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The Wait of Ashes

ASHES SOUND EFFERVESCENT WHEN HITTING THE WATER.

I am on the opposite side of the bridge. Each family lines up neat, single file. The line stretches all the way back across the promenade into the gurdwara. The families in the back are as small as a stamp. Everyone holds their sack so casually. Fists balled around the handles, like groceries.

I marvel at the efficiency: a ring of orange and white chrysanthemums drops into the river, palms press together, "Waheguru," invert the bag, shake the bag, "Waheguru," leave. The next family repeats. I don't know what I am expecting to see when they empty the bags. Some outline of the beloved? A quick flash of their stature? It looks no different than the dirt and dust emptied from a vacuum. Each family member is stoic. No fingers rub their eyes. No wails. After seeing this process ten times, I remind myself those ashes were once people. They are people. I look closely and see shards and fragments floating with the ashes. The pieces of bone tinkle together like wind chimes.

It is 2013, and I am on a vacation with my parents and eldest brother. We are in Kiratpur, some ninety kilometres north of the capital Chandigarh, in Punjab, India. We are not only trying to reconnect with our roots, but also with each other. The river below me is where the ashes of my middle brother, Sap, rest.

In Sikh faith, birth and death are closely related. The Sutlej River below is where my mother released her son's ashes twenty-two years ago. The body is only the shell and the person's soul is their real essence. Cremation allows for all Sikhs' souls to be together again, as one.

There is a brief pause. I shuffle along the bridge and look down at the turbid channel of water lazily pushing forward. It is early afternoon. The air is thick with smog. The sun is the colour of embers. I take a handkerchief and wipe it across my head. The cotton is peppered with black grit. My mother is on the bridge with me. I look out on the horizon. "Where did you do it?" I ask. In my periphery I see her exhale and adjust her shawl over her head. She points ahead, about a city block away to an area on the right bank of the river. It is completely unkept. Overrun with twisting weeds and waist-high grass.

We head down to the river shore, passing families along the way. The grass is stiff and stubborn. I slip off my backpack to use as a bulldozer to push the grass down. I stomp at the base of the plants and drag my foot over it to create a carpet of vegetation for my mother to follow. *Of course, it had to be here*, I think. My mother could never wait in line so stoically like the conveyor belt behind us—waheguru, dump, waheguru, leave. She is far too private with her pain.

I search behind us for my father and brother. My dad is examining the gurdwara's architecture. My brother, iPhone steady in his hand, records each family shaking their sacks into the water. He is mesmerized.

At the riverbank rest two concrete slabs. The slabs are a head taller than my six-foot frame. Between them is an opening no wider than a doorway. "I stood here," says my mother. She rubs her hands together, as if trying to clean them. She does this when she is unsure of what to say or do. She stands in the exact same location as she did in 1992. "The sun was so strong that day. My bones were even hot." Her lip quivers. "I was so thirsty." She turns her face away from me. "I didn't deserve to drink. It took me four hours." She kneels. I kneel with her. "I couldn't let him go." She peers into the water, searching. I know she wishes it was her in the river rather than Sap. "I still can't let him go."

I think about endings often. I owe this to my brother Sap. In the summer of 1991, I am six years old. The age our most formative memories are made. And then we spend the next few decades reliving them.

Sap walks through the side door of our childhood home and hands me an Orange Crush Slurpee. He tears open a package of Spearmint Trident and pops a piece in his mouth. He places a VHS cassette on the kitchen island and tells me to set up for movie time. I catch a

glimpse of the title before the brain freeze kicks in—*Transformers: The Movie.* At fifteen, Sap already has the hulking shoulders of a man. A handsome face topped with a halo of tight curly hair. Yet, it is his gentleness that makes people lose their breath. Always kind. Polite. Affectionate. Present when spending time with anyone. A deep love for action figures, comics, cartoons. Everyone adores him, especially me.

My parents immigrated to Canada from India in 1974. They settled into their new life in Cranbrook, British Columbia. A small mill and mining town of about 18000 people in the southeast of the province. Known for hiking and lakes in the summer and skiing in the winter, but not for its diversity.

Growing up in Cranbrook, I became shapeshifter. I may have been made of skin and bone, but I never felt at home in my body. I passed through realms, transforming myself for the right situation. My parents altered how they would raise me and my brothers. They deviated from their Sikh faith and allowed us to get haircuts. To shave. Eat meat and other Western foods. My mother even demanded my father, who once wore a turban and beard, to slash it all away. To this day, my father's only remnant of his orthodox Sikh appearance is a moustache, something that all the white fathers in the neighbourhood sported. Upon returning home from work and errands, my parents would immediately don kurta pajamas and salwar suit. More than meets the eye.

Perhaps that is why I gravitated towards cartoons and movies about outsiders. Pet store turtles mutated by ooze and trained in the martial arts by their master, a bipedal rat. A sensitive synthetic man with scissor hands. Subspecies humans born with superhuman abilities. However, I related most to the Transformers, sentient robots from another planet crash landing on earth, adopting this strange new world as their home, synthesizing their vehicle form in the make of ubiquitous automobiles in order to stay hidden in plain sight, mirrored my family's experience.

I wait for Sap on the blanket fort in the living room. To my right is a bag of Old Dutch BBQ chips and a plate loaded with Ritz crackers, pepperoni slices and marble cheese. Starter charcuterie. A mug of Coca-Cola fizzes in Sap's hand as he pushes the movie into the VCR. Before he hits play on the remote, he builds me a "Sap Stack." Cracker, meat, cheese, topped with a BBQ chip. I smile as he hands it to me. He knows how to make me happy.

I don't blink. The animation is smooth. The sharpness of colours. The voice acting. Everything is different than the Saturday morning cartoons. Different than any cartoon. Battles have stakes. Rather than blaster shots missing widely, the shots land directly. Striking evil Decepticons and the heroic Autobots. The characters fall and remain fallen. The shots are fatal. At first, I am surprised, but remind myself that these are side characters. Expendable.

Then it happens.

Optimus Prime, the mythic leader of the Autobots, the hero, dies.

"What do you mean he's dead?" I rise from the makeshift blanket fort and punch pause on the VCR. I stare at Sap for answers. My bequeathed Optimus Prime toy is clutched in my hand.

"That's what heroes do." He says this as if it's a maxim. He waves for me to sit back beside him before hitting play on the VCR's remote.

I believe I am too smart for these tricks. I snatch the remote from his hand and rewind the tape back before Optimus's death. I listen for any clue, a loophole, believing this is some cheap dramatic plot device. That Optimus will return.

Yet, there it is again.

"The injuries are fatal," reconfirms a medical Autobot about Optimus's state. I am in disbelief. Mad at my brother for showing me this film. *Heroes always live*, I think. But as Optimus's vital signs flatline again, his chest opens and he removes the Matrix of Leadership—an artifact of the Autobot religion that houses all deceased Autobots. Whoever holds it can communicate with the dead. The Matrix slips from Optimus's robotic fingertips to the next leader. His last words scramble out before his death, "Until all are one."

The movie ends with the Autobots (spoiler alert) defeating their enemies. Autobots and humans celebrate, chanting, "Until all are one," as the screen fades to black before the credits crawl. Later, in our bedroom, Sap from his bed mentions his surprise at my lack of excitement from the movie. I smile and tell him I liked it, but hide my uneasiness. Thoughts collide in my head as I stare at the ceiling through the darkness. *How can there be celebration when their leader died? Don't they care? How can this go on without Optimus Prime?* Sap snores beside me.

When school started in the fall, there was a change in Sap. He had met a new friend, Adam. Adam was known for defying authority and living life at his own speed. I found this hard to believe, as Adam looked like the quintessential blond boy protagonist found on any

sitcom—undercut, blue eyes, said please and thank you. He easily influenced Sap.

Sap's demeanour with my parents and oldest brother became dull. A listlessness that started when meeting Adam. Sap skipped school often. Teachers and principals would call home. My parents would become upset and try to understand him. They would divulge how worried they were about him. How upset they were. Sap would sit straight-faced, without breaking eye contact, only offering an occasional lackadaisical nod as if to say, "Are you done yet?"

Sap was too soft and too kind, which Adam abused. Initially it was harmless. Sap would buy Adam lunch. Soon the school cafeteria food was not enough. Adam would mention how his family barely had food in their fridge, galvanizing Sap to sneak into my mother's purse and retrieve more money for Adam. Eventually, Adam would cry about the price of his mother's medication and the inability to afford it. This escalated to Sap making deals with adults in pawn shop parking lots with our mother's gold and jewel-encrusted bangles. Treasures she planned to give her future daughters-in-law. Adam reaped the lion's share. Sap had a moment of clarity and knew our mother would notice the disappearance of further jewels, so he became more efficient and cut out the middle. Sap stole $1000 from my mother's purse and gave it to Adam. Never talking to Adam's mother or even asking for a receipt. When confronted by our mother, Sap would say sorry and, in a didactic tone, remind our mother about all the extras our family had. How fortunate we were. She kept Sap's stealing and the conversation from our father. Sap promised to never do it again. Even today, I still try to understand Sap's motives and lack of care. Was he discovering boundaries? Was it a pathological need to help? Could he not see how much pain and confusion he was causing the family?

When Sap was born, his eyes were closed. They remained closed for three days. I often wonder how this shaped him. This blindness. I wonder if he ever learned to see at all?

My eldest brother, Arb, was getting into trouble, too: pulling fire alarms at school and hiding lit cigarettes in school bathrooms. And then he was caught stealing cassette tapes from Zellers. My mother was exhausted from Sap and could not keep more secrets from our father. She consulted our father to talk to Arb about his behaviour.

This did not go well. My dad being kept in the dark about Arb's behaviour paired with his inherited authoritarian parenting style was a cocktail for disaster. He called us all into the living room as he spoke to Arb. He bellowed and threatened Arb with ominous statements, such as, "If you do this again, wait and see what will happen." Arb stood up from the couch, attempting to call our father's bluff. Something detonated in our father. He pushed Arb back into the couch, pointed a finger at him and yelled, "Do this again and I will chop your head off!" I remember looking out the window to see if the neighbours were exiting their houses, believing my father's booming voice roused them. No one heard anything. I made eye contact with Sap. His look drifted through me like smoke from a fire that I could not see. His face morphed from frightened to a relaxed clarity. Calm. Stern.

Sap left the next morning and never returned home.

My parents were distraught. They called his friends. No one had answers. One day my mom waited outside Sap's school and pleaded with friends for any information. One of Sap's friends approached my mom. "I am going to make sure you don't see him again." An eerie piece of foreshadowing. My mother was bewildered. Why would someone keep her from her son? Why would her son leave? She and my father had provided Sap with all he ever wanted. Sony Walkmans. Super Nintendo. McDonald's meals. Guess Jeans. Calvin Klein underwear. Starter jackets. But this was not enough.

At night, in our room, I would look at Sap's empty bed. I believed I would see him there in the morning. Yet, each morning the bed remained made. One night I unmade his bed. I folded the top of the blanket down and to the side. An attempt to make the bed more inviting might attract him. But I woke up to see the bed unchanged.

Days later, on an unseasonably warm and sunny November afternoon, just as my grade one class is about to begin our P.E. block, my teacher approaches me. She says a visitor is here for me. I am surprised. I think it is probably my mom dropping off a McDonald's Happy Meal. In the hall, I look towards the exit doors. Through the doors' window, I immediately recognize the broad shoulders of my hero. We speak outside.

"Your hair," I say. "I liked it better long." Sap had buzzed his tight, afro-esque curls. I reach out my hand. It feels rough, but it feels good to touch him again.

"It's that bad?" Sap asks. He takes a step back. He feels distant. Withholding. Conflicted. "I wanted a change."

I notice he has taken his ear piercings out as well. We carry on talking about how our mom and dad are. How Arb is doing. I don't know what else to say but okay.

"And you?" he asks.

"Are you coming home?" I stare at his feet.

A car horn blares.

Parked on the street in front of the school is a beat-up white Honda Civic hatchback. Adam is inside. Sap holds up one finger towards Adam.

"I don't have much time." He hugs me. Holds me. I can smell the sweat on his neck. My whole body feels warm in the cage of his arms. "I love you, Paul."

"I love you too," I say.

The car horn sounds again.

Sap releases me. He is not smiling. He looks frightened. "I will see you soon," he says.

I search for what to say. I have an unexplainable feeling, like something big is starting. I put on a smile. "I know."

Sap waves back to me from the car. I wave back. The vehicle drives away.

I return to school. My body aches. I feel hollow as I attempt to play freeze tag and soccer with my classmates. I already miss him.

When Sap was three years old, our cousins came to visit. All the kids played in the basement while upstairs the adults kept busy. My mom and aunt in the kitchen cooking. My father and uncle drinking. It was all as it should be. The phone rang and my mother answered—it was one of her friends checking to see where the kids were, specifically Sap. My mother laughed and said they were all downstairs playing. Her friend told her to go check. My mother did a head count and realized she was shy one. Shy a Sap. She noticed the basement door was open. She darted out to the streets and called for him. "Choo-Choo," Sap's nickname, "Choo-Choo, come back." She only saw streets and the neighbours' houses. She called the friend back. The local radio broadcasted a message about a little East Indian boy ready for pickup at the police station. My mother drove to the police station with her apron on, thinking of herself as a terrible mother.

"Ma'am, the new recruit is not going to make it," said the officer pointing at his desk, "he cannot stay awake for his shift." Sap was snuggled in a blanket, dreaming away on top of the desk.

For a short while after, whenever my mom was on walks with Sap, the sight of a police officer would cause Sap to run in the opposite direction and shout, in a playful way, "Come get me, policeman. Come get me."

Days go by and I don't hear anything about Sap. No one does. Then on November 12th, 1991, about a week since I saw Sap at school, I wake up to my parents crying. My mom off in the corner of the room unable to even look at me. Curled into a chair. Tears roar down her face. My father is beside her. He approaches me, eyes wet. I am surprised. I didn't know dads could cry. And then without even warning, he tells me, "Last night Choo-Choo was in a car accident." He inhales a big breath. Puts his hands on my shoulders. "He died." He tells me I don't need to go to school. I cannot comprehend what I hear. *I saw Sap last week. He said he would see me soon.*

I don't remember the walk to school that day. All I remember are the eyes of everyone staring at me as I walk down the halls to my classroom. It was as if I was a slimy green alien. In class a few friends look at me. Before I remove my jacket and backpack, I am bombarded with hugs. They all ask if I am okay. The hugs don't register. I cannot feel the tenderness. I nod and go sit at my desk. Notebook and pencil are out, I'm ready to learn for the day. I open the notebook and stare at my work from the last day, unable to understand how everyone knew about Sap's death when I found out only thirty minutes ago.

My brother died on a highway an hour north of Toronto, Ontario. The car they left Cranbrook in had stolen plates. Somewhere in Ontario the car broke down and Sap and Adam stole another vehicle. A police officer identified the stolen car and pursued. Adam became scared and buried the accelerator. He refused to pull over. After an hour of pursuit, a roadblock was positioned further down the highway. And without thinking, maybe due to fear, or possessed by the teen sense of invincibility, Adam did not lift his foot to the break. He drove straight through the roadblock. Sap died instantly.

Adam would later tell my mother what Sap said on the trip, "We need to turn around. This is a big mistake." Further begging, "Please, Adam." Even during the police pursuit, Sap asked him to stop, "Please, Adam, it's not worth it." I often wonder if, as the cop pursued the car, Sap thought to himself, like he did when he was three,"Come get me, policeman. Come get me."

Sap's funeral is standing room only. Bodies spill from the hall and out the front entrance. Punjabi prayers play on the speakers above

as I walk to the front pew. I am shocked at how many more Punjabis than white people are at the service. Mixed with Sap's friends are my aunts, uncles and cousins. The white and brown mirror one another in anguish. Some white youth and my cousins even hold one another. Suffer in tandem. Faces slathered with tears. It is bizarre being the majority demographic. My family in traditional dress, heads covered, nod in agreement to the voice from the sound system. In death we don't have to hide who we are anymore. As if mourning gave us a pass to be true to ourselves. I turn and look back at the congregation, the sadness of their faces, and I realize how incorrect I am. There is no minority or majority at funerals. Only pain.

It surprises me when my mother says we need to say hello to Sap. The air around the casket feels heavy, yet dull. As if it holds its own rule of physics. Its own atmosphere. My mother scoops me into her arms. I look down at my brother. He is dressed in a black suit and is wearing a turban. To be dressed in a well-tailored handsome suit but be lifeless is a strange sight. I think a dead body would look like one is asleep, but it doesn't. The body is too still. Too rigid. A mannequin. I can't understand how this is the result of a car accident. There is not a single scratch on his face. I look at my mother's face under her shawl. It is uncanny how alike they are. Looks that should live on forever—the arched thick eyebrows, the plump lips, the almond eyes, the smooth clear skin—features that will now only live with her.

I wait in her arms, unsure of what to do. My mother begins to walk away. *That's it*, I think. It feels odd and strange. My mother's love has always been tactile, rich with childlike affection. A hundred thousand touches. When she is a few feet from the coffin her body jerks and with me still in her arms, strides back. "I forgot his gum." She rummages in her purse and pulls out a pack of gum. Spearmint Trident. And with the nimbleness that only mothers possess, she takes her free hand and tears open the package, unwraps the gum, opens Sap's mouth, and places the gum inside his mouth. She slides the pack inside Sap's jacket breast pocket and buttons the jacket closed. As we sit in the pew, I realize how my mother wants her kids to be to be comfortable, even in death. Before we leave the funeral, my mother is handed what looks like a bakery box, something that should contain a dozen tarts instead of Sap's ashes.

After the funeral, we sold the house. It was far too painful for my mom to live in a home filled with the memories of Sap. Even though Sap's death floated in the air like a fog, we never discussed our feelings or the impact of his loss. It was as if our mouths and tongues could not bend to say his name. Too much anguish. Too much guilt.

We retreated from each other. There was no gurdwara in Cranbrook, so my mother folded the back bench of the Chevrolet Astro, the same van taken on many family road trips, and made an altar where she would go pray, alone. She asked the gurus where she missed the rift. How did it begin? How did he slip away so slowly? When not praying, she dove more into her custodian business. She worked endlessly to fill the hole left by Sap. She believed Sap left due to him not having enough, so to prevent us from leaving, she filled the hole by saying yes to anything we desired. My dad became more silent and drank more. I would be awakened by his late-night stumbles into our house. Often hearing him puke into the toilet. My oldest brother did not talk much, and to this day remains tight-lipped about the impact of Sap's death. Arb lashed out in different ways—quick to anger whenever not getting his way. He chose to finish high school in the next town over. He needed a fresh start. My parents switched me to a private school, believing it would prevent me from associating with the wrong crowd. I would tell no one at my new school about Sap's death. Our insularity became our armour. We couldn't lose anyone close again, if we didn't have anyone close to lose.

Sap's death was the fulcrum, the point on which everything hinged, the turning. I believe what we all felt and continue to feel is shame. Shame that it happened. Shame that we don't fully know Sap's motive. Shame that we as a family couldn't protect him. Another part of me believes it was all out of our hands. As I write this, uncertainties bloom about my brother. Questions about his truthfulness. Did Sap tell my mother lies about stealing the money? Was the money used to facilitate his and Adam's getaway? Did Sap shave his head and remove his ear piercings to conceal his appearance to counter the missing child reports? Of course, I will never know the answers.

After Kiratpur we go for a late lunch. While in the restaurant, the only mention of the day begins when my father asks if we want to order any alcohol with the meal. As a family we rarely drink around each other. I look at my dad blankly. Arb chimes in. "We just saw where Sap is buried. How is that a reason to celebrate?" That is all that is said about the day. Our mother places our orders for us as my dad sips a King Fisher beer.

On the car ride home, Arb and I sit on opposite sides on the back bench in the SUV. A seat between us. We stare out our windows at

the passing farmland. Our parents are up front, chatting away about the landscape. It almost feels like the road trips we went on as kids. I think about lost time together. Will we ever get it back? I tap Arb on the shoulder. "Do you think Mom and Dad would want to end up there?" I motion my head to behind us.

Arb inhales a big breath. "It's where their son is." He turns and looks back out the window.

That night, back at my parents' house in Ludihana, we don't talk much. We retreat to our separate areas. A big day of being around each other. A big day of emotions. I can hear the television on downstairs as my dad watches the news. My mom recites prayers in her room. My brother sends to my phone the recording of the families at Kiratpur. All those people saying goodbye to their loved ones. A feeling of peace washes over me. I take comfort with each burial. The dead never leave us. We are stuck carrying them around. All we can do is join them. Even though we don't connect like I hoped on the trip to India, we found each other again in our own way. I take comfort in knowing that in the end of our story, we will all be together.

After the fifth time viewing the recording, I start to fall asleep. My hand drifts to the nightstand and the phone glides off my fingertips.

Until all are one.