

## Pradna Singit and the Massacre of the Innocents

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When W. Covington Yearling, III, “Covie” to his intimates, went out onto the country club veranda for a cigar, Pradna Singit was levitating over the seventeenth tee. Snow covered the golf course, and only a habitu  could imagine the fairway stretching out into the darkness beyond the clubhouse lights. Covie was a habitu ; his greatest triumphs were against newer members who did not yet know the course. In defeat he retreated to the back bar, where Harris Scintilton, his lawyer, and Horlach Spenser, his financial advisor, consoled him with visions of limitless extravagance when his grandfather’s bizarre trust finally vested in him. Early forties, impeccably dressed in Navy cashmere blazer and bright Christmas tie, he was the image of inherited respectability in respectability’s most sacred shrine. Tonight Covie needed the air and the cigar to clear his head after four cabernets at the Sunday night buffet celebrating the demise of the last obstacle between himself and the Yearling fortune.

Backlit by the moon, Singit floated like a dark shadow over the brilliant snow. How could he stand the cold clad only in a robe and sandals, Covie wondered. The scion of Yearling Enterprises walked across the veranda to the rail and lit his cigar.

“Rejoice, Mr. Yearling,” Pradna Singit called, raising a bare arm against the bright winter stars. “Many generations shall bear your name.”

The evening’s food and drink turned rancid in Yearling’s stomach. The last thing he wanted were many generations bearing his name.

“What the hell are you talking about?” he said.

The chimera floated over Covington’s head toward Singit’s room on the second floor of the clubhouse and did not speak again.

The night was suddenly very cold, and the cigar bitter. Covie threw it over the rail and went back into the clubhouse, where his wife was still gossiping with the other women in the dining room, and the men were wondering if they could risk another scotch before their wives caught on they were drunk. Harris Scintilton and Horlach Spenser were gone. He could not reassemble his wise men until the next day.

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Covington’s earliest memory was sitting beside his grandfather in that same dining room slurping a kiddie cocktail. While his parents watched with fixed smiles and baby brother Devon drooled happily in his mother’s arms, the old man guffawed at his namesake’s attempt to keep up with him glass for glass. Covie was happy to be the subject of attention instead of Devon, whose arrival had removed him from the center of the universe. The waitress had already stopped by to take their dinner order, but the founder of Yearling Enterprises sent her away for another bourbon for himself and 7 Up® with maraschino cherry juice for his grandson. Suddenly the three year old felt the sickly sweet mixture swell up inside him like an ocean tide, and vomited over the

tabletop. While his brother gurgled his admiration, his parents froze; disinheritance had never been closer.

“Almost enough to make me change my will,” the old man said, then burst out laughing. “Don’t worry, boy! Took me a while to learn to hold my liquor, too.”

His mother handed Devon to his father and hustled Covie off to the ladies’ room to clean him up. When they returned, the old man had reached that rare moment of tranquility that sometimes rewards the longtime alcoholic.

“Sit beside me, boy,” his grandfather said. “And I’ll tell your fortune.”

“Like the circus?” the little boy said, recalling his last adventure with his grandfather.

“Better than the circus. This is guaranteed to come true.”

In the days before unions and workers compensation, his grandfather had amassed a fortune by stealth, violence, and deceit. Now, like a volleyball player spiking the ball between two players, he revealed his plans for his fortune and his family.

“Ol’ gramps spent too much time at the plant,” he said, looking at Covington’s father. “I only have one son to show for all those years of marriage.”

Earlier that year, Covington’s grandmother had happily embraced a heart attack as the easiest exit from her tortured marriage. Her husband’s sexual depredations had reached her only by rumor. Sometimes, however, taking Christmas baskets to the poor, she saw his features on the faces of hungry children.

“I’m going to give each of you boys enough to screw yourselves silly,” he said. “But when it comes time to divide up my marbles, the one with the most kids wins. Who do you think that will be, Covington? You or your little brother Devon?”

Like all children who began life as a blessed only child, he knew the answer instinctively. He would win, because his brother would never have any children. Covington would never have to share.

“Me, Grandpa!” he cried.

The old man laughed. When Devon died of AIDS forty years later, Covington thought his wish had been granted, until he heard Pradna Singit’s prophecy.

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Unlike Covington Yearling, Pradna Singit had an uncertain provenance. His arrival in the city was difficult to place. Covie had heard him introduced at a dinner meeting of the National Conference for Community and Justice as a representative of “the Eastern religious community,” but which Eastern religion was not specified. He spoke very precisely with a lilting accent that could have been Indian, or Pakistani, or something else. To complete the aura of mystery, he wore a faded ocher robe off the shoulder, betraying tattoos that suggested a Mandelbrot set or an alternative sexuality, depending on the viewer’s orientation.

He found his first followers while teaching “free to members” yoga classes at a sports mall. Soon the class was filled to overflowing, and a more intimate space had to be found. Since so many of his devotees were members of the country club, someone suggested finding him a room on the second floor, where he would be more easily accessible. He was enormously attractive to the type of wealthy women who can only find themselves in the presence of the exotic, like the last Czarina’s ladies with Rasputin, or the childless spouse of W. Covington Yearling, III.

Early Monday afternoon, Pradna was describing Joyce Yearling's aura to her in vivid terms, as she lay naked beside him. She had long salon-tanned legs and beautifully layered blond hair that kept its bounce under pressure.

"I thought it was ocher," Joyce said languidly. "What does violet mean?"

"Violet means you will have a child."

She sat up so fast she nearly knocked her spiritual advisor out of his single bed.

"I won't have an abortion this time," she said. "I don't care what the damn trust says."

He soothed her by tapping gently on her meridian points. She shuddered when he reached her collarbone.

"Lie down," he said.

Pradna planned to pay off many old and dangerous debts with the Yearling Trust. When Joyce had brought the trust documents to him for a spiritual analysis, he had read them with an inmate's practiced eye for legal detail. To encourage procreation, Grandfather Yearling had provided that at the death of the first grandson, the trust would be divided into equal shares for the surviving grandson and for each of his two grandsons' children.

Until Pradna told her, Joyce did not know that the definition of "child" in the trust included the unborn children of Covie and Devon. If Joyce had a child, the child would receive half the Yearling fortune, disinheriting his father from half the trust. Ecstatic, she immediately stopped using the myriad contraceptives that Covie had forced upon her, and embraced every occasion for procreation. Pradna was equally ecstatic: as Joyce's spiritual advisor, he would counsel her through the inevitable divorce and investment

decisions, the first of which would be to establish the Singit Foundation for Spiritual Empowerment.

Joyce sat up again.

“My God,” she said. “Whose do you think it is?”

“His,” Singit said, assuming there was a fifty per cent chance he was right.

Joyce started to lie down, then climbed on top of him laughing triumphantly. The pregnancy that she had so long feared would fund her exit from a stifling, destructive marriage. If she had studied tattoos as much as Pradna claimed he had studied auras and chakras, she would have recognized the logo of the Aryan Nation on his chest. Her eyes, however, were closed, and she was thinking of other things.

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“No way many generations will bear your name, Covie,” Horlach Spenser said in the back bar of the country club, where he and Harris Scintilton were ruminating with their patron about his vision of Pradna. “Devon was gay, and you and Joyce haven’t started yet.”

Although he affected business casual, the financial planner had stopped wearing ties because he could no longer button his collars. His face wore the same expression of stupefied wonder as clients who had followed his investment advice.

“When the first grandson dies, the trust is divided and distributed equally to the surviving grandson and his children and to the deceased grandson’s children,” Covie said, turning to his lawyer for support.

“Per capita and not per stirpes,” Harris Scintilton said, envisioning enough fees to send his daughter to the finest Eastern universities and finance his wife’s incursions onto prestigious boards and stores.

“So it can’t be true,” Covie said. “It all belongs to me.”

“That’s the way it should work,” the lawyer said.

In his late fifties, Harris wore dark suits, trifocal glasses, and an occasional bow tie, giving him the appearance of a think tank guest on Fox News. Most estate planners lure prospects with whispered confidences about trusts and contingencies to manipulate their descendants for generations, a vision their clients would never see fulfilled. Harris Scintilton had acquired Covie by pointing out that if both he and Devon remained childless until Devon died, the entire trust would go to him.

His client relished the advice. Not only would he not have to share with his brother, he would not have to share with his own offspring.

Horlach waved to the waiter for another merlot. After nearly twenty-four hours of abstinence, the wine was beginning to taste good to Covie again, too.

“You’re not drinking, Harris,” he said to his lawyer, suddenly suspicious.

“I received an odd bill in Devon’s estate last week,” Harris said. “From the sperm bank at the university. I was going to disallow it.”

“A bill for what?” Covie asked.

“For taking a sperm sample from Devon and freezing it.”

“My God,” Covie exclaimed. “What did they do with it?”

“They sent it to the Varanasi Fertility Center in India.”

“Why?” Covie demanded. “I didn’t think the Indians had any problem producing children on their own.”

“At the Varanasi Fertility Center, they inject the sample into women who have volunteered to be surrogate mothers,” the lawyer said.

“I don’t believe it,” Horlach Spenser exclaimed, seeing his one hope to pay alimony and child support from two divorces evaporate.

“So tell the Indians the deal’s off,” Covie said to Harris. “Devon’s dead. You’re the executor.”

“He paid them,” Harris said. “The women are already pregnant.”

Behind the bar, the bartender was setting a quart of Makers Mark®, a bowl of ice, and several bottles of sparkling water on a silver tray.

“Is abortion legal in India?” Covie said.

“It wouldn’t matter, if you had the money,” Horlach replied.

Covie and Horlach looked at the lawyer.

“There’s over a million left in his estate,” Harris said.

“Who do we know who has contacts with the Indians?” Covie asked.

The bartender picked up the tray and started for the door.

“Where are taking that?” Harris called, suddenly inspired.

“To Mr. Singit,” he replied. “He’s having one of his séances tonight.”

“Let me take it for you,” the lawyer said. “I was just going up to see him.”

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Like many experienced travelers, Pradna Singit preferred to travel anonymously, changing his appearance at the border to blend with the desired demographic. So despite

Harris Scintilton's offer to make the arrangements for the trip, he insisted on booking everything himself as Harry Singit, the name on his passport. In a restroom at the New Delhi Airport, he changed into khakis and a sport shirt before boarding the flight to Varanasi. To present himself as the representative of a family that would be impoverished by Devon's extravagance, he kept his sandals. He had never been to India before.

The word that Devon had scattered his seed upon the Indian subcontinent struck Pradna with the same force as the lookout's report of a Coast Guard cutter bearing down on his boat so many years ago. Hope is as fragile as the human psyche, and post-traumatic stress disorder is not confined to military personnel. When Harris Scintilton offered him an all expenses paid trip to India plus a draft on the Bank of India for \$250,000 to rescind Devon's gift, he accepted immediately. The Ganges looks no wider than the Mississippi from forty thousand feet, and the task assigned more manageable than dealing with his Wednesday evening disciples. Pradna nee Harry Singit, however, did not know Varanasi.

He shared a cab from the airport to the Raj Ganges Hotel with an elderly American couple. It was the worst ride of his life. While the octogenarians chatted happily about bathing at the five sacred ghats or platforms on the Ganges to obtain union with the One, the driver raced among people, bicycles, cows, and cars, honking madly as he swung into the path of oncoming trucks to pass, banging the steering wheel and howling when thwarted. Sometimes hands beat on the windows, offering sugar water in bright bottles or finger-smudged statues of the gods.

A car ahead of them stopped suddenly, and an oblong object bounced off the roof, its wrapping caught in the luggage carrier. As it unrolled, an arm, a leg, then a whole body appeared. The elderly couple explained that it was considered so holy to be cremated on the Manikarnika Ghat that people brought bodies from all over India for the ultimate holiness experience.

When they finally arrived at the hotel, a line of bellmen was drawn up like sepoy awaiting the Viceroy. The negotiation should be easy, Pradna thought, if this was the way they treated Americans. Leaving his new friends at the registration desk, Pradna retreated to his room until it was bourbon time in the mahogany paneled bar. With the help of a fine Indian dinner accompanied by an appropriate claret, Singit was happily contemplating how to invest the money remaining after he accomplished his mission.

The next morning the concierge gave him directions to the Varanasi Fertility Center so easily that he suspected it was a common destination for guests. As the cab crawled through the choked morning traffic, Singit wondered if Devon Yearling had flown to Varanasi to choose the mothers himself and bathe at the five sacred ghats. Perhaps he, too, would take some time to explore the city, as soon as his mission was accomplished.

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“A case of buyers remorse, Mr. Singit?” Kaushal Patel, M.D. inquired. “We have never had a request to reverse the procedure.”

“The children would be a burden to the family,” Singit said, reverting to negotiating skills honed in a far more dangerous business. “The estate is much smaller than anyone anticipated.”

He paused for dramatic effect.

“Of course there would be adequate compensation.”

“Of course,” said the doctor. “But we do not perform abortions at our clinic.”

“There must be others that do,” the American said. “I would appreciate a referral.”

“The mothers,” Dr. Patel began.

“Of course they would be compensated, too.”

“There are seventy-nine of them, all nearly eight months pregnant. The fees have been paid. Everything is ready to send the babies to America as soon as they are born.”

Seventy-nine, enough to ruin everyone hungering for the trust to vest in Covie.

“When they told me someone from the family wanted to see me, I thought you were going to give us names,” the doctor continued. “We don’t know that many American names.”

“Then this will solve a problem for you, too,” Singit said smoothly.

“Mr. Devon Yearling was so devoted to our work that I showed him something we had never shown a client before,” Dr. Patel said, standing up. “Come with me.”

Something like an electric buzzer sounded in Singit’s chest. Never look at the victims, everyone in the business said.

“Are you feeling well?” the doctor asked.

“Yes, yes,” Singit said.

He followed the doctor through the clinic to the rear exit.

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Like many modern Indian buildings, the Varanasi Fertility Center was like a Potemkin village: bright and shiny in front, dingy and ruined behind. Dr. Patel led him down an alley so narrow they had to press against the wall for a scrawny cow to pass. Children crowded around them, and women in worn saris squatted in rooms off the alley, cooking. White jacket flickering among darker shapes, the doctor moved ahead quickly. Singit caught up with him at a gate in a worn brick wall. Over the door was a worn frieze of a fantastic elephant, beaded and bejeweled like a Hindu bride.

“The god of the place,” Dr. Patel said, opening the door.

Singit stepped into the gloom after him, and the doctor closed the door. All Pradna could see were shadows receding before him into the depths. Little fires flickered like an upper layer of hell, and bodies lay on the ground, white eyes staring up at him. High above, where archers once crouched on platforms, slits in the wall let in light. The air was thick with sweat and smoke and human breath.

“Welcome to our dormitory, Mr. Singit,” Dr. Patel said. “Let me introduce you to some of the mothers. This is Naina.”

Singit’s eyes had adjusted enough to see her lying on a mattress with her hands on her stomach.

“We assure that she has a correct diet,” Dr. Patel said. “I see her every month. This will be a good strong baby.”

She looked at Pradna with deep, questioning eyes. It was a mistake to come here, he thought, just as it was a mistake to think about what happened to the cocaine after it was offloaded from his boat. Just do your job and get the hell out, they always said.

“She can keep whatever she’s been paid,” he said. “We’ll pay for the procedure.”

His voice sounded as hollow as when he stood before the judge and pled guilty.

“But this is Varanasi,” the doctor said. “If you abort them at this stage, you must have them cremated at the ghat.”

The room was silent, as if the wraiths were awaiting a sign from the upper world, or a god to descend to tell them that they would all be born again. Sitting on mattresses, squatting beside little fires, drinking tea, and sewing, the mothers of Devon Yearling’s children looked at Signit with joy and expectation. Perhaps this was the legendary father of their children, a man so virile that he needed dozens of women to carry his seed, a man whom the monkey god would envy.

Pradna Singit did not see himself reflected as a god in those eyes. Instead he imagined seventy-nine bloody little bundles lying on a stone slab while men in dirty robes tossed them into the fire. Suddenly his full English breakfast welled up inside him, and he turned away. Dr. Patel was not quick enough. Singit vomited all over the door.

“Mr. Devon Yearling told me that he wished he could be there when his brother found out about the babies,” the doctor said, leading Singit by the elbow back to the clinic. “Does his brother know that you have come here?”

“I’ll call you tomorrow,” was all Pradna Singit could say.

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Waving away taxis and Pedi cabs and beggars and prostitutes and priests, Pradna Singit wandered through the huge city. Sometimes he followed alleys that twisted back to the twelfth century before the Moguls came and burned the place; sometimes he followed pilgrims through sacred mazes and around altars raised to dancing gods. At the Golden Temple, he felt his breath pushed out of him by the crowd. Floating above them

like a sprite, he touched the gold leaf on the dome, hot in the afternoon sun, and peered into the cupola on top of the spire, where only gods dwelled. Late in the afternoon he descended to Dashashwamedh Ghat, whose broad steps down to the river were crowded with pilgrims and tourists. Joining a group of Americans, he got into a boat to watch the evening spectacle of seven priests dancing with the sacred fire to reenact the creation, while the Bhagavad Gita was recited over loudspeakers.

When the boat returned to the shore, Pradna left the Americans and wandered along the riverbank to Manikarnika Ghat, shrouded in blue and gray clouds from dozens of funeral pyres. He found a place on the platform beside a naked sadhu, a devotee with long orange hair and brightly painted stripes across his face and chest. The sadhu picked up his damuru, a small drum, and began to tap the heartbeat of a laughing god. All night long Pradna Singit stared across the dark water with the heat of the pyres behind him, watching orange flames reflect off the water. Sometimes he saw a body sit up, twisting in the heat, as if to run away from its fiery bed. Most of the time, however, they lay quietly on the burning embers, waiting to be reborn in the sacred fire.

In the morning, when the sun arose across the river and the sadhu began to chant, Pradna Singit arose and went down to the Ganges. While the doms or crematory attendants poured the night's ashes into the river, he stepped into the cold water. Closing his eyes, he ducked under three times, then walked back up the Ghat to Bhadani Road and a cab back to his hotel. The bellmen swung open the doors and bowed low, as if many times soaking wet Americans arrived after a night on the sacred shore.

Pradna slept through the day and the next night. After another English breakfast, he called Dr. Patel and told him that the family had changed its mind about aborting the babies, and that he was depositing \$100,000 in the Center's account for legal fees.

“Legal fees?” Dr. Patel exclaimed. “Why do we need legal fees?”

“The Ganges does not run through America,” Pradna Singit said. “You may need them for the children to receive their inheritance.”

And being warned of God in a dream that he should not return to Herod, he departed into his own country another way.