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Victory City

Salman Rushdie



JONATHAN CAPE
LONDON

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PART ONE

B i r t h

CHAPTER ONE

On the last day of her life, when she was two hundred and forty-seven years old, the blind poet, miracle worker and prophetess Pampa Kampana completed her immense narrative poem about Bisnaga and buried it in a clay pot sealed with wax in the heart of the ruined Royal Enclosure, as a message to the future. Four and a half centuries later we found that pot and read for the first time the immortal masterpiece named the *Jayaparajaya*, meaning 'Victory and Defeat', written in the Sanskrit language, as long as the *Ramayana*, made up of twenty-four thousand verses, and we learned the secrets of the empire she had concealed from history for more than one hundred and sixty thousand days. We knew only the ruins that remained, and our memory of its history was ruined as well, by the passage of time, the imperfections of memory, and the falsehoods of those who came after. As we read Pampa Kampana's book the past was regained, the Bisnaga Empire was reborn as it truly had been, its women warriors, its mountains of gold, its generosity of spirit and its times of mean-spiritedness, its weaknesses and its

strengths. We heard for the first time the full account of the kingdom that began and ended with a burning and a severed head. This is that story, retold in plainer language by the present author, who is neither a scholar nor a poet but merely a spinner of yarns, and who offers this version for the simple entertainment and possible edification of today's readers, the old and the young, the educated and the not so educated, those in search of wisdom and those amused by folly, northerners and southerners, followers of different gods and of no gods, the broad-minded and the narrow-minded, men and women and members of the genders beyond and in between, scions of the nobility and rank commoners, good people and rogues, charlatans and foreigners, humble sages, and egotistical fools.

The story of Bisnaga began in the fourteenth century of the Common Era, in the south of what we now call India, Bharat, Hindustan. The old king whose rolling head got everything going wasn't much of a monarch, just the type of ersatz ruler who crops up between the decline of one great kingdom and the rise of another. His name was Kampila of the tiny principality of Kampili, 'Kampila Raya', *raya* being the regional version of *raja*, king. This second-rate *raya* had just about enough time on his third-rate throne to build a fourth-rate fortress on the banks of the Pampa river, to put a fifth-rate temple inside it, and to carve a few grandiose inscriptions into the side of a rocky hill, but then the army of the north came south to deal with him. The battle that followed was a one-sided affair, so unimportant that nobody bothered to give it a name. After the people from the north had routed Kampila Raya's forces and killed most of his army they grabbed hold of the phoney king and chopped off his crownless head. Then they filled it with straw and sent it north for the pleasure of the Delhi sultan. There was nothing particularly special about the battle without a name, or about the head.

In those days battles were commonplace affairs and naming them was a thing a lot of people didn't bother with; and severed heads were travelling across our great land all the time for the pleasure of this prince or that one. The sultan in his northern capital city had built up quite a collection.

After the insignificant battle, surprisingly, there was an event of the kind that changes history. The story goes that the women of the tiny, defeated kingdom, most of them recently widowed as a result of the no-name battle, left the fourth-rate fortress, after making final offerings at the fifth-rate temple, crossed the river in small boats, improbably defying the turbulence of the water, walked some distance to the west along the southern bank, and then lit a great bonfire and committed mass suicide in the flames. Gravely, without making any complaint, they said farewell to one another and walked forward without flinching. Nor were there any screams when their flesh caught fire and the stink of death filled the air. They burned in silence; only the crackling of the fire itself could be heard. Pampa Kampana saw it all happen. It was as if the universe itself was sending her a message, saying, open your ears, breathe in, and learn. She was nine years old and stood watching with tears in her eyes, holding her dry-eyed mother's hand as tightly as she could, while all the women she knew entered the fire and sat or stood or lay in the heart of the furnace spouting flames from their ears and mouths: the old woman who had seen everything and the young woman just starting out in life and the girl who hated her father the dead soldier and the wife who was ashamed of her husband because he hadn't given up his life on the battlefield and the woman with the beautiful singing voice and the woman with the frightening laugh and the woman as skinny as a stick and the woman as fat as a melon. Into the fire they marched and the stench of their death made Pampa feel like retching and then to her horror her own mother Radha Kampana gently detached her hand and very slowly but with absolute

conviction walked forward to join the bonfire of the dead, without even saying goodbye.

For the rest of her life Pampa Kampana, who shared a name with the river on whose banks all this happened, would carry the scent of her mother's burning flesh in her nostrils. The pyre was made of perfumed sandalwood and an abundance of cloves and garlic and cumin seeds and sticks of cinnamon had been added to it as if the burning ladies were being prepared as a well-spiced dish to set before the sultan's victorious generals for their gastronomic delight, but those fragrances – the turmeric, the big cardamoms, and the little cardamoms too – failed to mask the unique, cannibal pungency of women being cooked alive, and made their odour, if anything, even harder to bear. Pampa Kampana never ate meat again, and could not bring herself to remain in any kitchen in which it was being prepared. All such dishes exuded the memory of her mother and when other people ate dead animals Pampa Kampana had to avert her gaze.

Pampa's own father had died young, long before the nameless battle, so her mother was not one of the newly widowed. Arjuna Kampana had died so long ago that Pampa had no memory of his face. All she knew about him was what Radha Kampana had told her, that he had been a kind man, the well-loved potter of the town of Kampili, and that he had encouraged his wife to learn the potter's art as well, so after he died she took over his trade and proved to be more than his equal. Radha, in turn, had guided little Pampa's hands at the potter's wheel and the child was already a skilled thrower of pots and bowls and had learned an important lesson, which was that there was no such thing as men's work. Pampa Kampana had believed that this would be her life, making beautiful things with her mother, side by side at the wheel. But that dream was over now. Her mother had let go of her hand and abandoned her to her fate.

For a long moment Pampa tried to convince herself that her mother

was just being sociable and going along with the crowd, because she had always been a woman for whom the friendship of women was of paramount importance. She told herself that the undulating wall of fire was a curtain behind which the ladies had gathered to gossip, and soon they would all walk out of the flames, unharmed, maybe a little scorched, smelling a little of kitchen perfumes, perhaps, but that would pass soon enough. And then Pampa and her mother would go home.

Only when she saw the last slabs of roasted flesh fall away from Radha Kampana's bones to reveal the naked skull did she understand that her childhood was over and from now on she must conduct herself as an adult and never commit her mother's last mistake. She would laugh at death and turn her face towards life. She would not sacrifice her body merely to follow dead men into the afterworld. She would refuse to die young and live, instead, to be impossibly, defiantly old. It was at this point that she received the celestial blessing that would change everything, because this was the moment when the goddess Pampa's voice, as old as Time, started coming out of her nine-year-old mouth.

It was an enormous voice, like the thunder of a high waterfall booming in a valley of sweet echoes. It possessed a music she had never heard before, a melody to which she later gave the name of *kindness*. She was terrified, of course, but also reassured. This was not a possession by a demon. There was goodness in the voice, and majesty. Radha Kampana had once told her that two of the highest deities of the pantheon had spent the earliest days of their courtship near here, by the angry waters of the rushing river. Perhaps this was the queen of the gods herself, returning in a time of death to the place where her own love had been born. Like the river, Pampa Kampana had been named after the deity – 'Pampa' was one of the goddess Parvati's local names, and her lover Shiva, the mighty Lord of the Dance himself, had appeared to her here in his local, three-eyed incarnation – so it all began to make sense.