

THE LOCK OF THE FIVE KEYS

Written by

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

SUNIL GUPTA, 20s-30s, dark, Indian tour guide, also plays:

VIKRAM RATHORE, barber
MAHARAJA, petty despot
KAMAL KIRTANE, eunuch singer and painter
MAHISHISURA, buffalo demon
GARUDA, winged messenger
HINDU WIFE
MUSLIM WIFE
CHRISTIAN WIFE
BUDDHIST WIFE
JAIN WIFE
BROTHER, elderly

DANTE PARDO, 30s-40s, light, American, also plays:

WEBSTER NELSON, academic
EDWARD MORGAN FORSTER, novelist
HASNAIN KHIMJI, archer
AKBAR, Mughal emperor
AMIT, Hindu ascetic
BRAHMA, supreme god
DURGA, goddess
WARRIOR

The action takes place in various locations throughout India.

The time is the present, the recent past, 1921, 1599, and the legendary past.

SETTING: Locations should be defined as fluidly as possible, perhaps simply through lighting and textiles. Two chairs, some cushions. Each of the five time periods should have its own palette.

COSTUMES: DANTE and all his characters should share a color or range of colors. Similarly, SUNIL and all his characters should share a color or range of colors.

Sounds of a nighttime waterfront. A cigarette is lit in the darkness. After a moment lights slowly come up on SUNIL GUPTA smoking. He is a young Indian man wearing a UCLA t-shirt and carrying a small backpack. Barely visible in the darkness behind SUNIL is DANTE, a slightly older American wearing a button-down shirt and khakis. He stands immobile, one leg wrapped around the other. After a moment, and without looking at DANTE, SUNIL speaks.

SUNIL

(Combination Indian/American accent.)

The boats landed there, at the Gate of India, and they fanned out immediately to--

(Pointing.)

The Taj Mahal Palace, the Oberoi--that's what you wanted to see, isn't it?

(No response.)

Also to Chhatapatri Shivaji Terminus, originally Victoria Terminus, and the Chabad House. You're not Jewish, are you?

(No response.)

English?

(No response.)

This area along the seawall from the Gate to Arthur Bunder Street is frequented by homosexuals.

(No response.)

Especially at night.

DANTE

(New York accent.)

Are all Indians inherently suicidal?

SUNIL

Because we believe in reincarnation?

DANTE

Because you smoke.

SUNIL

(Re: the cigarette.)

Western decadence.

DANTE

Maybe that's why Indian cities smell like shit on fire in the morning.

SUNIL

May I help you?

DANTE

I saw homeless people sleeping in front of the National Gallery of Modern Art. So many beggars of all sorts.

SUNIL

Just like New York. Perhaps you are becoming us.

DANTE

I'm looking for a tour guide.

SUNIL

So you can smell manure burning across the subcontinent? Consult the internet.

DANTE

I did.

SUNIL

Did it recommend hanging out by the Voodoo Pub on a Saturday night?

DANTE

It recommended a Mr. Sunil Gupta.

SUNIL

You've been following me for ten blocks.

DANTE

(Quoting website.)

"Indian tours with an American accent." "Go off the tourist track."

SUNIL

My rates are--

DANTE

No money talk on the street.

SUNIL

Charmingly American.

DANTE

Dangerous times.

SUNIL

You want to negotiate inside the bar?

DANTE

No.

SUNIL

Not your kind of place?

DANTE

Too noisy. I'm at the Fariyas.

SUNIL

You want me to come to your hotel?

DANTE

(holds up a notebook)

Itineraries, maps, quiet discussion.

SUNIL

Okay.

(Puts out cigarette. Takes
out phone.)

Your name?

DANTE

(As they walk. Lights shift.)

Dante Pardo.

SUNIL

(Notes in phone.)

Dante. In search of Virgil.

DANTE

You've spent time in the States.

SUNIL
High school and college.

DANTE
UCLA?

SUNIL
No.

DANTE semi-surreptitiously cleans
the inside of his ear.

DANTE
Ever been to Los Angeles?

SUNIL
Visited.

DANTE
Friends there?

SUNIL
I know some people.

DANTE
Really? Who? I live there.

SUNIL
No one you know, I'm sure.

They arrive in DANTE'S room. SUNIL
sets down his backpack.

DANTE
Here is is. Have a seat. Anything to drink?

SUNIL
Water, thanks.

SUNIL sits. DANTE doesn't get
water, stands with one leg wrapped
around the other.

DANTE
Do you know Webster Nelson in LA?

SUNIL

(After a moment.)

A client.

DANTE

He took a tour with you? Arranged through your website?

SUNIL

Yes.

DANTE

Where?

SUNIL

All over north India. He kept adding cities as we went.

DANTE

What was the last one?

SUNIL

Did you want to duplicate his itinerary?

DANTE

Beg pardon?

SUNIL

Is he a friend of yours?

DANTE

He's an American. And he's missing. About my height, southern accent, and a scar right--

(Touches SUNIL next to his groin.)

Here.

SUNIL

Is this...are you here in an official capacity?

DANTE

I'd rather not be. Just yet. But I'd appreciate anything you can tell me about his tour.

SUNIL

(Starts to get up.) You don't want a tour.

DANTE

(Gently but firmly pushing
him back down.)

Absolutely, I do. I want his tour exactly. Your
description of it.

SUNIL

When did he go missing?

DANTE

You tell me.

SUNIL

I'll need those itineraries, maps, quiet discussion.

DANTE

He never came back from India. His return ticket unused, no
record of re-entry into the US.

SUNIL

I'm a guide, not a tour operator. I don't put people on
planes.

DANTE

Where did you last see him?

SUNIL

Udaipur.

DANTE

The lake city?

SUNIL

The most beautiful in India--

DANTE

Where in Udaipur?

SUNIL

Our last stop was just before sunset, the Monsoon Palace.

DANTE

And then you dropped him back at his hotel?

SUNIL

I tried to persuade him to stay at the Lake Palace, the best hotel in the world--

DANTE

Did you take him back to his hotel?

SUNIL

Did you know he was an English professor?

DANTE

Yes. At UCLA.

SUNIL

Did you know he was a homosexual?

DANTE

He's the world expert on E.M. Forster.

SUNIL

Did you know homosexuality is illegal in India?

DANTE

Except at the Voodoo Club.

SUNIL

To attract western tourists.

DANTE

Dr. Nelson preferred dark men.

SUNIL

Are you a private dick?

DANTE

Why?

SUNIL

Because these don't sound like official questions.

DANTE

Don't be paranoid. This isn't an interrogation.

SUNIL AND DANTE

Yet.

DANTE

Americans disappear in foreign countries all the time and the government doesn't much care. But Dr. Webster Nelson's research is highly regarded, and he was in possession--? apparently--of a valuable object that might, in fact, have been stolen in Great Britain. I'm trying to head off an international incident and would appreciate your willing cooperation.

SUNIL

(Laughing.)

Highly regarded! In India he was just a bugger with a grant!

DANTE

He told you he had a grant?

No response. DANTE sits in a lotus position.

DANTE (CONT'D)

Did he talk about his work?

SUNIL

His work is why he came to India.

DANTE

So he wasn't just a sex tourist.

SUNIL

Americans take sex so seriously.

DANTE

In America it's not a criminal activity, like here.

SUNIL

Thank the British for that.

DANTE

Where did you get that t-shirt?

SUNIL

We all wear second-hand clothing.

DANTE

Did Webster--Dr. Nelson--give it to you?

SUNIL

Dr. Nelson gave me a lot of things.
 (Starts to dance,
 gracefully.))
 Do you know what an apsara is?

DANTE

No.

SUNIL

A graceful dancer. You see them everywhere on temples,
 beautiful young women symbolizing heaven.

DANTE

Dr. Nelson doesn't believe in heaven.

SUNIL

True. He didn't.
 (Dancing around DANTE.)
 He knew things but didn't believe in things. He'd lost
 faith. Are you ticklish, Detective Dante--?

DANTE

I'm not--

SUNIL

Agent Dante?

DANTE

I'm not--

SUNIL

Not at all ticklish? Not even in certain places?
 (Reaches for DANTE.)

Suddenly DANTE grabs SUNIL and
 clamps a handcuff onto one of his
 wrists.

DANTE

Now I'm getting official--!

SUNIL

Sala chutiya! [Fucking
 idiot!]

DANTE forces SUNIL into a chair,
 cuffing his hands together behind.

DANTE (CONT'D)
 These are very simple
 questions, but if you need
 help concentrating, I'm happy
 to give you a little focus!

SUNIL (CONT'D)
 Let me go! Americans think
 everyone dark is a terrorist!

Silence for a moment.

DANTE (CONT'D)
 This can still be a casual, off-the-record conversation--

SUNIL
 In handcuffs?

DANTE
 Formal and on-the-record is much less comfortable. Where
 did you get the t-shirt? There can't be that many of them in
 Mumbai.

SUNIL
 UCLA is a big school with an extensive marketing budget.
 American students come here a lot. They leave things.

(DANTE frisks SUNIL.)

Oh, yes, please frisk me. Take me to Guantanamo Bay or an
 undisclosed location.

(DANTE finds SUNIL'S
 identification.)

You'll find I'm exactly who I say I am. I can't afford an
 alias.

(DANTE continues frisking.)

Frisky frisk. Perhaps I have something for you in my pocket,
 Officer Dante.

DANTE does, in fact, find something
 in SUNIL'S pocket, an intricate,
 old? fashioned key.

DANTE
 What's this?

SUNIL
 A key.

DANTE
 To what?

SUNIL

A lock.

DANTE

An Indian lock.

SUNIL

A Mughal lock, to be precise.

DANTE

The lock locks up what?

SUNIL

That I can't tell you.

DANTE

Why not?

SUNIL

Because I don't know.

(Off DANTE'S look.)

Not exactly. It's a long story.

DANTE

I have no objection if the story explains what happened to Dr. Webster Nelson, American citizen six weeks unaccounted for in India during a period of increased tension between India and its neighbors, all of pivotal importance to the United States government?

SUNIL

(Starting to get frightened.)

I exactly don't know what happened to him! A tiger could have eaten him!

DANTE

Was the last time you saw him at the Monsoon Palace in Udaipur?

SUNIL

Yes.

DANTE

And did you see what happened there?

SUNIL

Yes, but you wouldn't believe me if I told you.

DANTE

Trust me.

SUNIL

(Laughs.)

I don't think so! Not now--

DANTE rips off the UCLA t-shirt.

DANTE

Tell me what happened to Webster! Tell me right now. I'm the nice guy. I can call the mean ones. They're much more serious than I am about sex and they won't give a fuck what an apsara is.

SUNIL

I really liked that shirt.

DANTE

Too bad.

SUNIL

It has sentimental value.

DANTE

Had.

SUNIL

Someone we know gave it to Webster when he got tenure.

DANTE

What?

SUNIL

You said it was time for him to invest emotionally in the school.

DANTE

Why would he tell you--?

SUNIL

We spent almost a month in each other's company, no one else to talk to.

SUNIL runs his foot along the inside of DANTE'S calf. DANTE jumps.

DANTE

Quit that!

SUNIL

Ticklish. The one place.

DANTE

He didn't tell you that.

SUNIL

No, he didn't.

DANTE

(Takes out a cord that could make a nice garrotte.)

Tell me now what happened to Webster in Udaipur. You know a lot of things you shouldn't.

SUNIL

I do. As well as things you won't believe. Much happened before Udaipur, and what happened there--inexplicable as it is--only makes sense in context. My tour with Webster was most definitely not "tourist track." Incredible India, indeed.

DANTE

I am a simple man. Please explain it to me.

SUNIL

You needn't be polite. I'm handcuffed and you have a cord you can use to strangle me if you wish. I'm entirely at your mercy.

DANTE

Is he all right?

(Begins to sob.)

I have to know. He came here because of me!

SUNIL

(After a moment.)

You're not with the government at all, are you? (Almost tenderly.)

Dante.

(MORE)

SUNIL (CONT'D)

(DANTE looks up, astonished.

SUNIL looks away.)

He seemed fine at first. Typical nervous American tourist in India for the first time, albeit vastly more educated than most.

Lights start to dim on DANTE.

SUNIL (CONT'D)

I met him in Delhi, where most tourists embark. Typical spots--the Red Fort, the Friday Mosque, the Qtab Minar--that's a 16th-century tower--you should see it if you get up there.

Lights out entirely on DANTE. SUNIL is isolated in light.

SUNIL (CONT'D)

On the internet we had worked out a simple tour, starting in Delhi.

SUNIL disengages from the handcuffs, stands, and puts on a different shirt. SUNIL'S speech changes slightly, his accent becoming more Indian, less American.

SUNIL (CONT'D)

After all the old Mughal sites, I thought I should show him something Hindu. I, myself, am Christian, but Hindu culture is the soul of India, so we went to a brand new temple complex, which gave me an opportunity to tell him about reincarnation as depicted on the temple walls. At the bottom of the wall are tigers, symbolizing carnivorousness, the lowest level of existence. Next up is the elephant, a vegetarian, a higher incarnation.

WEBSTER appears isolated in light. He is played by the same actor as DANTE, but his appearance is significantly altered. He wears glasses and a UCLA t-shirt identical to the one SUNIL wore earlier. He is listening attentively to SUNIL.

SUNIL (CONT'D)

The third level--

WEBSTER
(Southern accent)

People--

SUNIL
--Represents society, people coming together for the common good, a level higher than animals. The level above that--

WEBSTER
Lotus flowers, yes?

SUNIL
The lotus stands for perfection, spiritual but attainable by humans if they can achieve absence of desire.

WEBSTER
Can fulfillment of desire lead to absence of desire?

SUNIL
Temporarily, yes, sir, I am sure. But the day after a banquet you are hungry again.

WEBSTER
Sorry to be terribly Greek about this--it is my nature--but if in a Platonic sense we are seeking, desiring, the lost half of our soul, when we find that person and form a--union--? with them, become one, won't desire be fulfilled permanently and therefore absent?

SUNIL
(After staring at WEBSTER for a moment.)
And the fifth level--those dancers are what we will see in heaven.

WEBSTER
Apsaras, correct?

SUNIL
(Out.)
I told you he was educated.
(To WEBSTER.)
It's nice to tour an American who has studied India.

WEBSTER

Oh, hardly. My specialty is English literature. I teach--

SUNIL AND WEBSTER

(Pointing to t-shirt.)

--At UCLA.

WEBSTER

Your English is beautiful.

SUNIL

So is yours.

(WEBSTER reacts,
embarrassed.)

All educated Indians speak English, sir. And I am a
Brahmin, never rich but always intelligent.

WEBSTER

But your accent--for some reason it's easier to understand--

SUNIL

I lived in San Francisco and Chicago, eight years altogether.

WEBSTER

You're practically American!

SUNIL

Oh, no--

WEBSTER

So you mustn't call me "sir."

SUNIL

What would you prefer to be called, sir?

WEBSTER

"Ai, papi!"

SUNIL

Beg pardon?

WEBSTER

Kidding! Sorry!

SUNIL

A colloquialism.

WEBSTER

Yes! You are well-educated indeed. I'm looking for a tour guide with special skills like yours.

WEBSTER semi-surreptitiously cleans the inside of his ear.

SUNIL

I will do my best, ai-papi.

WEBSTER

Really, that was a joke! Call me Webster.

SUNIL

(Out.)

On the way back to the hotel, Dr. Webster Nelson began changing plans.

WEBSTER

Itineraries, maps, quiet discussion.

They get in chairs, next to each other, as if in a car.

SUNIL

Oh, no, you must ride in the back.

WEBSTER

But it's easier to talk--

SUNIL

It's more proper. I am the driver as well as the guide.

WEBSTER reluctantly moves his chair behind SUNIL'S.

SUNIL (CONT'D)

Webster. Like the dictionary.

Horns honk.

WEBSTER

My students accuse me of talking like one sometimes. I specialize, however, in E. M. Forster.

SUNIL

The homosexual English writer.

WEBSTER

Yes!

SUNIL

A Passage to India.

Horns honk.

WEBSTER

He lived here twice, and I'm--

SUNIL

Homosexuality is a criminal offense in India.

WEBSTER

That's my understanding. But Forster's why I came, actually-- damn, people drive fast here!

SUNIL

A pilgrimage?

WEBSTER

No, no, real work, research.

(Takes out letter.)

I have a letter he wrote to his friend Syed Ross Masood in 1921 with reference to various locations throughout India--

SUNIL

You wish to change your itinerary.

(Out the window, in Hindi.)

Abbe bhenchod..gaadi aage le bey! Baap ki jagah hain kya?
[You sister fucker, pull your car up! Is this your dad's domain?]

WEBSTER

Wow! Yes, that would be--

SUNIL

Why did you not alert me before, sir?

WEBSTER

Not change so much as augment--I hope it won't be a problem--

SUNIL

Where would you like to go for your research?

WEBSTER

Forster lists five cities: Benares--

SUNIL

We call it Varanasi now--

WEBSTER

Oh, well, that's already on our itinerary, so good--Khajuraho-

SUNIL AND WEBSTER

--Also on our schedule--

WEBSTER

But I would like to add some cities in Rajasthan.

SUNIL

No problem, sir. It will be a long drive from Agra. But everything is possible with the almighty dollar.

WEBSTER

Not so almighty any more.

(Reacting to something in the
road.)

Oh, my God! Sorry, I'm not used to--

SUNIL

Elephants in the road?

WEBSTER

No, two trucks coming straight at me on a two-lane highway! (
(With some hesitation.)

May I share more of this letter with you?

SUNIL

Certainly.

WEBSTER

It makes some reference to Forster's sexual practices--

SUNIL

I am not offended. He is not practicing them in my vehicle.

WEBSTER

No--good--apparently he had--an encounter--with a young man who worked for a Maharaja Forster was visiting. It overwhelmed Forster, who was not used to passion--he writes "I am happier now than I have ever been. It cannot possibly last."

SUNIL

Did it?

They leave the "car" and begin walking. SUNIL

WEBSTER

Well, nothing lasts, does it? Certainly not for Forster. It went bad quite spectacularly, but he is more than vague about it, obfuscating, which means--

SUNIL

Deliberately unclear.

WEBSTER welcomes SUNIL to his hotel room, gesturing for him to sit.

WEBSTER

Yes, exactly. In fact, he refuses to describe exactly what happened--

(Reading.)

"I shall not--must not!--commit to post the details of the horrific outcome. My true role in the tragedy is a secret shame not to be disclosed till I am safely in my grave, if ever. By the way, have you an expertise in antiques? I am in possession of an incised silver strong box. The design is frightfully clever--a puzzle, really--Mughal in origin, or so I am told."

SUNIL

Did he ever confess his shame to anyone?

WEBSTER

No. But I suspect that he committed it to paper if not to post. And I have this.

WEBSTER produces a small,
intricately decorated silver strong
box.

SUNIL

The same strong box mentioned in the letter?

(Out.)

Was that the object stolen from England?

WEBSTER

It was part of Forster's estate--

SUNIL

How did you get it?

WEBSTER

I have--some standing--a bit of a reputation--as a Forster scholar--so I was given permission to borrow it and even open it if I could.

SUNIL

Have you the keys?

WEBSTER

Keys? There's no keyhole at all--look.

SUNIL

Of course not. It is, as Mr. Forster guessed, a typically arcane Mughal design.

WEBSTER

Do you know how to open it?

SUNIL

(Tinkering, unscrewing.)

It will do you no good without the keys, but--

(Pulls a decorative knob
free.)

Here is hidden the first keyhole.

WEBSTER

The first keyhole?

SUNIL

Boxes of this design were to protect property held in common by three or more people. Each had a key, so the lock could not be opened unless all were present.

WEBSTER

That's paranoid.

SUNIL

That's Mughal. Am I to understand you believe Forster's shame is locked within this Islamic enigma?

WEBSTER

A written confession, some other evidence--I don't know.

SUNIL

Are the keys hidden in the five cities?

WEBSTER

The letter has further clues--for instance, in Benares he says he found the Durga temple "overrun with monkeys who suit my purpose as a protective army. The sadhu accepted my offering with grace."

SUNIL

We fly to Varanasi tomorrow, but as a non-Hindu you will only be permitted to enter the courtyard of the Durga temple.

WEBSTER

You're not Hindu, either!

SUNIL

But I will not be suspected.

WEBSTER

I'll sit outside and play with the monkeys.

They sit in the chairs again, now
side by side.

SUNIL

(Out.)

On the airplane to Varanasi, Dr. Nelson disclosed more details that gave me concern.

WEBSTER

I'm actually in a bit of hot water--academically--and this mission to India may get me out of it.

SUNIL

What has made your water hot?

WEBSTER

I've gone rather out on a limb about the extent of Forster's romantic conquests in India, advanced a theory about his guilty--

SUNIL

Romantic homosexual conquests?

WEBSTER

He had no interest in women. A bit of a misogynist, in fact.

SUNIL

Romance between men. Sexual relations I can understand, but romance? Is it possible?

WEBSTER

Several thousand years of passionate poetry seem to indicate it is.

SUNIL

Western poetry.

WEBSTER

In any case, not all Forster scholars agree with me, and neither does the estate. A lawsuit is threatened, in fact.

SUNIL

And yet they gave you the Mughal strong box?

(Out.)

He did not have an answer for that. Instead he demonstrated a repulsive personal habit I had noted earlier.

WEBSTER cleans his ear.

WEBSTER

Would you mind teaching me some Hindi?

SUNIL

You will have no need of it. It is safely arranged that you will meet only English speakers.

WEBSTER

What did you holler at that driver?

SUNIL

What driver?

WEBSTER

When we were passing the elephant.

SUNIL

Oh, it is very common. I am ashamed to translate it.

WEBSTER

Sunil, I'm putting my life in your hands. You can certainly trust me with an obscenity. If you do, I'll show you my scar.

(Touches himself next to his groin.)

SUNIL

(Out.)

Not wanting him to embarrass himself further with clumsy flirtation, I told him "*abbe bhenchod, gaadi aage le bey.*" Sister fucker, let me pass.

WEBSTER

Abbe bhenchod, gaadi aage le bey! Damn, that's good! *Abbe bhenchod, gaadi aage le bey!*

They get up from their "airplane" seats and start walking. WEBSTER brings the silver strong box.

SUNIL

(out)

And he practiced all the way to the temple in India's holiest city.

WEBSTER

Abbe bhenchod...gaadi aage le bey! This place is astonishing, but must we walk?

SUNIL

The streets are too narrow for automobiles. You no doubt find it dirty.

They dodge traffic. Automobile honks.

WEBSTER

It is a bit...untidy, but fascinating. Is that a bull inside a fabric store?

SUNIL

He honors the sari shop with his presence.

WEBSTER

At least it's not a china shop.
(Looks about.)
Amazing, just amazing.

SUNIL

Do not look at the beggars. They are professionals and will see vulnerability in your eyes and chase you down.

WEBSTER

But they're children--

SUNIL

Children are the most ruthless. Do you have sunglasses?

WEBSTER

(Puts on sunglasses.)
I feel heartless.

SUNIL

(Stops.)
Then you may atone here. We have arrived at the Durga temple.

WEBSTER

Atone?

SUNIL

Although you may only enter the courtyard, I can take an offering to Durga for you as a form of worship.

WEBSTER

Ah, Sunil, I am an atheist.

SUNIL

And I am a Christian. But this is India.

WEBSTER

I worship nothing but knowledge. Nor do I pray.

SUNIL

(Out.)

A pretentious fellow, isn't he?

WEBSTER

I can embrace India without practicing its religions.

SUNIL

Hinduism is not a religion--it is a way of life. And with more than 330 million gods, you are apt to worship one without knowing it. Give me at least a monetary gift for the sadhu.

WEBSTER

(Digging in his wallet.)

This is payment, not an offering. I'd rather not be--

SUNIL

(Taking money.)

Call it what you wish to keep your soul pure.

WEBSTER

A bribe!

SUNIL

(out)

Fortunately, the sadhu knew of the homosexual English writer and his key. It had been handed down, sadhu to sadhu over generations in anticipation of Dr. Webster Nelson's request.

WEBSTER

See that monkey? It snarled at me with these giant incisors!

SUNIL just holds up the key.

WEBSTER (CONT'D)

How did you--? Was there a secret compartment--?

SUNIL

I simply asked and it was given unto me.

(WEBSTER grabs for the key.)

You must do the same.

WEBSTER

May I have it please?

SUNIL gives WEBSTER the key.

WEBSTER immediately tries to open
the box.

SUNIL

Turn it several times. It is not like a normal lock.

WEBSTER

It's working! It's turning. A panel is coming out--?

(Disappointed.)

With another keyhole!

SUNIL

Mr. Forster is making you work for your revelation.

WEBSTER

Can we get an earlier flight to Khajuraho?

SUNIL

Do you not want to see more of Varanasi? It is the oldest
city in India--a boat on the Ganges--

WEBSTER

I am not a tourist.

SUNIL

I will see what I can do.

(Out.)

For a university professor, Dr. Webster Nelson had surprising
financial resources. On the flight to Khajuraho, I learned
more uncomfortable facts.

(They sit in "airplane" seats
again.)

I see you are married, Webster. Tell me about your wife.

WEBSTER

Oh, no, I don't have a wife.

SUNIL

But that is a wedding ring, is it not?

WEBSTER

No, just a ring. It means nothing at all, in fact.

SUNIL

Perhaps I am confusing my American customs. That finger is for wedding rings, correct?

WEBSTER

It used to have meaning, but not any more.

SUNIL

Ah. I am sad for you. Why wear a ring without meaning?

WEBSTER

For the memory of meaning. To remind me of betrayal.

SUNIL

Then I am sad double. This means you are not a trusting person.

WEBSTER

I am a careful person. More careful, nowadays.

SUNIL

(Out.)

My scholar was--not surprisingly--fascinated with the erotic carvings on the temples at Khajuraho.

WEBSTER

Lookit all the nekkid people!

(Peering.)

Those men are copulating with a horse!

SUNIL

Are you shocked, sir?

WEBSTER

Please stop calling me sir.

SUNIL

Are you shocked, ai-papi?

WEBSTER

I'm not at all shocked. And don't call me ai-papi, either. If you only knew.

SUNIL

May I attempt to shock you then?

WEBSTER

That, in fact, will be difficult. I teach college students.

SUNIL

I would like to tell you an Indian joke.

WEBSTER

All right.

SUNIL

It is of an erotic nature, appropriate for the setting.

WEBSTER

Fire away.

SUNIL

The tiger and the donkey decided to fuck each other. First the tiger fucked the donkey, and then the donkey aroused himself to fuck the tiger. When the tiger saw what the donkey had to offer, he became frightened, and ran off through the jungle. The donkey, not to be denied his pleasure, pursued the tiger, his throbbing member bouncing as he ran. Presently the tiger saw a monkey and said, "Help, help! The donkey, he wants to fuck me!" The monkey said, "Talk to the bird." So the tiger says to the bird "The donkey wants to fuck me." "I will help you," said the bird, "when the donkey comes I will sew up your arsehole so he cannot fuck you." The tiger agreed. Suddenly the donkey appeared, and immediately the bird flew inside the tiger's arsehole. The donkey seized his chance and began fucking the tiger. The tiger turned in anger to the monkey and said, "I thought you said the bird would save me!" To which the monkey shrugged and replied, "Your assurance flew up your arse."

SUNIL laughs uproariously. WEBSTER
just looks confused for a moment.

WEBSTER

I don't--what? "Your assurance--?"

SUNIL

It is funnier in Hindi.

(Out.)

I inquired at the tourist office whether noted homosexual English author Edward Morgan Forster had ever visited Khajuraho, and we were directed to a guest house where he had stayed in 1921.

WEBSTER

(Reading the letter.)

"My guest house was distinguished by a heavy Ganesh statue in the garden." Heavy? He must have moved it. But surely it won't still be here.

A light reveals a statue of Ganesh,
the elephant headed god. They see
it.

SUNIL

Nothing changes in India.

WEBSTER

And Ganesh is the remover of obstacles.

Together they tip the statue.

SUNIL

Hurry, before the owner returns.

WEBSTER reaches under the statue
and pulls out a key.

WEBSTER

Damn!

SUNIL

(Produces the silver box.)

Dr. Nelson, as our enterprise seems blessed with potential fruition, I would like to know--

WEBSTER

(Using the key.)

It fits!

(Disappointed.)

Two more keyholes!

SUNIL

I am rather certain five cities means five keys. I must insist, however, that you read me more of this letter.

WEBSTER

You've heard all the relevant parts.

SUNIL

You've withheld details of the young man.

WEBSTER

Forster's description borders on the pornographic.

SUNIL

Worse than the tiger and the donkey?

(Off WEBSTER'S reaction.)

Your quest is to discover Forster's secret shame, an act so terrible he could not tell his friend Masood. You yourself are in some kind of quandary, trouble, even, and we are pursuing Indian artifacts of an age that qualifies them as antique. If I help you remove them from India, I may find myself accused of a criminal act. I require to know more.

WEBSTER

It's an extraordinarily long letter.

SUNIL

Then you may read it as I drive to Fatehpur Sikri, Jaipur, and Udaipur. I hope you may offer me the courtesy of honesty if I am to take this risk with you.

They get back in chairs and SUNIL starts to drive.

WEBSTER

There's no ordinance against reading pornography aloud, left over from the British Raj?

SUNIL

Your secret is secure with me, ai-papi.

WEBSTER

(Referring to the letter.)

The young man's name was Vikram Rathore.

SUNIL

He was Rajput.

WEBSTER

You've heard of him?

SUNIL

In India we all know caste from surnames. It is not perceptible to non-Indians.

WEBSTER

(Reading.)

While I was his guest in Guarihar, the Maharajah almost impishly put me in the charge of a young Indian who was at first rather uppish, but presently treated me with more deference, growing almost friendly. It was clear within two days that he wanted something of me. Masood, I've endured your romantic descriptions of females, so you must return the favor with your indulgence.

WEBSTER's accent gradually segues into very prim English as he and SUNIL are isolated in pools of light. SUNIL, beginning a transformation into VIKRAM, removes his shirt.

WEBSTER (CONT'D)

(Reading.)

Unlike the boy actors favored by the Maharajah, Vikram was rather tall, and he seemed proud, almost vain, of his physique. Although never requested to perform manual labor, in my presence he was frequently shirtless.

SUNIL/VIKRAM

(Stronger Indian accent.)

It is beastly hot today, Sahib! Apologies for our poor weather!

WEBSTER

(Reading, accent more
English.)

He was lithe and muscular, graceful, with deceptive strength.

In becoming VIKRAM, SUNIL changes into clothing from the 1920s, a combination of Western and Indian attire, perhaps including a turban. His transformation is a ceremony tinged with self-assurance, even arrogance.

WEBSTER (CONT'D)

(Reading.)

My eye often dwelt on his hipbone where it met his flat, brown belly, ticklish on some men, or so I hear. Though his official function was as my barber, he quickly and cheerfully expanded his ministrations to full-on valet.

VIKRAM steps into WEBSTER'S pool of light and begins to transform him into EDWARD MORGAN FORSTER, replacing WEBSTER'S t-shirt and jeans with colonial British clothing circa 1920. FORSTER'S physicality is less confident and more constrained than WEBSTER'S. When nervous, he has a habit of standing with one leg wrapped around the other.

FORSTER

(No longer reading, but
writing.)

Everything here--as you have noted--is a terrible muddle all the time, but Vikram seems to thrive on the chaos that is India. He is determined that I "break out of my shell" and monopolizes conversation with exhortations.

VIKRAM

(Continuing to dress
FORSTER.)

Sahib must learn Hindi.

FORSTER

I am too old to learn a new language.

VIKRAM

That is but an excuse, Sahib. It is laziness, I think.

FORSTER

Why should I learn Hindi when your English is so excellent?

VIKRAM

It is good, isn't it? If you will not learn the language may I teach you an Indian joke?

FORSTER

Of course.

VIKRAM

It is obscene!

FORSTER

I have no objection. Tell me right now.

VIKRAM

And you will be the cheers of the English club.

FORSTER

The toast--

VIKRAM

So the monkey and the tiger decide to fuck each other.

FORSTER

Goodness, Vikram!

VIKRAM

This is not a tale for gentle ladies, Sahib!

VIKRAM (CONT'D)

So the monkey, he fuck the tiger, but when tiger turn come, the monkey, he run away. The tiger, highly irritated, pursue the monkey through the jungle. The monkey, he come to a clearing and find a table with a newspaper and a pair of spectacles. Quickly, he put on the spectacles and pick up the paper.

(MORE)

VIKRAM (CONT'D)

The tiger rush up and say, "You see a monkey?" And the monkey say "You mean the one who fuck you?" The tiger cry "Yes, how you know?" Say the monkey: "I read it in the paper."

(FORSTER laughs heartily.)

Sahib, I am satisfied to make you laugh. You are too somber.

FORSTER

Indeed, Vikram, I have not had such a laugh since I came to India.

VIKRAM

Then you did enjoy, not simply guffaw of politeness?

FORSTER

I did enjoy.

VIKRAM

Then I am wondering, Sahib--

FORSTER

(Out.)

Here it is, I thought. Of course there is something he wants.

VIKRAM

I need--

FORSTER

(Out)

So many beggars of all sorts! You excepted, my dear Masood!

VIKRAM

I need help to solve mystery.

FORSTER

I am no detective, Vikram.

VIKRAM

You speak like Sherlock Holmes.

FORSTER

Nevertheless, I--

VIKRAM

I have keys to a treasure.

FORSTER

What kind of treasure?

VIKRAM

A very powerful one. At one time, it belong to this young man.

VIKRAM shows FORSTER a Mughal miniature portrait.

FORSTER

Oh, this is quite old.

VIKRAM

From the Mughal period. He is Muslim.

FORSTER

(Taken with the image.)

A handsome fellow.

VIKRAM

Sahib, I agree most heartily--he look rather like you. A famous archer, an Islamic hero.

(Holds up five keys.)

You see I have the keys.

FORSTER

What was his name?

VIKRAM

Hasnain Khimji.

FORSTER

And what treasure is so valuable it must be locked five times?

VIKRAM

A treasure neither silver, gold nor gem
But richer still than these and priceless rare.
Of ancient origin, the legend says,
And worth the awful price Hasnain did pay.

FORSTER

Was that--? Did you just recite a quatrain?

VIKRAM

The Maharajah has seen to my education, Sahib.

FORSTER

He made you memorize in English--?

VIKRAM

(Laughing.)

Oh, no!

FORSTER

But who wrote the poem? An Englishman?

VIKRAM

Oh, no, the poem is a very old epic from Mughal times, a story of how once--and most tragically--Hindu and Muslim found freedom and peace.

FORSTER

Then who translated it?

VIKRAM

Oh, I did, Sahib, and memorized it, too.

FORSTER

What is the next line?

VIKRAM

How far the archer hero fell when he Discovered an old god outside his faith--

FORSTER

(Having counted on his fingers.)

My dear Vikram, that's perfect blank verse!

VIKRAM

Oh, no, it is iambic pentameter.

FORSTER

That's the same thing!

VIKRAM

Forgive my ignorance, Sahib.

FORSTER

But you wrote it, translated it--?

VIKRAM

A rough approximation of the beauty in the original language.

FORSTER

(Out.)

He is a savant!

VIKRAM

But not an idiot, I hope, Sahib.

FORSTER

Far from it, Vikram. You may well be a genius, translating so fluidly into English from your native Hindi--

VIKRAM

Hindi is my second language. The poem is in Marathi--

FORSTER

And English is your third language?

VIKRAM

It is highly embarrassing to use English words before a born Englishman! I have a very heavy accident.

FORSTER

You mustn't be embarrassed, Vikram, but very proud indeed. Have you written down your poem?

VIKRAM

No...I cannot write, Sahib. I am ashamed.

FORSTER

All the more astonishing! How did you come by the original poem?

VIKRAM

With the portrait, passed down over generations, tradition of mouth.

FORSTER

But who gave it to you?

VIKRAM

The Maharajah, who has no need of it. Nor of the keys. Marathi wife of Akbar the Great--she is said to have originated the poem and saved the keys and portrait from destruction.

FORSTER

And how may I be of help?

VIKRAM

I wish to find the treasure.

FORSTER

What is preventing you?

VIKRAM

I have found employment with the Maharajah in Guarihar, which is far from the place I believe the extraordinary treasure is hid.

FORSTER

Where is that?

VIKRAM

The epic is set in the court of Akbar the Great, during his military campaign near Ellora.

FORSTER

(Consults guidebook.)

I'll check my Baedaker's--

VIKRAM

To the south many miles. I am but a servant, and the Maharajah would not permit me leave, nor have I sufficient funds.

FORSTER

Do you want me to go to Ellora?

VIKRAM

Oh, Sahib, I thought you would never ask!

FORSTER

But I don't know how to--

VIKRAM

You may request me as your guide. The Maharajah will satisfy any request of his esteemed English visitor.

FORSTER

(Out.)

Vikram was right. The Maharajah, delighted that we got along, and with a bit of a smirk, gave me not only Vikram, but also a car.

They sit in car seats, VIKRAM driving, FORSTER in the rear, with the Baedaker's.

FORSTER (CONT'D)

This is a hopeless quest, Vikram.

VIKRAM

Yes, indeed, Sahib. We are most unlikely to find what we seek. But perhaps we will find something better still. Would you like to go on a tiger hunt?

FORSTER

Why do you want the treasure so avidly? Is the Maharajah a bad employer?

(No response.)

He has been nothing but gracious to me.

VIKRAM

You are a guest, and English. I am Marathi far from Pune, a wandering Jew.

FORSTER

But Marathis are Hindu, generally, or Muslim, yes?

VIKRAM

It was a metaphor, Sahib.

FORSTER

Ah, yes, I use them all the time.

VIKRAM

You are Christian, yes?

FORSTER

Only in form. I'm struggling to free myself of Christianity.

VIKRAM

Hindus are mostly satisfied with their place. It is the legacy of caste--

FORSTER

Barbaric!

VIKRAM

We are most grateful for English attempts to overturn it. But you are invaders, too.

FORSTER

Yes, I know. Clumsy and oafish at that. What do you think of Mr. Gandhi, Vikram?

VIKRAM

I do not know exactly what this treasure is, but with it the Mughal archer and a Hindu found peace, freedom--it is confusing but intriguing.

FORSTER

But the archer paid a terrible price. Did he die?

VIKRAM

Oh, worse than that, Sahib.

FORSTER

What is worse than death?

VIKRAM

It is a very long poem, Sahib.

FORSTER

We have a long drive to Ellora. And please stop calling me Sahib. It makes me feel hideously English. Call me Forster.

VIKRAM

Oh, no, Sahib, I cannot!

FORSTER

I insist!

VIKRAM

(Pointing.)

Look! Fruit bats sleeping in a tree!

FORSTER

Vikram, I will not be distracted. All my friends call me Forster.

VIKRAM

Oh, Sahib, I cannot be your friend. That is not proper.

FORSTER

You are my friend! You are! I'm but a once-upon-a-time popular author, and you--my friend--are a prodigy of note. I would be most desirous of your friendship.

VIKRAM

A prodigy! Is that not some sort of monster?

(Rebuffed, FORSTER sulks.)

Perhaps if we find the treasure we seek, we will be friends.

(No response.)

Forster.

FORSTER smiles and relaxes. VIKRAM does as well. After a moment, they leave the car. Sound of Hindu music. FORSTER gapes.

FORSTER

Good heavens, Vikram, these are astonishing!

VIKRAM

I believe they are more than one thousand years ago.

FORSTER

Carved of living rock! How deep do they go?

VIKRAM

I do not know, Forster. I see them for first time only, also.

(Pointing.)

These Hindu, those Jain, and those Buddhist.

FORSTER

All three faiths in harmony, side by side. And somewhere inside, a Muslim artifact.

VIKRAM

We do not know where the treasure is locked--

FORSTER

But surely it's in one of these caves! Where else?

VIKRAM

I am a stupid man. I deduce the treasure would be here, but am neither Holmes nor Watson enough to puzzle out more.

FORSTER

Do you know the ending of the poem?

VIKRAM

Yes, I translated it.

FORSTER

If your translation is accurate enough--and I have no doubt it is, Vikram--then perhaps the poem reveals the location.

VIKRAM

Oh, Forster, have you not heard enough of it already?

FORSTER

Hours, yes, but the story seemed barely begun.

VIKRAM

The genealogies hold great import. Like the first verses of your Gospel According to Matthew.

FORSTER

Not mine! What of the verses at the end?

VIKRAM

You would have me pass over the tale? Without what goes before, the ending will make no sense!

FORSTER

I can hear the story as we drive back to Guarihar rich as Maharajahs with the treasure. Just the final quatrains, please.

VIKRAM

The English, so impatient.

FORSTER

If not for the English, nothing in India would ever move.

VIKRAM

(Reciting.)

Thus Hasnain Khimji's tragic fate did rush
Upon the eunuch's death--

FORSTER

The hero was a eunuch?

VIKRAM

No, that is the other character. A Hindu.

(Reciting.)

Upon the eunuch's death, so ends the tale.
Their treasure hid forever near their graves,
Within Ellora's perfumed temple walls--

FORSTER

Elementary, my dear Vikram--it's inside one of the temples.

VIKRAM

But which? There are more than thirty, I am told!

FORSTER

Thirty-four, according to Baedaker's--

VIKRAM

All very large!

FORSTER

Recite!

VIKRAM

Forgotten like the faith remembered not--

FORSTER

Goodness, what does that mean?

VIKRAM

All faiths are remembered in India. Here they began! Even
your Christianity.

FORSTER

Not mine!

VIKRAM

Except--

FORSTER

What?

VIKRAM

In your travels through India, Forster, have you met a Buddhist?

FORSTER

No, that's true. Buddhism started in India but was forced out by a revival of Hinduism, is that not so?

VIKRAM

Truly, so then perhaps--

FORSTER AND VIKRAM

Buddhism is the forgotten faith!

They clasp each other in
enthusiasm, then quickly step
apart, embarrassed.

FORSTER

Which of these are the Buddhist temples?

VIKRAM

(Points.)

The abandoned ones?

FORSTER

Good show, Vikram! We've narrowed the field. More verses!

They walk, almost trotting.

VIKRAM

Forgotten like the faith remembered not,
Like daughter number ten of twelve young girls--

FORSTER

What does that mean?

VIKRAM

I do not know, I translate exact.

FORSTER

Ten of twelve--I think--

(Consults Baedeker.)

Yes! There are twelve Buddhist caves!

VIKRAM

So we must to explore--

FORSTER AND VIKRAM

Number ten!

More initially unguarded jubilation
followed by embarrassment. They
trot.

FORSTER

Verses, Vikram!

VIKRAM

Whose womb the secret holds that none may know--

FORSTER

The temple is the girl, the treasure is the secret!

(Counting temples.)

One, two--just eight more--

VIKRAM

No, Forster, I think you are counting backward--it is the
next!

FORSTER

It's huge!

They stop and stare.

FORSTER (CONT'D)

(Pawing through Baedeker.)

This one's called the Carpenter's Cave because the stone
ceiling looks like wooden beams.

VIKRAM

Alas, we cannot enter.

FORSTER

Why not? No one worships here now. Buddha doesn't much care.

VIKRAM

We have no light.

With a grin, FORSTER whips out an electric torch, and they walk cautiously into the cave. Lighting change so the torch is the only illumination.

FORSTER

Can you recite in the dark?

VIKRAM

Trod underfoot like dust, the treasure sleeps--

FORSTER

(Playing his flashlight about.)

It must be in the floor--

VIKRAM

The floor is solid stone.

FORSTER'S light fixes on a seated Buddha.

FORSTER

Look at that Buddha.

VIKRAM

Most beautiful. But he is sitting wrong.

FORSTER

How do you mean?

VIKRAM

It is not a posture of true contemplation. His legs--

FORSTER

He's not cross-legged.

VIKRAM

It is unusual. His feet--

FORSTER

Are on the floor.

VIKRAM

Trod underfoot like dust, the treasure sleeps--

FORSTER
A secret paver--!

VIKRAM (CONT'D)
A loose stone--!

They dive to the feet of the Buddha
to try to dig or pry loose a stone.
In their haste, FORSTER drops the
torch.

FORSTER (CONT'D)
Dammit, Vikram--? now look--!

VIKRAM (CONT'D)
You jostled me, Sahib--

FORSTER (CONT'D)
Stop calling me Sahib--

VIKRAM (CONT'D)
Be careful, that is my--

FORSTER (CONT'D)
Ow, Vikram, you're on my--

VIKRAM (CONT'D)
The light, the light--

FORSTER (CONT'D)
Sorry, is that your--

VIKRAM (CONT'D)
No, no, it is all right--

FORSTER (CONT'D)
All right?

VIKRAM

Yes, Forster.

(After a moment.)

All right.

FORSTER
(A whisper.)

Really?

VIKRAM
Yes, it is all right.

Silence, then some fumbling sounds
in the darkness.

FORSTER

Oh. My! Beg pardon.

Sound of FORSTER scrambling for the torch. He shines it on VIKRAM.

VIKRAM

It is all right, Forster. We are alone.

FORSTER

One is never alone in India.

VIKRAM

You live too much in fear.

FORSTER

And you in too much hope.

VIKRAM

It keeps us alive, yes?

Silence for a moment, VIKRAM
blinking in FORSTER'S light.
FORSTER seems frozen.

VIKRAM (CONT'D)

(After an uncomfortable
moment.)

I believe we have found the treasure.

FORSTER

Not yet.

VIKRAM

Then let us dig.

FORSTER

You dig. I'll hold the torch.

VIKRAM digs at the stone floor for
a few moments as FORSTER holds the
light.

VIKRAM

It does not feel solid.

FORSTER

There's a seam, a joint, I see it. There.

VIKRAM

Yes, it is loose, even, under the dust.

FORSTER

It's heavy--let me help.

FORSTER holds the torch in his armpit and together they lift a stone paver from the floor.

VIKRAM

Careful of your fingers--

FORSTER (CONT'D)

It's moving! Lift!

VIKRAM (CONT'D)

Toward me!

FORSTER (CONT'D)

Push!

They look in the hole they have made.

VIKRAM (CONT'D)

I know this kind of box.

FORSTER

The keys! But where is the keyhole?

Shakily, VIKRAM takes out the keys as FORSTER jiggles the box.

VIKRAM

Twist there.

(FORSTER does.)

FORSTER

It's coming off.

VIKRAM

That is the keyhole.

(Tries key.)

It turns. Use the second key.

(FORSTER does.)

FORSTER

Now the third--

(VIKRAM turns the third key.)

The fourth--

(FORSTER turns the fourth
key.)

VIKRAM

And now the final key.

Silently VIKRAM turns the key. After
a moment, the box opens. FORSTER
shines a light inside. They just
stare.

FORSTER

What is that?

VIKRAM

It is--

FORSTER

It's nothing! A symbol--

VIKRAM

It is most powerful--

FORSTER

(Reaching into the box.)

A splinter, a fragment--

VIKRAM

No! Do not touch it.

FORSTER

Whyever not? It's only--

VIKRAM

It is like Shiva, creator and destroyer--

FORSTER

You said it could mean freedom and peace--

VIKRAM

Freedom and peace oftimes come of creation and destruction--

FORSTER

Nevertheless--

VIKRAM

Freedom from petty Maharajahs, freedom from the British!

FORSTER

(Reaching again.)

Now I see.

VIKRAM

(Grabbing FORSTER'S arm.)

You do not understand it! You could destroy yourself!

FORSTER

(After a moment.)

Then make me--understand.

VIKRAM

Apologies, Sahib--

FORSTER AND VIKRAM

Forster!

VIKRAM

Only permit me--

FORSTER

Yes?

VIKRAM

To finish the poem--

FORSTER

Wasn't that the end, revealing the location of the box?

VIKRAM

The story is not finished until you have heard the middle. Without it the end is meaningless. Surely you know this?

FORSTER

Yes, of course, but we haven't time--

VIKRAM

In India there is nothing but time. Permit me to tell what happened to the last man to touch this--

FORSTER

Talisman. That's all it is--a fetish, a trinket.

VIKRAM

Permit me! Please.

FORSTER

Very well, but the battery in my torch--

VIKRAM

Shut it off.

After a moment, FORSTER turns off
his torch. Darkness.

FORSTER

And there we sat, Masood, an Indian and an Englishman in the dark, blind and confused, especially so after our clumsy fumbling with each other moments earlier. A state of frustration, anticipation, eager for something to be revealed. A secret both terrifying and liberating--if only I had known the dreadful place the poem would take us.

VIKRAM

According to the Prophet, images
Of man are sinful and idolatrous,
But that did not prevent the Mughal kings
From stealing Persian styles of ink and paint
And glorifying all their deeds in art.
Hasnain Khimji, an archer Allah blessed
With skill exceeding any man, had killed
More Hindu rebels in the Deccan than
All other archers in the Muslim ranks.
As his reward the Emperor commissioned
That a portrait should be made
Commemorating Khimji's greatest feat.
A handsome man he was, both bold and strong--

Lights come up on HASNAIN KHIMJI, a
handsome young man in ceremonial
Mughal attire, posing with some
irritation. He is played by the
same actor as FORSTER, but with a
much greater sense of self-
assurance.

VIKRAM (CONT'D)

But modest, too, and quite averse to pose
For pompous, vain, un-Muslim portraiture.

Lights come up on KAMAL KIRTANE, a
Hindu hymn singer and painter. He is
played by the same actor as VIKRAM,
and is dressed in simple Hindu
attire of the Mughal period. He is
painting HASNAIN.

HASNAIN

(Urdu accent.)

This is a sin, I hope you know, to let
You paint my likeness thus. It irks me, but
My Emperor insists, therefore I must
Obey.

KAMAL

(High, light voice.)

'Tis complicated, yes, I know.
My brush is but a single hair I plucked
From a small squirrel's tail, an intricate
And tiny portrait to create. In life,
The complicated seeks us out, and when
We capture it, we capture life as well.

HASNAIN

To live a moral life is intricate
Indeed.

KAMAL

You speak Marathi fluently,
The Urdu accent charming but quite light.
Most Mughals never bother with our tongue.

HASNAIN

Though Akbar, may he live forever, is
Our king, we are minority within
This land of shit on fire. So I must know
The people's tongue in dangerous times to keep
The peace.

KAMAL

But don't I paint you now because
You killed so many men whose tongue you speak?

HASNAIN

Another sin, one imam says, and yet The next is full of
praise for killing Infidels, of pivotal impor-
tance to our faith. I am a simple man
And do as I am told, but afterward
Am tortured with regret.

KAMAL gently adjusts HASNAIN'S pose
and HASNAIN obeys.

KAMAL

You live for peace?

HASNAIN

Praise Allah, yes! I'm loathe to string my bow.

KAMAL

And what of freedom, sir?

HASNAIN

The Emperor
Loves freedom, too, and lets you worship all
Your many gods, though this sends you to hell.
Remember, Akbar's father ordered shrines
Destroyed, but half a morning's walk from here
Ellora's temples unmolested lie.
And please don't call me sir.

KAMAL

Apologies--

HASNAIN

Hasnain.

HASNAIN KAMAL

(Indicating himself.)

Kamal.

HASNAIN

Kamal Kirtane?

KAMAL

Indeed.
You know my name?

HASNAIN

I am most honored to
Commit this sin with one so talented,
Admired by all not only for your brush
But also for your voice.

KAMAL resumes painting.

KAMAL

I'm blushing, sir--

HASNAIN AND KAMAL

--Hasnain--

KAMAL

That you should know my humble songs.

HASNAIN

The best-known eunuch singer in the land.
You are a eunuch, are you not?

KAMAL

For years
I served in the *zenana* keeping watch
O'er all of Akbar's wives--

HASNAIN AND KAMAL

--And may he live
Forever--

KAMAL

Where, of course, I could not serve
If I were but a common man. The years
Inside the harem taught me how to sing
And paint, for which I have but gratitude.

HASNAIN

Forgive me, but, Kamal, do you not yearn
To be a man in every sense?

KAMAL

To be hot tempted by a woman's flesh
And so to sin? According to your faith?

HASNAIN

The Prophet favors marriage--

KAMAL

You are wed?

HASNAIN

Not yet.

KAMAL

And so you burn. I understand.

(HASNAIN starts to protest.)

But pity not the eunuch, for not all
Is stolen by the knife, and we have ways
To take our pleasures where we can.

HASNAIN

(Uncomfortably.)

Another sin.

KAMAL

(Cheerfully.)

Ah, well.

Silence for a moment as KAMAL
paints.

HASNAIN

The Emperor has wives
Of every faith and studies every creed
With equal ardor, makes religious men
Debate Koran and Talmud--Vedas, too.
His liberality regarding God
Is bad for Islam but helps rule the land
In fairness--"peace for all."

KAMAL

How so?

HASNAIN

Abolishing the *jizya* tax.

KAMAL

A minor point beside the massacre
Of thirty thousand Hindus at Chitod--

HASNAIN

An insurrection--!

KAMAL

Or the Jauhar
Of Hindu women there--

HASNAIN

The Jauhar--
What's that?

KAMAL

Self-immolation, also called
Suttee.

HASNAIN

These terrible events, the bloody road
To peace.

KAMAL

There is another way.

HASNAIN

Negotiation, yes--

KAMAL

Oh, no, not that.

HASNAIN

What then?

KAMAL

When opposites unite, then peace will reign.

HASNAIN

A pretty dream--

KAMAL

Can man and wife unite?

HASNAIN

That kind of peace does not last very long.

KAMAL

To force one of his followers to pay
Homage to both himself and his consort,
Lord Shiva merged himself with her--one breast,
One male member, dancing in the act
Of ripe creation--

HASNAIN

Opposites as one.

KAMAL

(Indicating HASNAIN.)

A Mughal warrior--

(Indicating himself.)

A Hindu man

With violence cut out, an archer and

An artist--these are opposites.

KAMAL once again manipulates HASNAIN'S pose, a more intimate interaction than the first time. He is exacting, so it takes a while. HASNAIN is uncomfortable, but intrigued, as KAMAL'S touch veers dangerously close to seduction but never quite crosses the line.

HASNAIN

Yes, but--

KAMAL

Can two such men unite in peace?

HASNAIN

Perhaps,

But not as man and woman do! And how

Would two mere men give birth to peace? We share

A country so much larger than ourselves,

And not so peacefully inclined.

KAMAL

I have

An ancient amulet that can bring peace

When ritual and righteousness are one.

HASNAIN

Then why have you not used it until now?

The world has suffered long with war--

KAMAL

Because I had not found my opposite.

The magic only works when it is shared.

HASNAIN

Black magic is a slap to Allah's face!

KAMAL

Apologies. That was a metaphor.
It is an invocation, nothing more.

HASNAIN

If not of Allah, then 'tis still a sin.

KAMAL

Lord Shiva said, "Whichever god a man
Prays to, I am the one who answers him."

HASNAIN

O facile words--!

KAMAL

And does Allah desire
Peace?

HASNAIN

Above all else. And so do I.

KAMAL

Then you must find the talisman.

HASNAIN

Hold on--
You said you had it, did you not?

KAMAL

I had
It, yes, and still could fetch it easily
Until I hid the keys where I can go
No more.

HASNAIN

Where's that?

KAMAL

They're in the harem with
The first five wives of Akbar--

HASNAIN

That's impos-
-sible! To enter the zenana is
Forbidden any man, except, of course,
Those mutilated like yourself--

KAMAL

I know
The secret ways--

HASNAIN

Then why can you not go?

KAMAL

The Emperor
Is fond of me but jealous of the way
His wives entrust their thoughts to singers and
To artists. I became too close--

HASNAIN

--But not--

KAMAL

No, not that close, or I would now be dead.
I'm merely banned, confined to art and song.

HASNAIN

And you'd send me where I would surely die!

KAMAL

But not unarmed! I know the weakness of
Each wife and how she'll be persuaded to
Deliver up the key and hide you from
Her husband.

HASNAIN

Now the road to peace is bloody,
Sinful, evil, worse than war itself!

KAMAL

The first five wives each come from different faiths,
And what their gods forbid them they most crave.
The Muslim wife cannot drink wine or beer.
The Hindu shan't eat beef. The Jain will pine
For chicken flesh because she cannot kill
A living thing. The Buddhist, in her bare

(MORE)

KAMAL (CONT'D)

Austerity, does lust for silk. The wife
Of Christian faith is easiest of all--
With no constraints on alcohol or meat
Or luxury, she only yearns for love denied:
The flesh of any man but he she wed.

HASNAIN

To cuckold Akbar--

HASNAIN AND KAMAL

--May he live forever--

HASNAIN

That is all you ask?

KAMAL

It is a sin,
Of that there is no doubt.

HASNAIN

I cannot risk
My own immortal soul for magic and
An amulet that may not even work.
What is this trinket? Why should I believe
In something I have never seen?

KAMAL

You've seen Allah, my friend?
(HASNAIN looks annoyed.)
Perhaps you need to hear
The legend of this amulet of old.

HASNAIN

Immobilized for portraiture, what else
Have I do to but listen to a tale?

KAMAL

Not just a tale, a song.

HASNAIN

I'll get to hear
You sing? A privilege indeed! Proceed.

KAMAL

It is quite long.

HASNAIN

I beg of you!

KAMAL

All right.

HASNAIN KAMAL

The legend handed down from Sanskrit verse
 Called "sloka" with quatrains that rhyme, is from
 A time soon after Aryans swept down
 Upon the Ganges plain from northern climes.
 Pale men made demons of our gods because
 Dark mysteries were threatening to them.
 Twas then that caste arose in India,
 To keep us in our place, a subject race.
 But we embraced invaders, made their gods
 Our own, and quietly absorbed their ways.
 Just as a woman who is raped gives birth
 And even loves her violator's child.

HASNAIN

I don't want history--I want a song!

KAMAL

(Sings.)

Mahishisura was half man,
 Half buffalo, of demon clan,
 And wished to learn the secret of
 Both peace and everlasting love.

As KAMAL sings, the light on
 HASNAIN dims until KAMAL is
 isolated in light. KAMAL transforms
 himself into MAHISHISURA as he
 sings, putting on beautiful
 feminine garments and veiling his
 face.

KAMAL (CONT'D)

(Sings.)

Mahishisura knew Amit,
 Who studied at the Sage's feet
 Had learnt the secret that he craved.
 Mahishisura misbehaved.
 He put on clothes that women wear,
 The softest silk and perfumed hair.

KAMAL/MAHISHISHURA begins to dance.

KAMAL (CONT'D)

(Sings.)

Disguised and beautiful he came
Seductive as a candle flame
To weaken the disciple's will
And make Amit his secret spill.
Mahishisura's prurience
'Gainst Amit's vows of abstinence
At first proved futile in technique,
For Amit never ceased to speak
About the gods' eternal reign.
Mahishisura danced in vain.

AMIT, a beautiful ascetic clad in a
dhoti, is suddenly illuminated in a
lotus position. He is played by
the same actor as HASNAIN.
MAHISHISURA dances around him.

AMIT

Draupadi sought a husband wise,
Great strength and virtue in his eyes,
And merciful and handsome, too.
An average god would never do.
For these five traits she hunts and hunts,
But no man has them all at once.
Draupadi fell into despair--
She couldn't find him anywhere.
Then the Pandava brothers came--
Each had a trait that was the same
As one of those Draupadi sought:
Ardjuna heavenly virtue brought,
And Yudistira mercy showed
While Nakula with beauty glowed.
Sahadeva's intelligence
And Bima's strong magnificence
Coaxed sad Draupadi's heart alive A
nd so she wed the brothers five.

MAHISHISURA

(In a feminine voice.)

I wish to wed as well, great sage.

AMIT

I'm only just in tutelage--

MAHISHISURA

(Stroking AMIT.)

Teach me, wise one, and I'll teach you.

AMIT

(Aroused against his will.)

What knowledge do you now pursue?

Quit that!

MAHISHISURA

Do you indeed wish me

To stop?

AMIT

I do.

MAHISHISURA

You don't. Set free

The secret of both love and peace.

AMIT

(Succumbing to the
seduction.)

The first you have, so please release--

MAHISHISURA

(Grabbing more tightly.)

Show me the way to peace, my friend, And I will bring this to
its end.

AMIT

(Close to ecstasy.)

A poor ascetic am I now

So easily to break a vow,

But I will show you how to live

To please the gods and so receive

Enlightenment and peace--

(MAHISHISURA pulls away.)

--Don't stop!

MAHISHISURA

I'll bring you to the mountaintop

When you reveal the mystery.

AMIT

(Kneeling.)

Then you must kneel--here, next to me.

MAHISHISURA

(Kneeling.)

A prayer is all it takes?

AMIT

It's true.

If worship is sincere, then you
Win Brahma's favor, love and peace.

MAHISHISURA

(Caressing AMIT forcefully.)

And I will give you your release.

AMIT has an orgasm. Lights out on
AMIT. MAHISHISURA, sheds the
womanly garb (revealing horns),
remains kneeling and offers a
prayer.

MAHISHISURA (CONT'D)

Lord Brahma, once I was revered,
A god myself, before the feared
Invaders from the north came in,
Called me a demon dark in sin.
A Shudra issued from your feet,
The lowest of the low, I greet
Lord Brahma now in humble prayer.
I praise you, great creator fair.
With wisdom, beauty, virtue, strength,
And mercy, thou dost rule the length
And breadth of all the world we see,
And that we don't, the heavenly
Blest realm where all the gods do dwell.
A demon's prayer you may repel,
But mercy is thy trait, and hope
Is mine that the tremendous scope
Of thy vast power might grant a boon
To one poor worshipful buffoon.

MAHISHISURA prostrates himself.
BRAHMA appears, magnificent and
played by the same actor as AMIT.

He holds up the same notebook DANTE
held in the first scene.

BRAHMA

Peace unto you. Humility
Is rare in demons such as thee.
Instead your kind makes war upon
The gods, and most of you have gone
To hidden realms to plot your schemes.
But openly thy worship dreams
Of higher things. What is the boon
That thou wouldst have?

MAHISHISURA

My lord, how soon,
How quickly you have heard my plea!
Had I but known to worship thee
Brought such results, I'd done it long
Ago!

BRAHMA

You stand out from the throng
Of evil creatures. What shall I
Give thee?

MAHISHISURA

My life is all I cry
For, Lord.

BRAHMA

No fear, I will not take
That which I gave. Poor thing, you quake
As if a noose is on your neck!

MAHISHISURA

O gracious one, I'm but a speck
To thee or other gods. Protect
Me from their wrath.

BRAHMA

I must respect
Thy humble wish. You'll not be harmed.

MAHISHISURA

I'm safe from gods, however armed?

BRAHMA paints a holy swastika in
red on MAHISHISURA'S forehead.

BRAHMA

This peaceful swastika will shield
You from the gods so none may wield
A sword to threaten thee. A ban
Is in effect henceforward--

MAHISHISURA

Man?

BRAHMA

Beg pardon?

MAHISHISURA

Gods may not kill me--

BRAHMA

Tis true.

MAHISHISURA

I think, then, logically
No man may do me hurt as well?

BRAHMA

Thou shan't be killed by gods, I tell
Thee now. Nor shall a man have power
To bring thy death.

MAHISHISURA

(Standing, assured.)

This very hour
I'm off to heaven then.

BRAHMA

(Amused.)

To test
My gift?

MAHISHISURA

Immunity so blest
Makes me again a god.

BRAHMA

Oh, no--
It means not that!

MAHISHISURA

A god does what
He wishes, and I wish to strut
In heaven's halls unchallenged now.

BRAHMA

I gave thee peace and safety. How
Will you my generosity
Abuse?

MAHISHISURA

Is it stupidity
Instead, my holy Lord?

BRAHMA

Stay here

(Grabbing MAHISHISURA'S arm.)

And wreak your havoc in this sphere,
And not on heaven's sacred field.

MAHISHISURA

To your command I will not yield!

Without a costume change, BRAHMA
instantly becomes DANTE, holding up
the notebook. At the same time,
MAHISHISURA becomes SUNIL,
handcuffed to the chair.

DANTE

(New York accent)

Whe's Webster?! We've been here more than an hour--

SUNIL

Four thousand years--!

DANTE

--And I still have no idea what you did to him, motherfucker!

SUNIL

Patience, Sahib--!

DANTE

How can a goddam myth reveal the truth?!

SUNIL jumps up from the chair,
becoming MAHISHISURA. At the same
time DANTE becomes BRAHMA.

MAHISHISURA

(Knocking BRAHMA down.)

I'm bringing--

(Gesturing to swastika.)

Peace to paradise,
O mighty Brahma, O so wise!
Thy boon has made me safe from you
As well. I can't be killed--it's true--?
By any god nor any man.
So try and stop me, if you can!

BRAHMA

'Tis evil, this betrayal of
A gift I gave to thee in love!

MAHISHISURA

What I commit in mystery
Will echo on through history!

With a maniacal laugh, MAHISHISURA
flies up to heaven. BRAHMA is too
distracted to pick himself up as
MAHISHISURA'S laughter echoes.

Blackout.

END OF ACT ONE

ACT TWO

In the darkness, sounds of battle:
 roars, screams, explosions,
 crashes. GARUDA rushes on in a
 panic. Played by the same actor as
 MAHISHISURA, GARUDA has the limbs
 and torso of a man but the head,
 wings and tail of an eagle.

GARUDA

Lord Brahma, heaven trembles now!

BRAHMA appears, looking more than a
 little beat up.

GARUDA

Mahishisura broke his vow
 Of peace and battles deities!
 My Lord, your word can save us--please!

BRAHMA

My word's the cause--I did bestow
 The demon of the buffalo
 Immunity from god and man.

GARUDA

Then take it back, Lord, if you can!

BRAHMA

My word is law to me as well-?
 Pronounced, each holy syllable
 Must be obeyed and never changed.

GARUDA

But he is dangerous and deranged!
 Lord Vishnu fought with all his arms-?
 Then used his conch to sound alarms
 And summoned Siva to his side.
 While Vishnu scuttled off to hide,
 Lord Siva did his dance of death--
 The demon never paused for breath!
 He stole Lord Siva's tiger skin
 And left him shivering in chagrin.

BRAHMA

No god can harm him--

GARUDA

Yes, it's true!
He's beaten Krishna black and blue!

BRAHMA

We need a warrior of skill
Who quickly can this demon kill.

GARUDA

No god nor man has power to slay
This evil wretch! Let's fly away!

GARUDA flies away.

BRAHMA

Both men and gods tend to forget
Society's most awful threat--
The man who's hardest to police
Is he who says he comes in peace.
With flattery on fawning lips
This demon's put us in eclipse
And fed my vanity such meat
As made my intellect retreat.
Our shameful, sad predicament
Has been contrived with my consent.
So I must find a hero brave
Or fool who thinks that he can save
The gods from our own foolishness!
Dear me, I've made an awful mess!

BRAHMA rushes off as MAHISHISURA
appears, bloody but exhilarated.

MAHISHISURA

Not a drop of my own blood
Has fallen in the raging flood
Of godly gore I've shed today!
The whole of heaven's in my sway!
Fat Ganesha saw me prove
An obstacle he could not move.
The demon-slayer, Kartikay,
Despite six heads, was easy prey.
From me Garuda flew in fright.

(MORE)

MAHISHISURA (CONT'D)

Indra tumbled from his height,
 And I before I headed on
 A monkey made of Hanuman.

VOICE

(Off.)

Mahishisura, best beware
 Of arrogance!

MAHISHISURA

What's that? Who's there?

VOICE

(Coming from a different
 direction.)

I am the one who'll bring, my friend,
 Your reign of terror to an end.

MAHISHISURA

(Pointing to swastika.)

No god nor man can snuff my life!

VOICE

(Coming from yet another
 direction.)

I've been sent here to stop this strife.

MAHISHISURA

Will you bring peace through violence?

VOICE

(From another direction.)

It's necessary in defense.

MAHISHISURA

Hypocrisy! The lie divine!
 Your wars are good, but never mine!
 Come show yourself, frail heaven-spawn!

VOICE

(Another direction.)

I'll show you ruin.

MAHISHISURA

Bring it on!

A masked or helmeted WARRIOR
appears. He and MAHISHISURA square
off.

WARRIOR

Why do demons hate us so?

MAHISHISURA

If you're a god, then you must know.

They fight. It's pretty even.

WARRIOR

I am no god. Enlighten me.

MAHISHISURA

Can mortal man a hero be,
Prevail when mighty gods I've crushed?

WARRIOR

How into peril you have rushed.

MAHISHISURA

We are well matched. You have some skill.
You may deserve, before I kill,
To know the reason I assault
Your precious paradise. I fault
The gods for demonizing me.
They made dark skin iniquity,
Enslaved my soul in ages past,
Establishing degrees of caste.

WARRIOR

Tis only right to know your place.

MAHISHISURA

I'd rather choose, in any case.
You're weakening.

WARRIOR

And you are too.

MAHISHISURA

I've stamina to battle you
Eternally.

WARRIOR

So it appears,
For we have fought a thousand years.
But now we've reached the end of time.

MAHISHISURA

That's good--I'm running out of rhyme.
I have enjoyed our combat, but--

WARRIOR jabs at MAHISHISURA,
wounding him.

WARRIOR

Demon buffalo--!

MAHISHISURA

(Astonished.)

I'm cut!

WARRIOR

You're not immortal after all.

MAHISHISURA

I am! You have the power to maul,
Not kill!

WARRIOR

Let's test your theory, then!
(Slashes MAHISHISURA.)

MAHISHISURA

I bleed, but I will heal again!
You are a mortal, not divine,
But neither god nor man will dine
Upon my flesh!

WARRIOR takes off helmet, revealing
flowing locks.

WARRIOR

(In a tough but feminine
voice.)

I've hid my face Millennia. It's true
I'm not a god, nor man, but you
Can recognize a goddess when
You see one, yes?

MAHISHISURA

(Horrorified.)

Who are you then?

WARRIOR (DURGA)

I am the goddess Durga, known
For patience and to humor prone.
So I can wait a thousand years
To laugh while I cut off your ears.

They continue fighting.

MAHISHISURA

A goddess! Neither god nor man!

DURGA

And I can do what no god can.

MAHISHISURA

The boon I got now spells my doom!

DURGA

Before I send you to your tomb,
I offer mercy feminine--

MAHISHISURA

My life?

DURGA

No, that is mine. Your sin
Against the gods must be repaid.
Before you die, a final boon.

MAHISHISURA

What good is that? I'll be dead soon!

DURGA

You yearned to be a god again
And savor worship from all men--

MAHISHISURA

How can I be a god if dead?

DURGA

Your soul will live inside my head.

MAHISHISURA

How so?

DURGA

I will your flesh devour

And make you sacred from this hour.

MAHISHISURA

If literal or metaphor Neither is what I'd opt for.

DURGA

With you in me, we'll share delights Like human offerings and
rites.

MAHISHISURA

So incense at your altar burned,
Will come with prayers that I have earned?

DURGA

My temple is your temple, too.
Give me your life, you'll live anew.

MAHISHISURA

You swear? There's no semantic trick?

DURGA

You have my word I'll make it stick.

MAHISHISURA

(Kneeling.)

Then I submit to be consumed.

DURGA

Your life in mine will be resumed.

DURGA cuts off MAHISHISURA'S head.

DURGA

Oh, dear, I slipped--cut off his head.
I meant to clip his ears instead,
But it was an efficient blow
Two ears removed at once, just so.

DURGA consumes MAHISHISURA as she
speaks.

DURGA

Oh, demon buffalo, I honor you
Enough to keep my word as true.
Your flesh, your bone, what you're made of--
Consuming you's a form of love.
Though enemies in life, in death
We will be one, and for each breath
I take, you'll breathe as well.
When mortals worship me, from hell
You'll hear a portion of their prayers
And of their offerings some shares
Will come to you.

Mysterious roaring sound and a
flickering change of lighting,
possibly a brief blackout. The
sound dies and the lights return to
normal. There is nothing left of
MAHISHISURA but bones. DURGA picks
up a bone and examines it. On the
bone is clearly incised the red
swastika.

DURGA

What's this? The sign
Of Brahma's boon. I'll build a shrine
To house this sacred amulet--
Great power in this bone is set.
For peace in unity it grants
The one who learns the proper chants
And rituals the spell requires.
But he who comes with dark desires
And evil thoughts or knows not how
To wield the amulet, I vow
That in his hands it is a curse,
(MORE)

DURGA (CONT'D)

And brings damnation, death and worse.
 But risking all for peace is worth
 The chance, for everyone on Earth
 Knows in peace freedom can be found
 By anyone enslaved or bound.

KAMAL appears in light. Lights
 slowly fade on DURGA.

KAMAL

The shrine was lost millennia ago,
 But handed down for generations thence,
 The amulet its power retains. Though no
 One yet has dared perform the ritual
 For fear of worse than death. I learnt the words
 And complicated steps that one must take
 To conjure up the potent force within,
 But only opposites united turn
 The trick.

Lights up on HASNAIN posing as
 before.

HASNAIN

So now I'm turning tricks for you!

KAMAL

But just with Akbar's wives.

HASNAIN

You say
 This talisman, correctly coaxed, brings peace
 And freedom to the land?

KAMAL once again manipulates
 HASNAIN'S pose.

KAMAL

It is complex.

HASNAIN

Whose freedom do you seek, my friend Kamal?

KAMAL

That everyone be free is my great wish.

HASNAIN

But I am free. And though I disagree
I know you feel the Hindus are the slaves.

HASNAIN touches KAMAL, not groping,
but intimate, curious.

KAMAL

If I were not enslaved, my body would
Be whole. My history is written on
My flesh.

HASNAIN

It is too late for you.

KAMAL

I hope
To save another boy from suffering
This fate or worse.

HASNAIN

You advocate revolt
And pray to bring it on through magic spells.
A revolution 'gainst my Mughal lord,
The death of my own king you'd have me seek.
I fail to see what I'm to gain in this!

KAMAL

Just peace.

HASNAIN

Through war and civil strife!

KAMAL

Peace is
The goal of every war, an opposite
Again.

KAMAL steps away, avoiding
HASNAIN'S intimate touch.

HASNAIN

(After a moment.)

You are a clever man, Kamal,
Or if not man, a clever what you are.

KAMAL

You'll do it then?

HASNAIN

I'll risk my life to find
These hidden keys of yours, but what will you
Give me?

KAMAL

Whatever you desire, Hasnain.

HASNAIN

Desire is sin.

KAMAL

Then best put it behind
You if you can, thereby securing peace.

HASNAIN

Another clever turn of phrase! You twist
Words till they mean the opposite.

KAMAL

One last
Great property attributed to this
Strange amulet, and that's the means to save
From sin, forgive all faults, which is the way
To everlasting peace.

HASNAIN

Show me the way
To the zenana then, the secret door
To Akbar's heart--

HASNAIN AND KAMAL

--And may he live always.

KAMAL hands HASNAIN a wrapped
package and points the way. HASNAIN
begins his journey as KAMAL
narrates it.

KAMAL

A secret door indeed! The path is long,
Circuitous, so follow closely on

(MORE)

KAMAL (CONT'D)

My words.

Lights out on KAMAL as his voice
continues in the darkness, and
HASNAIN creeps toward his destiny.

KAMAL (V.O.)

Turn right, then go down twenty stairs. You'll find
Three doors--choose left, then forty paces down
A hall. Turn right, and at your knee you'll see
A door no taller than a pig--no, wait--
I'm sorry, not a pig, my Muslim friend--
A dog! Now crawl. The tunnel sixty steps--?
That's if you were to walk--

HASNAIN

(Crawling.)

Humiliate

Me first, then make me lose my way--is that
His plan?

KAMAL (V.O.)

Stand when you reach the end, and sniff The air.

HASNAIN

(Stands, sniffs.)

It's jasmine!

KAMAL (V.O.)

You are getting close.
Turn to the left, walk forty paces on,
Reach out your hands and on both sides you'll feel--

HASNAIN

(Reaching out.)

Rich tapestries!

KAMAL (V.O.)

You're almost there. Turn right,
And pull the tapestry aside. Go through,
And twenty paces straight ahead you'll hear--

Sound of water.

HASNAIN

A fountain, giggling like a girl!

KAMAL (V.O.)

Turn left.

It's only ten steps more. Turn right.

What do You see?

HASNAIN AND KAMAL

A light.

KAMAL (V.O.)

There sleeps the Muslim wife.

She dreams of wine poured sweet upon her lips

Or beer, a golden foam against the glass.

You have a potion that will slake her thirst

And make her render that which will slake yours.

As KAMAL describes, HASNAIN finds a MUSLIM WIFE (played by the same actor as KAMAL) asleep in a mound of pillows. He touches her, she starts awake, draws back, but relaxes when she sees the cup he proffers from his pack.

KAMAL (V.O.)

Be careful with this one, she is the first

Of Akbar's wives, and oldest, too.

The MUSLIM WIFE drinks of the cup, reacts, drinks again, reacts, then passes out.

KAMAL (V.O.)

She is

Susceptible to alcohol. Now take

The key she wears around her neck and let

Her sleep. But for the missing key she'll think

You were a dream.

HASNAIN takes the key and rises.
Lights out on the MUSLIM WIFE.

KAMAL (V.O.)

The taste of victory
Upon your lips, walk on until you see
A door. Go in, turn left again, and then
Another step, another door, step through,
Go forward to till you hear--

Sound of a woman's gentle laugh.

HASNAIN AND KAMAL

A laugh.

KAMAL (V.O.)

That is
The Hindu wife.

HASNAIN finds the HINDU WIFE
(played by the same actor as KAMAL)
on pillows, this one wearing a
different color. She jumps up.

KAMAL (V.O.)

Give her forbidden flesh.

HASNAIN proffers a beef rib with
cooked meat clinging to the bone.
The WOMAN turns away, snatches the
bone from him, and gnaws on the
bone.

KAMAL (V.O.)

She'll chew herself insensible so you
Can simply take what you desire. She will
Not even notice that it's disappeared.
She is my favorite of the wives, so please
Be gentle with her if you can, my friend.

HASNAIN strokes the HINDU WIFE'S
neck from behind until he finds the
chain holding the key. He jerks it
off her neck, breaking the chain,
but she doesn't stop munching.

KAMAL (V.O.)

Turn right.

HASNAIN walks. Lights out on the
HINDU WIFE.

KAMAL (V.O.)

Creep further down the hall until
Your nostrils catch the scent--

HASNAIN AND KAMAL

--Of sandalwood!

KAMAL (V.O.)

That is the incense of the Jain, the wife
Most pious, wearing white.

Lights up on the JAIN WIFE (played
by the same actor as KAMAL) praying
with a burning stick of incense.
She wears a simple white robe.
Seeing her, HASNAIN reaches into
his pack and brings out a chicken
leg, waving it behind the JAIN
WIFE.

KAMAL (V.O.)

But she can be
Persuaded by her own taboo, just like
The rest. She knows the bird killed for its flesh
Is manifest of sin, but can't resist.

The JAIN WIFE smells the chicken,
turns around and grabs it. She
gnaws the bone with great
concentration, allowing HASNAIN to
pull the key from where it dangles
between her breasts.

KAMAL (V.O.)

The immolation of the chicken in
Tandoori tomb will horrify her soul
But tempt her tongue. The key that dangles twixt
Her firm, young breasts is yours for pillaging.
Before she finishes her feast, sneak out
The door and down the passage to the left,
Then left and left again. A few more steps--

HASNAIN leaves the JAIN WIFE, and
the lights go out on her.

KAMAL (V.O.)

You'll feel a breeze upon your face that comes
From stonework *jalis* carved to ventilate
The royal ladies in the summer heat.
Pass through an archway to your left, ten steps,
The marble of the floor to sandstone turns
From white to red.

Lights up on the saffron-robed
BUDDHIST WIFE (played by the same
actor as KAMAL) in meditation.

KAMAL (V.O.)

And there in saffron robe
You'll see the Buddhist wife, austere and grim.
Her eyelids shut against the temporal world
She meditates on purity and faith.

HASNAIN pulls a length of silk from
within his pack and drapes it over
the BUDDHIST WIFE. She starts at
first, then strokes the luxurious
textile longingly, ecstatic.

KAMAL (V.O.)

Though luxury and this world's senses keep
Her from Nirvana's joys, she can't help but
Indulge her skin and revel in the silk
That stands for earthly sensuality.

HASNAIN wraps the ecstatically
writhing BUDDHIST WIFE in a cocoon
of silk then reaches in and
retrieves a key.

KAMAL (V.O.)

Safely, softly smothered in a skein
Of rich delight, she will not keep you from
Your thievery. Then quietly depart
While she is wrapped in rapt tactility.

Lights out on the semi-mummified
BUDDHIST WIFE as HASNAIN continues
on his quest.

KAMAL (V.O.)

One wife remains, the Christian, youngest of
The five, most precious to the Emperor.
Four steps, turn left, three steps, turn left,
Two steps, turn left, one step and there you see
Her tight-shut door across the room. She waits
In hope of any man, but knows she hopes in vain.
If you but speak in manly tones, she'll fling
It open wide.

Lights up on the CHRISTIAN WIFE
(played by the same actor as KAMAL)
reading her Bible.

HASNAIN

May I come in?

CHRISTIAN WIFE
(Terrified but hopeful.)

Who's that?

HASNAIN

An archer.

CHRISTIAN WIFE

With an arrow?

HASNAIN

Yes.

CHRISTIAN WIFE

Then come.

HASNAIN enters the room. It's all
she can do to keep herself from
throwing herself upon him.

CHRISTIAN WIFE

You aren't just any archer--you're Hasnain,
The hero of my husband's royal force.

HASNAIN

Alas, I am betrayed, you know my name.

CHRISTIAN WIFE

I'll not betray you if you obey me.

HASNAIN

You are a queen. As you command, I'll do.

CHRISTIAN WIFE

Come here, then, famous archer. I must see
How you propel your shaft into the heart
Of one you must destroy.

HASNAIN approaches the CHRISTIAN WIFE. She grabs him and they fall into the pile of pillows. While they make passionate love, KAMAL continues his instructions.

KAMAL (V.O.)

Surrender to
Her lust, but don't forget that she to you
Surrender must be the final key.

HASNAIN and the CHRISTIAN WIFE quickly come to mutual orgasm deep in the pillows. At the final groan, HASNAIN'S arm shoots out above the sea of pillows, the key in his hand.

KAMAL (V.O.)

Well done.

HASNAIN leaps up. Lights out on the CHRISTIAN WIFE.

KAMAL (V.O.)

The rest is simple: now retrace your steps.

HASNAIN looks annoyed and
bewildered for a moment, but then
retraces his steps in double time.

KAMAL (V.O.)

(Also doubletime.)

One step, turn right, two steps, turn right, three steps,
Turn right, four steps, the sandstone floor now turns
To marble white, ten steps, upon your face
The breeze, turn left, a few more steps, then right-?
Smell sandalwood? Then right, then right and down
The passageway--

Sound of sobbing.

KAMAL (V.O.)

The laughter turned to tears.
Go forward to a door, step through, then step
Again, turn right, go through another door,
Go straight ahead until you see the light.
Turn left, ten steps, turn right--

Sound of water.

KAMAL (V.O.)

The fountain laughs.
Go twenty paces to the tapestry
Pass through, then forty paces, right--

HASNAIN AND KAMAL

I (You) smell The jasmine!

KAMAL (V.O.)

Crawl now sixty steps, stand up
Turn left, go forty paces more, choose right,
Ascend the twenty stairs, turn left

Lights illuminate KAMAL as he and
HASNAIN see each other.

HASNAIN AND KAMAL

And there (here)
You are (I am)!

In great relief HASNAIN flings himself into KAMAL'S arms and kisses him passionately. KAMAL is only briefly surprised and returns the kiss with equal ardor. After a few moments, HASNAIN steps back, embarrassed and slightly shy. He holds out the keys.

HASNAIN

I got your keys.

KAMAL

(Taking the keys.)

You have my thanks.

HASNAIN

And that is all?

KAMAL

Are you not sated with
The love of Akbar's wives?

HASNAIN

When I looked in
Their eyes I saw you looking back at me.
Your face, your lips--

KAMAL

Another sin is your
Reward if you should wish.

HASNAIN

(Overcome.)

My heart--I wish--

KAMAL

Then meet me here tonight--I'll bring the box
In which the talisman is hid. Then both
Of us will meet our destiny within
Each other's arms and in the amulet's
Sweet supernatural embrace.

HASNAIN

What time?

KAMAL

Do not come till the moon has set. Our spell
May not be witnessed by a soul except
Ourselves. Now go. I have much to prepare.

Light on his feet, HASNAIN runs
off. KAMAL creates a magic circle
of sprinkled sand, a sort of
mandala, as he speaks.

KAMAL

The elements at last fall into place:
The lock the five keys open will reveal
The talisman unused for centuries
For fear of curses worse than death itself.

Lighting change as the moon sets.

KAMAL

The darkest night, a blackened curtain draws
Around our ritual. Two souls unite
To make themselves as one--two psyches born
As opposite each other as can be.
And when the prayers are uttered by the pure
Of heart, with love profound and blessed by gods
Though shunned by men, all sins will be reversed,
Forgiven everywhere.

(Lights incense.)

The power of
The amulet, when stirred by righteous words
Mends all that's broken in the world. With good
Made whole, then evil loses strength and will,
So freedom melts the chains on human souls
Throughout the earth, not just this holy pair.
The Hindu people free from Mughal bonds,
A revolution fathered by a kiss!

HASNAIN

(Off.)

Kamal!

KAMAL

Not yet, Hasnain! I still must fetch
The box that holds the amulet.

HASNAIN

(Off.)

I'll wait.

But first give me your hand as surety.

Puzzled but complying, KAMAL stretches his arm forth into the darkness.

KAMAL

What needs my hand when you my heart possess?

Horrid chopping sound. KAMAL stiffens with the shock of pain. After a moment he gasps and clutches his arm to his chest--his hand is gone and only a bloody stump remains. Into the light steps the Emperor AKBAR, resplendent except for the severed hand he is holding. AKBAR is played by the same actor as HASNAIN.

AKBAR

As Emperor I own your heart, your hand--

(Takes the keys from the hand.)

And all that any loyal subject owes His king. But you have given them away With sodomitical, rebellious glee. A thief you are as well. Sharia calls For this--

(Indicates severed hand.)

Just punishment. A pity for a thief To lose an artist's hand, your livelihood. No matter, for you'll lose your life as well Unless you tell me where to find this box You've hidden all these years, this talisman From ancient times ordained by pagan gods To bring the Mughal empire to its knees.

KAMAL

(Offering up his other hand.)

This hand I offer up as well--take it, And take my amputated life. I've lived A mutilated thrall since I was six.

(MORE)

KAMAL (CONT'D)

No threat of mere mortality can sway
 A man with nothing left to lose. A life
 In bonds has ceased to be a life, for one
 Poor man, for all your wretched Hindu slaves.

AKBAR clamps a handcuff (antique or
 possibly the same one DANTE used on
 SUNIL) on KAMAL'S remaining wrist
 and attaches the other end to the
 wall.

AKBAR

I'm hurt. You judge me as a despot with
 But scant regard for any faith but mine.
 Should I not bother with reforms? With laws
 That tolerate the Hindu gods, the Jain
 Refusal to defend my state? Is this
 The thanks I get for liberality?
 You judge me harshly, but I am the judge
 O'er all the land. My verdict in your case
 Will be a public spectacle, so no
 One can complain of secret trials, of doom
 Pronounced behind closed doors--an open court!

At AKBAR'S gesture, the lighting
 shifts to isolate the handcuffed
 KAMAL in light. AKBAR disappears
 in darkness, but continues in
 voiceover.

AKBAR (V.O.)

This eunuch has confessed--no, bragged--that he
 Seeks revolution, dissolution of
 Our state.

Roar from an unseen crowd.

AKBAR (V.O.)

For that alone he earns a painful death.

Another roar.

AKBAR (V.O)

But emperors benevolent can be,
 And though this would-be rebel values not
 His forfeit life, there is another life

(MORE)

AKBAR (V.O) (CONT'D)

That he can spare if he will tell us what
We want to know.

KAMAL reacts with real fear for the
first time.

AKBAR (V.O.)

He had a partner in
His crime, a man known once to all of us,
A hero of our race. Seduced by this
Unseemly half-man, he has fallen far.

Crowd roar.

AKBAR (V.O.)

My wife confessed he tempted her to sin,
And thought she would not tell because she too
Insulted her own faith with wicked deed.
I have forgiven her--she is my wife.

Crowd roar.

AKBAR (V.O.)

But he has paid the price for looking on
My wives, for seeing what is only mine
To see. By law, therefore, he sees no more!

HASNAIN, unbounded, but with a
bloody rag obscuring his eyes,
stumbles into an isolating light as
if pushed.

KAMAL

Hasnain!

HASNAIN

Kamal!

AKBAR (V.O.)

You see, they recognize
Each other--evidence enough of guilt.
But we will let the blind man live--against
What laws demand--if only he who sought
To crush Our state with sorcery and lies
Surrenders truths that we still want to know.

HASNAIN

It is a lie!

KAMAL

To save--

HASNAIN

They tortured me
And dare not let me live to tell a soul.

AKBAR (V.O.)

Speak Urdu, not the gutter tongue! We are
In court!

KAMAL

I will be tortured then as well,
And know that I cannot withstand the pain--

HASNAIN

I told them everything I knew.

KAMAL

We both
Shall die--

AKBAR (V.O.)

Don't speak Marathi here at court by law!

HASNAIN

You must not let the secret out!

KAMAL

And yet it must not die with me.

HASNAIN

Say where
It is your own tongue and you'll be heard
By your own people and the box is theirs.

AKBAR (V.O.)

Enough conspiracy! Speak Urdu now
Or die immediately!

KAMAL

Ask for a last
Request!

HASNAIN

How can that matter now?

KAMAL

Ask for
Your bow!

HASNAIN

But why?

KAMAL

I'll sing for you--you'll know!

AKBAR (V.O.)

I call the executioner!

HASNAIN

My Lord!

AKBAR (V.O.)

At last some proper Urdu--speak!

HASNAIN

I know
That I have sinned against Allah and you.
My death is all that I deserve and yet--

AKBAR (V.O.)

And yet?

HASNAIN

My last request--I'd like to have my bow.

AKBAR (V.O.)

What for?

HASNAIN

I am archer in the Mughal force.
I wish my final act to be a shot.

AKBAR (V.O.)

How will you aim? You have no eyes.

HASNAIN

Allah
Will guide my shaft into the air and safe
(MORE)

HASNAIN (CONT'D)

Again to ground. None of your court need fear.
Or do you doubt Allah's protecting hand?

AKBAR (V.O.)

It is a noble act, this final flight.
Bring him his famous bow and one last quill.

HASNAIN

Great Emperor, I thank you for this boon.

KAMAL

May I have one as well, O Generous Lord?

AKBAR (V.O.)

You're not of noble blood--no privileges--

KAMAL

I have a voice you once admired. I'd like
To serenade you one last time.

AKBAR (V.O.)

If you
Will sing the words I want to hear, then yes.

KAMAL

That I will do, Lord, if the archer's life
Will then be spared.

AKBAR (V.O.)

(Pleased.)

That's what I offered you.
A final shot, a final song--'twill do.

KAMAL

(Singing.)

Within Ellora's perfumed temple walls
Forgotten like the faith remembered not--

AKBAR (V.O.)

In Urdu! Sing in Urdu, fool!

KAMAL

(Singing.)
Like daughter number ten of
twelve young girls-

While KAMAL sings and AKBAR rants,
someone out of sight in the
darkness hands HASNAIN his bow and
arrow.

<p>AKBAR (V.O.) I'll start the torture now--I need to understand--!</p>	<p>KAMAL (Singing.) Whose womb the secret holds that none may know</p>
---	--

HASNAIN aims his arrow first at the
sky.

KAMAL
(Singing.)

Trod underfoot like dust, the treasure sleeps.

HASNAIN swiftly aims his arrow
toward KAMAL'S voice, and shoots
him in the heart. He dies
instantly, just after finishing his
song. Lights out on KAMAL.

AKBAR (V.O.)

Disarm him! Execute him now! Right now!

HASNAIN collapses, a knife in his
back.

AKBAR (V.O.)

Did anyone catch that? Who knows what he
Was singing? A Marathi speaker--now!

The pool of light tightens around
HASNAIN, the only known Hindi
speaker other than KAMAL.

AKBAR (V.O.)

Can anyone translate that song? We have
To know what those words mean! Our fate depends--?
The empire rests on finding what he's hid!

Darkness. After a moment, FORSTER
resumes his letter to Masood.

FORSTER

My dear Masood, are all Indians aware of this extraordinary poem? Is it purposely hidden from the English? Or do only Hindus know of it, and it's hidden from you Muslims as well?

In the darkness, VIKRAM lights a stick of incense.

FORSTER

It's all rather a muddle, with the sympathetic Hindu wife supposedly securing the keys and the portrait and then writing the Marathi poem. Why did she? A guilty conscience? Was she the wife who betrayed Hasnain to the Emperor?

Lights up on VIKRAM with incense inside the sand circle originally prepared by KAMAL. VIKRAM wears two garlands of blue lotus flowers around his neck. FORSTER stands outside the circle. The open box sits within the circle.

FORSTER

And why didn't she, who had all the elements, seek out the box and the amulet to complete the ritual?

VIKRAM

Perhaps she is not as clever as an Englishman.

FORSTER

Aren't we cheeky! Or perhaps she was ambivalent about conjuring peace and freedom that undoubtedly meant the overthrow of her husband's empire.

VIKRAM

Are you similarly ambivalent, Sahib?

FORSTER

Ah, Sahib again, is it?

VIKRAM

Forgive me, Forster, but it is only natural you resist the end of the British Empire.

FORSTER

End of the Empire! I thought your little amulet ceremony was intended only to set India free from British hegemony. Now it's the whole Empire. Ambitious, lad!

VIKRAM

Forster, I understood you to be for home rule and against the British Raj. Are you merely embarrassed by it?

FORSTER

No, no, absolutely, we must leave.

VIKRAM

Because the incantation would be spoilt by an impure heart.

FORSTER

Must I be pure, then? Pity.

VIKRAM

Pure in the sense of honest.

VIKRAM takes FORSTER'S hand.

FORSTER allows it, but is tentative, embarrassed.

VIKRAM

Two pure hearts, opposite but prepared to unite. Like Hasnain and Kamal, if they'd only had the chance to use the amulet.

FORSTER

Are we opposite enough? We are the same sex.

VIKRAM

(Leading FORSTER inside the circle.)

I an Indian servant, you a wealthy Englishman--

FORSTER

I'm far from wealthy--

VIKRAM

Me illiterate, you well educated--

VIKRAM places a garland of blue lotus flowers around FORSTER's neck.

FORSTER

You a genius, myself merely talented.

They kneel next to each other within the circle, facing the box.

VIKRAM

Black and white.

FORSTER

Young and old.

VIKRAM

But we want the same thing, do we not?

FORSTER

Yes.

VIKRAM reaches into the box and takes out the bone with the red swastika on it. He holds it aloft. FORSTER is uncomfortable with the ceremony, but tries to be a good sport.

VIKRAM

Yaa Devii Sarvabhuuteshhu Maatrirupena Sansthitah Yaa Devii Sarvabhuuteshhu Shaktirupena Sansthitah Yaa Devii Sarvabhuuteshhu Shaantirupena Sansthitah Namastasyaih Namastasyaih Namastasyaih Namoh Namah

[Goddess Durga is omnipresent. She is the personification of Universal Mother. She is a Mother, who is present everywhere and who is embodiment of power and energy. Great mother, who is present everywhere and who is embodiment of Peace. I bow to that mother, I bow to Durga, I bow to Shakti.]

Strange flicker of light and a mysterious roaring sound similar to the sound when DURGA consumed MAHISHISURA, but twisted and sinister. VIKRAM and FORSTER both gasp. Lighting returns to normal.

FORSTER

That wasn't right, was it?

VIKRAM

No.

FORSTER

Did we do it wrong?

VIKRAM

Something was not proper, I don't know what. The incense, the lotus, the circle--

FORSTER

(Taking the bone.)

Dear heaven, Vikram, look at the swastika! It was red before, wasn't it?

The swastika on the bone is now black.

VIKRAM

Black. It is very bad.

FORSTER

What happens if we do it wrong?

VIKRAM

We must return to Guarihar. Something terrible has occurred.

FORSTER

(Out.)

Vikram drove back to Guarihar in grim silence. Greeting us upon our arrival was a gaudy pile of wood draped with flower garlands.

VIKRAM

(Weeping.)

The Maharajah!

Indian music. VIKRAM and FORSTER stand side by side watching something. VIKRAM continues weeping.

FORSTER

Vikram, the Maharajah was more than seventy. The amulet had nothing to do with it!

An orange glow off-stage as a fire begins to consume the Maharajah's funeral pyre.

VIKRAM

I have insulted Durga with my trespass. I had no right to touch her sacred amulet, much less tempt the gods with her ritual!

FORSTER

Vikram, these are modern times! To blame some kind of voodoo--

VIKRAM

He was my Maharajah!

FORSTER tries, sotto voce, to calm VIKRAM down. They are at a funeral after all.

FORSTER

Your employer! I understand your grief, but you've done nothing but complain about his treatment of you--

VIKRAM

You do not understand! You British have ruled India for a hundred and fifty years and still do not understand. You will leave--

FORSTER

Yes, I must go home eventually--

VIKRAM

But we will absorb you, just like the Aryans and the Mughals before you-

VIKRAM

Our invaders become part of India, but India goes on.

FORSTER

Vikram, yes, of course, but that is entirely beside the point. A little dignity, please--this is a funeral and we must show our respect.

VIKRAM

(Sobbing.)

I cannot respect in silence.

FORSTER

You're acting like a woman.

VIKRAM

I was a woman to him.

The orange light gets brighter and
is soon the only illumination.

FORSTER

Vikram, surely not. I knew he had his boys, but you're a grown man, young and vital, and he was--well, older than even myself. I refuse to believe you were his--his--catamite!

VIKRAM

I do not know that word.

FORSTER

His--sexual--relief.

VIKRAM

I am ashamed.

FORSTER

No, no, even if it's true. No one need know--

VIKRAM

And I killed him.

FORSTER

No, you didn't, or if you did, I was part of it, so any guilt isn't yours alone--

VIKRAM

A good or evil act is the responsibility of the whole universe.

FORSTER

That's an especially Oriental way of looking at it--

VIKRAM

The Maharajah's brother has accused me of working ill magic.

FORSTER

Superstition!

VIKRAM

He told me what I must do. But I will do it my way.

FORSTER

You should go away--come with me when I return to England--

VIKRAM

Good-bye, Forster.

VIKRAM kisses FORSTER, then suddenly bolts, disappearing into the orange glow. Sound of a body landing on the burning pyre, possibly a crowd reaction. FORSTER is frozen, staring, horrified. After a few moments, he resumes his letter. The orange glow dies away.

FORSTER

(Out, stiffly.)

I'd heard of *suttee*, of course, the barbaric custom of wives throwing themselves on their husband's pyre. But, Masood, a man? However intimately connected to the Maharajah--surely this is unusual! I am deeply affected in ways I cannot describe. I have several assignments in towns across Northern India, but once these and my other duties at Dewas are concluded, I am free to leave the subcontinent and plan to do so with as little delay as possible.

SUNIL is revealed in light as the light on FORSTER fades. He is driving.

SUNIL

Doctor Webster, I am very confused. The homosexual Forster as much as confesses to a physical relationship with the barber--the very least an attraction--is that certainly at the shameful secret? What more could there be? He makes much of superstition, but does he believe in the power of the talisman or not?

WEBSTER is illuminated as well,
seated in the back seat.

WEBSTER

It's more than just sex, Sunil. That's why I spent all this money to come to India!

SUNIL

(Out.)

So near to the goal of his quest, I decided I could push him further.

(To WEBSTER.)

Did you steal this letter as you did the box?

WEBSTER

I didn't steal--!

SUNIL

Are you the first to read this letter? Has it never been published?

WEBSTER

It was given to me by Masood's great grandson. No other Forster scholar knows of its existence.

SUNIL

Together we've secured the keys from Varanasi, Khajuraho, Fatehpur Sikri, and Jaipur. Here--

SUNIL stops driving and they walk.

SUNIL

--In Udaipur, with the gods still watching over us, we may presume to find the final key and open this bloody box. Be careful--this entire mountain is a wildlife refuge--keep an eye out for sambars, panthers, jackals, wild boars--

WEBSTER

Panthers?

SUNIL

Even tigers.

(They walk.)

What will you do with what you find inside the box?

WEBSTER

That depends on what the letter says.

SUNIL

If it is the letter.

WEBSTER

What else could it be?

SUNIL

The amulet. Forster's letter never says what happened to it.

WEBSTER

A piece of bone has no bearing whatsoever on my Forster research--I'm only interested in the letter--his words.

SUNIL

(Pointing.)

Here is the Monsoon Palace of Udaipur.

WEBSTER

Quite a palace, once upon a time.

(Consulting FORSTER'S
letter.)

Forster says "The view of Udaipur from the ruin at sunset is legendary, and, according to Baedaker, key to a successful visit to Rajasthan."

SUNIL

Key?

WEBSTER

He goes on: "I managed to find a third-floor balcony that I had all to myself for three quarters of an hour."

(SUNIL points up, and they
walk up stairs.)

What was he doing there for forty-five minutes?

SUNIL

Viewing the sunset?

WEBSTER

Dante could spend more than an hour with a sunset--taking pictures as the colors changed, always trying to capture that green flash.

SUNIL

Who is Dante, please?

WEBSTER

(Unconsciously touching his ring.)

Oh, a friend. An excellent amateur photographer.

SUNIL

Your domestic partner?

WEBSTER

You did spend some time in America, didn't you?

SUNIL

The one who betrayed you?

WEBSTER

Betrayal's too strong a word, I guess. He just had a rather surprising change of heart.

SUNIL

After how long?

WEBSTER

Five years.

SUNIL

And now you are lonely.

WEBSTER

I really can't--talk about that.

SUNIL

I must confess a lie.

WEBSTER

A lie?

SUNIL

Homosexuality is no longer illegal in India.

WEBSTER

But the guidebook--

SUNIL

The law was only recently appealed.

They stop. WEBSTER cleans his ear
nervously.

SUNIL

Is this the balcony?

WEBSTER

(Pointing.)

Is that Udaipur?

SUNIL stands with one leg wrapped
around the other, FORSTER'S habit.

SUNIL

That is the famous view.

WEBSTER

(Consulting the letter.)

"Abandoned for lack of water, the palace, and this balcony in
particular, is all rather shabby. The marble facing on the
left side--"

(SUNIL points.)

"Was slightly loose, as were the bricks behind it."

They go to a wall and start testing
it for loose panels.

SUNIL

He took a great chance leaving keys where anything could have
happened since 1921.

WEBSTER

(Taking a panel out.)

There's a hollow space behind here--?

(Reaches in.)

(MORE)

WEBSTER (CONT'D)

I expect he thought Masood or someone else would find them sooner. Ah!

(Pulls out a key.)

SUNIL

(Pulls out the box.)

Are you ready?

WEBSTER

I've been waiting for this moment ever since I got the call from Masood's great grandson about the letter. Let them try to pursue that lawsuit now!

In reverent silence, they open the box using all five keys. WEBSTER opens the box but does not reach inside. SUNIL gestures impatiently. WEBSTER reaches into the box and pulls out an old envelope.

SUNIL

Open it!

WEBSTER

(Overcome.)

Research has so many dead ends--I hope--!

SUNIL grabs the letter. WEBSTER gives a little yelp but doesn't stop him. SUNIL opens the letter.

SUNIL

(Reading.)

"Concerning the events in Ellora and Guarihar, 1921."

WEBSTER

(Grabbing the letter.)

"My dear Masood." So he did expect Masood to chase after keys all over India!

Off: male voice shouting in unintelligible Hindi.

SUNIL

The palace is closing at sunset.

WEBSTER

There's still enough light to read.

(Back to the letter.)

"Sorry to send you on a wild goose chase, but only such a devoted friend as you would go on such a ridiculous quest."

(To SUNIL.)

Masood died in 1937 without reading between the lines of Forster's letter.

SUNIL

But you did.

Light out on SUNIL, isolating
WEBSTER in light.

WEBSTER

(Accent slowly becoming
English.)

"You have always had my heart. Now you have my soul. Perhaps this confession will surprise you not in the least, and I can hear you even now making mock of my fantastical imagination. But I am not alone in thinking the ritual at Ellora had consequences far beyond the death of the Maharajah of Guarihar. The Maharajah's brother broke his mourning to pay a visit to my room the night before the cremation.

Lights up on the BROTHER, an old man in Indian mourning clothes, trembling with anger. He is played by the same actor playing SUNIL. WEBSTER, without costume change, has become FORSTER.

BROTHER

That knave Vikram told me what you have done!

FORSTER

I've done nothing at all. What do you mean?

BROTHER

You used him like a woman, European degenerate! Then forced him to work a spell to kill my brother!

FORSTER

Vikram has reversed the situation entirely. He made an offer that was offensive to me, expecting I would enjoy his services in the same manner as your brother. And what would I know of spells?

(BROTHER reacts in surprise.)

You'd take the word of a Rajput barber over that of an Englishman?"

BROTHER stares for a moment, then bows and departs. Lighting shift as FORSTER gradually loses his English accent and becomes WEBSTER again.

FORSTER

He backed down immediately, almost kowtowing, and I never felt more British in my life. It was horrible. In the weeks since, I've kept on the move throughout India, as if to stay ahead of the dreadful events unleashed by that damnable Durga ritual with the talismanic bone. As you know, Masood, I am neither religious nor superstitious, but I know in my heart that my own impurity--my bred-in-the-bone allegiance to England--twisted the ceremony away from good toward evil. I can say we should quit India, but don't truly mean it. All manner of misfortune has followed me since Ellora, and I can feel evil spewing out into the world like plague rats.

Lights up on SUNIL again.

WEBSTER

(Reading.)

"When the swastika on the bone turned from red to black, it was as if the evil side of the holy symbol took on supernatural powers of its own, shuddering across the whole planet. I fear for all of us, and know I am to blame."

SUNIL

So he betrayed Vikram? Felt responsible for his act of suttee?

Off: male voice shouting in unintelligible Hindi. Lighting slowly changes to sunset.

WEBSTER

Oh, dear. Now I--oh, dear!

SUNIL

What is it, Webster?

WEBSTER

Masood's great grandson mentioned one other thing, but it didn't make a lick of sense till now. He said his grandfather tried to give the letter back to Forster in 1946 and Forster refused, saying he wanted nothing more than to forget what happened to him in India.

SUNIL

But he wrote a novel about it!

WEBSTER pulls out his iPhone, does a search.

WEBSTER

His last novel. But that wasn't--the part that was so cryptic--Forster told Masood's son that he felt responsible for the whole of the Second World War, that he'd "unleashed" it somehow--that's the word he used.

SUNIL

Unleashed a world war?

WEBSTER

Unleashed the swastika.

SUNIL

Oh.

WEBSTER

Unleashed...the Nazis.

SUNIL

But he didn't, of course. They were in Germany and he in India, and Adolf Hitler didn't come to power until--

WEBSTER

Nineteen thirty-three.

(Reading his iPhone.)

But the National Socialist Party was founded in--

(MORE)

WEBSTER (CONT'D)

(Waits for phone.)

--Nineteen nineteen--

SUNIL

So Forster couldn't have--

WEBSTER

(Reading from phone.)

--And adopted the swastika as its symbol in 1921.

SUNIL

(Picking the swastika bone
out of the box.)

Webster, no one's more superstitious than Indians, but it is absurd to think--this--caused the death of millions of people.

WEBSTER

Forster believed it. Perhaps that's why he never wrote a novel after A Passage to India in 1924, even though he lived until 1970. He felt this shadow over him, over the world because of him, and as he watched the swastika destroy Europe--

SUNIL

You don't believe it?

WEBSTER

No! Do you?

SUNIL

No! These are modern times. And yet...

WEBSTER

What?

SUNIL

How easily we found the five keys! How coincidental that you found the box, the first letter--

WEBSTER

It's not coincidence! My entire career has been about Forster--he's all I think about--

SUNIL

(Out.)

And then an evil spirit got into me.

(MORE)

SUNIL (CONT'D)

(To WEBSTER.)

Is that what Dante would say?

WEBSTER

Yes, in fact, that's exactly what he said.

SUNIL

Before he left.

WEBSTER

He said I was in love with Forster. Who was physically unprepossessing at best.

SUNIL

Not to mention dead for several decades.

WEBSTER

(Laughs.)

Dante didn't leave--I did. He told me if I went to India, not to come back. I told him, if he really wanted me, he'd come get me. He tested me, and I tested him. Both failed!

(Laughs a bit hysterically.)

A further distance off: male voice shouting in unintelligible Hindi.

SUNIL

The Monsoon Palace is closed.

WEBSTER

We're locked in?

SUNIL

I have been a guide here before. It is much easier to get out than in.

WEBSTER

We can't stay.

But neither of them moves. They stare at each other without speaking for a moment.

SUNIL

Perhaps we are meant to stay.
(Pointing.)

Look.

Lights up on the prayer circle
originally established by KAMAL.
The remains of a stick of incense
and some flowers lie there as well,
left by FORSTER and VIKRAM.

SUNIL

Someone has abandoned their worship.

WEBSTER

In this desolate place?

SUNIL

(Holds up the bone.)

The site was chosen by Maharana Sajjan Singh for its
spiritual properties.

WEBSTER

(Laughs nervously.)

I'm not participating in--

SUNIL goes to the circle and lights
the remains of the incense.

SUNIL

Forster believed he poisoned the world with the swastika.
Don't you owe him the courtesy of setting things right?

WEBSTER

Stuffing the Nazi genie back in the bottle? A little late.

SUNIL

Maybe there is worse to come if we don't.
(Pointing.)

And look at that sunset. If Dante were here...

WEBSTER

(Stares at the sunset a
moment.)

Please don't...speak of him.

SUNIL

(Putting garland on WEBSTER.)

Without the ceremony, your journey is not complete.

WEBSTER

I'm not praying. I will not pray.

SUNIL

(Leading WEBSTER into the circle.)

I know the prayer.

WEBSTER

I will not kneel to any god.

SUNIL

(Kneels.)

Remain standing then. Out of respect for Forster.

WEBSTER

I was born June 7. The day Forster died.

SUNIL

You are not religious, but you are most assuredly superstitious.

(Raises the bone and prays.)

Yaa Devii Sarvabhuuteshu Maatrirupena Sansthitah [She is a Mother, who is present everywhere and who is embodiment of power and energy.]

WEBSTER jolts.

WEBSTER

Oh!

SUNIL

Yaa Devii Sarvabhuuteshu
Shaktirupena Sansthitah
[Goddess Durga is
omnipresent. She is the
personification of Universal
Mother.]

WEBSTER

Suddenly I'm sleepy! We
weren't up that early!

SUNIL

Yaa Devii Sarvabhuteshu Shaantirupena Sansthitah [Great mother, who is present everywhere and who is embodiment of Peace.]

WEBSTER

(Walking off.)
I have to--if I can just--lie
down over here--

SUNIL

Namastasyaih Namastasyaih
Namastasyaih Namostamah
[I bow to that mother, I bow
to Durga, I bow to Shakti.]

Strange roaring sound and a flash
of light, similar to the sound and
light when DURGA devoured
MAHISHISURA. WEBSTER has
disappeared.

SUNIL

Webster, I do believe it worked.

(Looking around for WEBSTER.)

Webster, where are you?

(Runs off.)

Webster!

DANTE

(Appears in light.)

He just wandered off in the darkness and disappeared?

SUNIL

(Runs back on, now wearing
the UCLA t-shirt.)

Webster! There are tigers!

(Runs off again.)

DANTE

You're saying a tiger got him? Most of the so-called tiger
reserves in India haven't seen a tiger in decades!

Lights up on SUNIL seated
handcuffed to the chair, shirtless
as before.

DANTE

And how did you end up in his t-shirt? Wouldn't a tiger have
torn it to shreds? Wouldn't there be blood?

SUNIL

(Sounding slightly more
American. Hint of a
southern accent.)

I don't know. Suddenly I was just--wearing it.

DANTE

So you've known all along who I was.

SUNIL

You were very amusing as a fake CIA agent.

DANTE

You knew I was Webster's partner and you didn't say?

SUNIL

I needed to know if I could trust you. Like, maybe you could
take off the handcuffs now.

DANTE

Can I trust you?

SUNIL

I've told you everything I know.

DANTE

Except where Webster is.

SUNIL

I think I know where he is.

DANTE

Where?

SUNIL

First the handcuffs.

(DANTE hesitates.)

I've no interest in running away. Only in being free. And I
can't show you locked up like this.

DANTE

Show me what?

SUNIL just glares at him. DANTE
takes off the handcuffs.

SUNIL

Thank you.

SUNIL starts removing his pants.

DANTE

What are you doing? I'm not like Webster, chasing after--

SUNIL AND DANTE

--Every little dark boy he sees.

DANTE

How'd you know that?

SUNIL

You complained about that all the time.

DANTE

Webster told you?

SUNIL

No. Do you object to dark boys?

SUNIL is wearing only his
underwear.

DANTE

I'm here to find Webster.

SUNIL

Why? You let him go--too much Forster all the time, then the possibility of this lawsuit--

DANTE

I can't believe he told you all that.

SUNIL

Why come halfway round the world in search of someone you betrayed?

DANTE

Betrayal is his melodrama.

SUNIL

So cold.

DANTE

I'm not cold. I'm--

(Suppresses a sudden sob.)

I'm here.

SUNIL

He's...very happy you went to such lengths to find him.

DANTE

He knows I'm here? Where is he?

SUNIL

Take off your clothes and I'll show you.

DANTE

Take off my clothes? Forget it.

SUNIL

Do you want to see him?

DANTE

Yes!

SUNIL

If I asked you to do something difficult, would you do it?

DANTE

Yes.

SUNIL

Take off your clothes.

DANTE

(Taking off his clothes.)

All right, but why?

SUNIL

(Reaching into his backpack,
taking out the box.)

So we can complete the ritual.

DANTE

That ritual's caused nothing but trouble. If Forster's to be believed, we could start World War Three!

SUNIL

(Taking out the amulet.)

Do you want to be with Webster?

DANTE

I want to know he's all right. Where is he?!

SUNIL

Here.

DANTE

In Mumbai?

SUNIL

In this room.

DANTE

In my room? How'd you manage that? Did the tiger drag his body here from Udaipur?

SUNIL

(Pointing to himself.)

He's here.

DANTE

What do you mean?

SUNIL

I'm Webster.

DANTE

No, you're not.

SUNIL

(Removing his underwear.)

And Sunil the tour guide. And Vikram the barber, Forster the writer, Hasnain the archer, Kamal the eunuch, Durga the goddess and Mahishisura the Buffalo Demon.

DANTE

How can they all be--you?

SUNIL

(Indicating the bone.)

Here's how. How else would I know all their stories?

(MORE)

SUNIL (CONT'D)

How else would I know where you're ticklish? How else would I have this?

SUNIL points to a scar next to his groin.

DANTE

That's...Webster's scar.

SUNIL

My history is written on my body.

DANTE

You couldn't--

SUNIL

(Kneeling with the bone.)

When we worship the goddess Durga, part of our offering goes to the Buffalo Demon, his just portion. The opposites unite.

(Cleans his ear like

WEBSTER.)

Kneel with me, papi.

DANTE

Webster?

SUNIL

Get nekkid with me.

DANTE

Webster...why didn't you say right away?

SUNIL

You wouldn't have believed me without hearing the full story. Kneel with me and you'll become part of India as well.

DANTE sheds his last bit of clothing then kneels next to SUNIL.

DANTE

You never pray. You don't worship anything.

SUNIL

Now I worship everything.

(Prays.)

(MORE)

SUNIL (CONT'D)

Yaa Devii Sarvabhuuteshhu Maatrirupena Sansthitah [Goddess Durga is omnipresent. She is the personification of Universal Mother.]

SUNIL lays the bone down so the swastika is visible. It is red. DANTE joins the chant. Lighting tightens to focus on DANTE, SUNIL and the amulet before them. Naked, they could be any of the characters in the play.

SUNIL AND DANTE

Yaa Devii Sarvabhuuteshhu Shaktirupena Sansthitah Yaa Devii Sarvabhuuteshhu Shaantirupena Sansthitah Namastasyaih Namastasyaih Namastasyaih Namamah

[She is a Mother, who is present everywhere and who is embodiment of power and energy. Great mother, who is present everywhere and who is embodiment of Peace. I bow to that mother, I bow to Durga, I bow to Shakti.]

THE END