own story hasn't come bubbling out. The bones are like heavy blocks in her hands and she wants to be rid of them, but the presence of this shocking woman prevents their immediate disposal.

The bones are so white and clean; they fit so neatly into the cloth sack Tanushri made that it's not surprising Melanie assumes it's a game. That evening when Tanushri sits at the large dining table, self-conscious and remote, sharing only the rice and vegetables the women have prepared, Melanie describes Tanushri's game and suggests she might teach them all to play. She does it as a kindness, to help bring Tanushri out of herself, to offer her a way into this community of women, but the kindness is not appreciated. Heat rises in Tanushri's cheeks. She knows she can never tell these women the truth of it, and so she lies: "It was my mother's game. I never learned to play it, myself."

A quiet voice at the end of the table emerges, and dumbfounds Tanushri. "I know the game. It's called the bone game. I can teach it." The woman who has spoken is Janet. She has a reputation for being both aloof and mysterious, a woman who does not often speak. Her room is a place of refuge for things of the natural world: the branch of a yew tree, the pelt of a fox, stones and shells and seeds. Above her bed hangs a shield she's made from a disk of redwood, an eagle's claw, and an owl's feather. She also wears an owl feather around her neck.

Melanie is the first to express enthusiasm at the prospects of learning a new game.

"Is it anything like Mahjong?" a woman inquires.

"Can you play it for money?" another asks.

Soon every woman at the table is talking about the game, while Tanushri just wants to shrink away.

"We've played bingo and bridge and gin rummy," Melanie says, "but The Bone Game!" It's as if she's speaking directly to Tanushri, although she is addressing the entire table.

They ask her to deliver the bones, and Tanushri isn't strong enough to refuse. She feels there's nothing else she can do. If only she'd left them under the bed or disposed of them earlier. If only she'd known beforehand that her mother's instructions wouldn't work. She lifts Tejas from her highchair and takes her to their room. Perhaps if she tells the women the bones are gone—that she's misplaced them. Perhaps they'll just forget. But before she has a

chance to formulate a speech, Melanie is at her door, and Tejas has extricated the sack of bones from a drawer. “That kid of yours is brilliant,” Melanie says.

The dishes have been cleared and washed, and the bones are set out on the dining room table for Janet to inspect. Her eyes are like light pools as they scan the bones. Tanushri holds her breath, wondering if Janet will announce her fraudulence—if she’ll say, “these are just ordinary meat bones.” But Janet begins to speak to the bones, then carefully divides the collection, putting the four small bones in one group and the eleven long bones in another. She removes a marking pen from her pocket and draws a circle around the circumference of two of the smaller bones.

“The one with the markings are the female bones and the ones without are the male bones,” she explains.

Tanushri wants to stop her. To tell the gathering that Janet’s lying. To explain. But she doesn’t really want to explain—she can’t explain, and so she stands mutely by as Janet proceeds.

The women line two rows of chairs facing each other, and divide into teams, as Janet directs. Each team picks a leader, and each leader is given a pair of bones, which they will hide in their hands and pass to other players. “The object of the game,” Janet explains, “is to intuit where the female bones are hidden.”

“A guessing game?” one of the women asks.

“No. More than that,” Janet says.

Tanushri is appalled by Janet’s barefaced lies, affronted by the smoothness and inventiveness of her deceptions. It is as if the blood in Tanushri’s veins is becoming hot, as if the pressure of holding her tongue, of not telling the truth, is causing a bodily fever. Tejas squirms in her arms, as if she too feels the uncomfortable heat and no longer can bear the proximity of her mother.

“Intuiting and guessing are not the same things,” Janet tells the women, “but you’ll see as we play.”

A few of the women nod their heads, as if they find some kind of resonance in Janet’s words, but Tanushri’s head remains sullenly fixed. If only she could release her own tongue’s trigger.

“There is something about the power of the voice, as well,” Janet says, startling Tanushri, whose soundless voice is impaling her throat. “You need to sing in this game. A good song can help your team win.”

The women want to know what kind of a song to sing, and Janet says that they ought to try an assortment—that they’ll know when they’ve found the right one.

“That sounds like what my mother used to say about finding the right man!” a woman shouts.

“How about “Row, row, row your boat?” another offers.

“How about “Find, find, find the bone?” Melanie says.

A few women on Melanie’s team begin to sing, and others scramble to the chairs and join them as the bones are passed. Tejas sways back and forth to the rhythm, free from her mother’s arms. The other team quickly arranges itself and starts to sing “The foot bone’s connected to the leg bone ...”

Incoherent words explode from Tanushri’s mouth, crackings and hissings, but no one can hear them above the din of women’s voices that grow louder under the inharmonious current of songs. Tanushri turns to Janet who is caught in the spirit of the music, her feet stamping the rhythm—the owl feather, around her neck, ensnared by her voice, flaps as if it would fly off. Tanushri reaches for Tejas, who is dancing in rapturous abandon, but who slips from her hands as if they had no substance at all. And then it is as if Tanushri is surveying the room from a great a distance, as if she has lost her body completely to the incessant pulse below, but can see with a piercing clarity everything that has ever evaded her.

Her life spreads out before her, disjointed, fractured, and in need of repair, but she sees how this might be done now. Her life with Anil seems to have existed a hundred years ago and, like the bones her mother insisted she collect, only as a means to this end—an ending, like all endings, that is fixed in the silent contracts of one’s smaller life, and can never truly be anticipated.

It is her mother, speaking through Janet, who brings her back to her body: she is telling her to find the female bones. And as clearly as she sees her mother, sisters, aunts and daughter extending before and beyond her into the future, she sees the hands that hold the female bones and shamelessly begins to laugh. Her laughter rises like owls’ wings and the voices of women, beyond the secure confines of the shelter, and out into the bright star-filled night.