

Every night, under open sky, lions invaded their camps. Lions with an appetite for human flesh prowled around the Commiphora with snapping jaws and vicious claws. They snuck up on the sleeping men so fast—like *that!*—the jaws unhinged. Eaten to death. Crunchy bone and bloody tongue.

They called those lions *Ghost* and *Darkness*. Because the men did not believe they were animals. The lions were demons wearing fur. Ghost and Darkness could not be killed. The Englishmen tried with their rifles, but the demons always escaped. When a man was taken, ripped from his tent, dragged from the infirmary or a railway car, there was a debate: Who was the murderer? Ghost left tooth marks in the skull. Darkness ate the belly and left the head alone.

This was in Tsavo, one hundred miles upcountry. The name is infamous now.

My father arrived from Jamnagar in 1898. He was recruited by a firm promising a better life, and he was one of the “free” Indians, unrestricted by the government. Left to accept whatever deal he could find. He was an adventurer. He was truly desperate, okay? Not many of our Jain people were coming to Africa then. Mostly he worked with Punjabis, some Sikhs, many Muslims.

The men working the rail line were sick all the time: malaria, scurvy, jiggers hatching in their feet and hands. On any day, half the men were laid out flat. When the water is strained from mud, what can you do? It is a miracle anyone survived.

Maybe you have heard of one of the heroes of that time, Pir Baghali? This man ran so fast he could catch a peacock and was so pious and kind he could put a python to sleep. He spoke the language of animals, and his powers kept his people safe from the lions. They even said his kerai full of sand and cement floated a few inches above his head. When he died, they made a monument to him—now it is a mosque, I think—near Mackinnon Road, on the rail between Mombasa and Nairobi. The trains slow down and whistle when they pass.

Fear kept the men awake, but it also brought them together. On the dhows, the men had shared their nightmares—of crashing stars, drowning, giant jellyfish. Here, on the plains, in the *nyika*, they stayed awake and vigilant at night by telling stories, the stories of Shiva and Parvati and Ganesh. (After all, here they were, surrounded by elephants.) My father told of the Tirthankaras, who conquered the cycles of birth and death. Around their fear, they wound words like bandages.

Those who survived the night were so relieved in the morning that they broke into sudden, insane laughter. They joked about the lions choking on their turbans before finding a soft, juicy bite. And the killings were not all bad. Some were merciful. When the men taken were so weak they wouldn't have lasted two more days. What did the sahibs care about the workers? There were so many more to fill the place of the dead. Every week, more Indians arrived. The sahibs were always calling for more carpenters, more blacksmiths, more dirt diggers.

On the nights the lions took one or two or three of the men away forever, my father prayed so hard for sunrise. All the men prayed for hammers and nails and more workers to speed the pace of the rail. To be done and finally see the waters of Lake Victoria, where they could lay down their tools. The Hindus wished for arms stronger than Shiva's, our people wished for the patience and renunciation of Mahavira, and the Muslims prayed for who knows what from their prophet—their God is a vengeful one.

Is it a surprise, then, my father was so devout? So strict. You can't understand a war against nature until you have survived. Survived in order to be born into the next life, a better one, by meditating so deeply you are dry of all karma, and perhaps you can taste just a little bit a possible end to the eternal cycles.

The lions ate twenty-eight in all.

And yet, there is reason to be a little grateful to the lions.

Because of the killings, word of the men's courage spread back along the rails. Reached the ears of their cousin-brothers in Mombasa. Newspapers in London printed their misfortune. Members of Parliament read out gruesome accounts to the floor. Their story began to be told.

Because you know what these men did? They mutinied. Refused to work until the lions were slain. Refused to pound steel nails, shape tools, carry the earth, and even to fetch water. That is the way to get the bosses' attention!

These men never meant to stay in this country. *Who is remaining in this rotten desert-jungle?* they said. *Not me!* But first they owed their labor—there was always more steel to bind, another fishbolt to secure—and when that was done, they had no money to go home. The scouts, you see, had counted on their death. If you were “free” you were not protected, not guaranteed a return. Some five or six thousand Indians remained in this place of heat and rain and sweat, and here many of us live to this day.