

Chasing Hares
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"If it was a matter of hunting a deer, everyone well realised that he must remain faithful to his post; but if a hare happened to pass within reach of one of them, we cannot doubt that he would have gone off in pursuit of it without scruple..."

Jean-Jacques Rousseau – from *A Discourse on Inequality*

Cast:

**Prab
Kajol
Chellam
Devesh
Amba**

Plus:

**Journalist
Adil
Sasha**

***All actors should speak in their own accents.**

Prologue

This evening, Amba, late 20s, leans against her clapped out car on a grassy hill on the outskirts of Leicester, a sleeping baby lying on her chest. She wears her EatRightNow uniform – a Deliveroo-type takeaway food courier.

Amba: *(to the baby)* And Chandi wonders why they have to work so hard. Why there's never *enough* work, never *enough* food. Why the place they live is damp and cold, with wires sticking out all over the place and broken windows taped up yellow. How the weight of their heads aching, and the gaping hole in their bellies, and the fear beating in their hearts, stopped them from ever looking up. Stopped them from ever seeing the stars, let alone reaching for them... And she asks herself what could ever make them find the courage..?

She trails off, kisses her baby on the head and rubs his back.

Part One

Scene One

The early 2000s, inner city Kolkata. Prab is in the room where he lives with his wife Kajol and their 5-year-old daughter, Amba, in the apartment they share with Kajol's parents, and brother and sister in law. Prab sits in the curtained off corner where Amba sleeps on a rush mat. He's in the middle of a bedtime story – making it up as he goes along. He casts the occasional hand shadow puppet on the wall, using the dim glow of a cheap plug-in nightlight.

Prab: Chandi met the ogre at the mouth of the river, as agreed.
(Enthusiastic ogre impression) "O Chandi, some of your precious villagers spoke of your bravery, shortly before I ate them. But they didn't mention your phenomenal *stupidity*." *(Fearsome ogre laugh)* "Now you will be reunited with them as you're digested together." He lunges at her with his terrific claws. They are five times the size of the falcons' who hunt in the forest next to her village. But what do you think she does, Amba? Does she run? Does she cry? Can you imagine Chandi crying? However big the ogre is, however scary, Chandi knows she is two steps ahead, and that makes her brave. She puts her fingers in her mouth and whistles. The loudest, most piercing whistle *ever*. The ogre's so surprised he stops in his tracks and puts his big warty hands over his ears. But then he starts to laugh. "This is your final living act on earth? How pathetic." Chandi responds with just two words: "look up." First he hears the beating of their wings. So many of them it sounds like drums beating. Then they come into view. Hundreds, no *thousands*. No. *Millions* of falcons. Falcons from every part of the forest, falcons from forests in the neighbouring kingdom, and the one beyond that, and the one *beyond that*. Razor beaks wide open, waiting to taste this meaty

ogre flesh they have heard so much about. The sky darkens as they descend. “Arrrrggggggghhhhhh, my eyes...!” Chandi turns away. She will not gloat over her victory. She’s too good for that.

Kajol pulls aside the curtain.

Kajol: (to Prab) Come on, time to go.

Prab: I haven’t finished.

Kajol: Look at her, she’s fast asleep and you’re still wittering on. Come on, we don’t want to miss the start.

Prab reluctantly kisses Amba on the forehead, and joins Kajol in the other part of the room they share as a family. Lights up.

A million falcons? You’ll give her nightmares.

Prab: Ah, you were eavesdropping.

Kajol: No.

Prab: You were *gripped*, you couldn’t tear yourself away.

Kajol: Our first date in months and you want to waste time telling Amba stories. Bet you fell asleep.

Prab: We’re just going to talk about her all evening anyway.

Kajol: *Chellam Dey’s* performing tonight.

Prab: (*melodramatic*) “The Story of Draupadi.” Yawn. Now that *is* a story I could tell you in my sleep.

Kajol: (*of her sari*) Oh, I’m so glad I made an effort.

Prab: Shit is that... new?

Kajol: Borrowed it off my cousin – don’t worry.

Prab: ...Ravishing. What are you doing to me? Wow... She won’t mind if it gets creased..?

Kajol: I should be so lucky.

Prab does his ogre impression again, lunging at Kajol, ending up in a flirtatious embrace.

Kajol: Shh. You'll wake her up. Then we'll never get out of here. You know she's been pestering me all day about getting a slingshot?

Prab: Least we can *afford* a slingshot.

Kajol: Most kids her age are nagging their parents for an ipad.

Prab: I can *make* her a slingshot.

Kajol: Don't you dare. You'll get her into trouble, filling her head with all these silly ideas.

Prab: You said she was getting bullied.

Kajol: I said a *couple* of boys had called her names.

Prab: And next time she'll think WWCD, and scare the living shit out of them.

Kajol: 'WWCD..?'

Prab: 'What Would Chandi Do?'

Kajol: So that's her role model now? Some tearaway child with superhuman powers?

Prab: Don't talk about her like that. She's been Amba's friend since they were babies.

Kajol: Her *imaginary* friend.

Prab: Still counts.

Kajol: If *she* whistles, the only thing flying through the air will be a bag of schoolbooks – right into her face.

Prab: If she thinks like Chandi, walks like Chandi, *talks* like Chandi, maybe they'll think twice before giving her a hard time again.

Kajol: Ma can only sit with her for a couple of hours. Come *on*. We can argue later.

She grabs him. They exit.

Scene Two

A traditional Bengali folk theatre (jatra) troupe perform in the round, in an open air theatre. This is expressionist folk theatre. Chellam, 30s, performs a woeful song and dance as Draupadi, on being sold to Lord Duryodhana after being gambled

away by her husband, Yudhisthira, played by Devesh, late 20s. As she sings, Duryodhana enters, played by Adil, who's drunk, and grabs her by the hand. She resists, reaching out to Yudhisthira.

Draupadi: *(sings)* How many years
 have I given to you?
 How do you repay me?
 Breaking my heart in two.

 But I'm crying for nothing
 I'm crying for nothing
 'Cos my loving heart is worth nothing at all.

 If my love were money
 Would it be worth something to you?
 What price must I pay
 For the life we once knew?

 I'm crying for nothing
 I'm crying for nothing
 'Cos my loving heart is worth nothing at all.

 I'm crying for nothing
 I'm crying for nothing
 'Cos my loving heart is worth nothing at all.

Yudhisthira looks on, helpless, as Duryodhana grabs the pallu of Draupadi's sari and pulls, trying to disrobe her. Draupadi covers her breasts with her hands as she is spun round and round by the leering Duryodhana. Adil opportunistically pulls down Chellam's blouse. Chellam stamps on his foot as she spins. He yelps, and Chellam quickly rearranges her costume, managing to avoid revealing her nipple to the audience. Theatre magic makes the silk of Draupadi's sari infinitely long, covering her body despite Duryodhana's attempt to humiliate her. Draupadi falls to her knees and looks up to the sky.

Draupadi: Lord Krishna has saved my modesty.

Duryodhana storms over to Yudhisthira and shoves him to the ground.

Duryodhana: I'll make sure every goondah in the state knows you don't pay your debts.

Yudhisthira: That will only anger him more.

Duryodhana angrily points to the door for them to leave. Music as the couple exit.

Duryodhana: *(direct address)* Next time she won't be so lucky.

Adil comes out of character and stumbles from audience member to audience

member with a basket for donations. Prab and Kajol get up from their seats in the audience.

Prab: Come on.

Kajol: Where are you going?

Prab: Don't you want to meet the great "Chellam Dey"?

Kajol: ...No. What would I say..?

Prab: "I've been pestering my husband to bring me to this jatra for weeks..?" ...Even though it's a tired story we've heard a million times and the production was uninspiring."?

Kajol: Did you see that bastard tugging at her blouse? How dare he? I was so ashamed for her.

Prab: Even more reason to give her a little pep talk.

Kajol: It's almost 10.30. Ma will be waiting for us.

Prab: Do you know who that was playing Yudhisthira?

Kajol: No.

Prab: Mr *Nag's* son.

Kajol: Thought he had a big job overseas. Toronto or somewhere.

Prab: Nope.

Kajol: He lets his son parade around in jatras?

Prab: Needs a way to spend all that money.

Kajol: So he's throwing cash at vanity projects while the factory's been on lockdown for months?

Prab motions for her to keep her voice down.

Prab: Let's just show our faces. Say hello, be nice.

Kajol: Why?

Prab: If the factory ever opens again... *when* it opens again, I want to be the first person they think of. "Oh, that Prab's a cultured and intelligent fellow, he's the man we need on the shop floor."

Kajol: ... I don't know how to talk to actors. I don't know how to talk to *Chellam Dey*.

Prab: So I'll do the talking.

Kajol: You'll get overexcited and shoot your mouth off, say something off colour, or...(I don't know)

Prab: 'Off colour..?'

Kajol: You know what I mean. Give them a full review of the show they didn't ask for. Then it'll be "Oh, that Prab's annoying and opinionated, I never want to see him again as long as I live."

Prab: I'm not an idiot.

Kajol: Oh, you won't *plan* to, but the moment will overtake you and all of a sudden you'll find yourself having some sort of heated debate...

Prab: I am *not* here for a heated debate. I will be polite. I will be...*complimentary*.

Kajol: Make sure you are. Praise upon praise. Lots of enthusiasm. Especially about him.

Prab: He fluffed his lines in the last scene.

Kajol: Talk about...the song at the end. I *loved* the song at the end. Be specific, be positive.

Prab: What's this, a lesson in arse licking?

Kajol: This is how people get ahead. Doesn't matter how hard you work, how talented you are. What really matters is how effectively you can lick Nag's backside.

Prab: ...Okay, maybe you're right.

Kajol: How else do you think Mukherjee got that promotion?

Prab: He's over at Pritam, now. I hear he's in Product Development.

Kajol: Bet he is. Top class arse licker.

Prab: *Arsehole* more like.

Kajol: Wasn't going to waste his energies on you, was he?

They exit.

Scene Three

Chellam is removing her make up in the bare, makeshift dressing room.

Chellam: He did it on purpose.

Devesh: He's a bit drunk, he got carried away by your magnificent performance.

Chellam: You think this is funny? How about I pull your trousers down tomorrow night and we'll see who's laughing then?

Devesh: No one saw anything.

Chellam: Oh, that's okay then.

Devesh: You handled it well. He'll be limping for a few days.

Chellam: So now I'm supposed to learn my lines and practise self-defence?

Devesh: It's 'method' isn't it? Draupadi is terrified everyone in the court will see her tits. You were terrified everyone in the audience would see your tits.

Chellam throws her makeup remover at him.

Chellam: I wasn't terrified, I was *disgusted*.

Devesh: What do you want me to do? No one wants to join a jatra troupe anymore. Any actor with ambition has their sights on Mumbai.

Chellam: Oh, thanks a lot.

Devesh: You know what I mean. Always have to take everything so personally.

Chellam: I'm not working with him again.

Devesh: Drop the diva act, will you? The train has passed. You are not Sushmita Sen.

Chellam: I mean it. Fire him, or I walk.

Devesh: To where?

Chellam: I'd rather be unemployed than work with that bastard.

Devesh: He's the best we could get.

Chellam: Because all we ever do are these tedious adaptations of the fucking *Mahabharata*.

Devesh: Oh, The *Mahabharata*'s beneath you now, is it?

Chellam: It's 2000 years old – time we changed the record.

Devesh: 1.2 billion Hindus can't be wrong.

Chellam: Not sure if you've noticed, but they're not buying tickets.

A knock at the door.

Who is it?

Devesh: I ordered champagne.

Chellam: Ooh, think you can soften me up with a drink?

Devesh: We both know you're soft enough already.

Chellam opens the door. Prab and Kajol enter.

Prab: Hello. Sorry to disturb you.

Devesh: Who are you? Fucking security guards - chewing paan and playing cards as usual.

Prab: They let us in because they recognised me.

Devesh: Is that right? You're some sort of big shot, are you?

Prab: I work at Khub Bhalo. We just wanted to say how *much* we enjoyed the show.

Chellam: Really? Fucking *shit storm* tonight.

Prab: Oh. Um... No, not at all. You were really... *professional*.

Kajol glares at him.

Devesh: *(to Chellam)* There you are – that's one to put on the poster.

Kajol: He means you were great, he means you were *fantastic*. You have such star quality. It was impossible to take my eyes off you.

Chellam: Thank you.

Kajol: And your voice is *excellent*.

Prab: *Really* excellent.

Devesh: *(to Chellam)* Struggled a bit with the high notes today, didn't you?

Chellam: No, not really.

Devesh: Thought I heard a *bit* of a crack. *(sings a high note badly)*

Chellam: Ignore him – thinks he's a comedian.

Prab can't help but laugh. Devesh glares at him.

Prab: *(to Devesh)* Must be why you have such fantastic timing.

Devesh: Oh..?

Prab: You brought real... *tension* to the last scene. Can't be easy to allow all that silence to fill the stage.

Devesh: ...Yudhishthira is trying to comprehend what he's seeing – can he trust his own eyes? With other troupes, it's like he *expects* her sari to go on forever.

Chellam: There is no wonder or surprise anymore with this story. Everyone knows what's going to happen because they've heard it a *hundred* times before.

Prab: *(to Devesh)* But somehow you still managed to capture his astonishment, there in the moment. Experiencing this... *miracle* before his eyes.

Devesh: What do you do for my father?

Prab: I'm a machine operator. Embroidery.

Chellam: What's your name?

Prab: Prab.

Chellam: Did the show connect with you, Prab? The characters, I mean? Did their... problems chime with your own, in any way? *(for Devesh)* In any fucking way whatsoever?

Devesh: He's not here for a bloody lecture.

Chellam: This is the problem. You have no interest in what our audience thinks.

Kajol: Prab has a degree in Bengali Literature.

Prab nudges Kajol to shut up.

It's how he first caught my eye, actually. I saw him at the Coffee House telling some girl an idea he had for a novel/ and...

Prab: /Just a book of short stories. I was young/

Kajol: /...it was quite clear he was boring her senseless, but I liked the sound of it.

Chellam: That's actually quite romantic.

Prab: *(to Kajol)* You never told me that.

Kajol: You never asked.

Chellam: *(to Devesh)* There you go. You underestimate them.

Devesh: Didn't realise we had Rabindranath Tagore in tonight.

Chellam: *(to Prab)* What did you think of the show? Go on. Be honest.

Awkward beat.

Prab: Well, it was really...scary, when, um, Draupadi was faced with Duryodhana/ in his court.

Chellam: /It meant something to you? A couple of high caste bastards fighting over some rich bitch?

Prab: I...well...

Chellam: That's something you've experienced? Something you've witnessed in your life?

Prab: Well, no...

Chellam: *(to Devesh)* See?

Devesh: What? Some factory monkey trying to impress you. *(to Prab)* What are you after? *(of Chellam)* Something to remember later when your wife's asleep?

Kajol: Er, excuse me, but that is not/ acceptable...

Prab: /Draupadi's husband gets drunk and gambles her away - as if she's his property. Then she's sold to that creep Duryodhana and the first thing he does is try to humiliate her in front of his whole court. Why's the debt Draupadi's problem? *She* didn't run it up.

Chellam: *(to Prab)* Good question. *(to Devesh)* One I've asked in rehearsals.

Devesh: Yudhishtira is too weak to resist a game of dice, and at the end of the game he's desperate to stay in, so he stakes everything, even his wife and his brothers.

Prab: So, what? All debts must be paid, unless you happen to have Krishna on your side? If so you're probably a Brahmin or a bebshayi. No disrespect, sir, but those people don't spend their time at jatras.

Chellam: He's right.

Devesh: Baba appreciates the classics. He says there's a reason these stories have lasted so long – offered us wisdom from the Mughals, to the British, to fucking iphones and yoga apps.

Prab: Oh... I didn't know Mr Nag was so...

Devesh: What?

Prab: It's incredible he finds time to run a successful business and be so involved in the arts.

Devesh: Are you taking the piss?

Prab: ...No. Sir...

Devesh: Factory's been locked up for months.

Prab: I know, but that's surely a... shrewd business decision. He must have to make a lot of tough choices to run that place.

Devesh: What's your big idea?

Prab: ...My idea..?

Devesh: I'm starting to think you're one of those people who plays dumb but always has something tick tick ticking up here *(taps Prab's forehead)*

Prab smiles nervously.

We have a vacancy at the jatra.

Chellam: *Thank you.*

Devesh: I'm firing Adil. He's a mess, bloody liability. So if you have some big idea for a new direction for us, now is the time to speak up.

Prab: Um... I'm not a... *jatra* type, sir...

Kajol: *(to Devesh)* He's an expert. Seriously. A *massive* fan.

Devesh: Come on. You've got us all fired up, don't leave us with blue balls.

Chellam: We need something that will *speak* to our audience – really connect with them.

Everyone stares at Prab. Expectant beat.

Prab: ...How about the greatest untold Indian myth of all time? The one scholars have edited out of the *Mahabharata* over the centuries...

Kajol shoots him a querying look.

Devesh: Vikarna?

Prab: No.

Devesh: Ahilawati?

Prab: No.

Chellam: Her son..? The story of Barbarik?

Prab: No, not Barbarik... His... daughter.

Beat.

Devesh: I've never heard of him having a child.

Prab: No one has.

Chellam: Who is this child, then? What's his name?

Prab: *Her* name is...

Kajol discreetly shakes her head at him.

Chandi. And her story is full of danger and cunning and sacrifice and... the highest stakes of all.

Chellam: Why? What does she do?

Prab has to think on his feet.

Prab: ...After Barbarik's ultimate self-sacrifice, Chandi was forced into exile, to escape the wrath of the Kauravas, who blamed their defeat on her father. She never forgot his legacy though, and protected the weak and the vulnerable wherever she travelled.

Unimpressed beat.

Devesh: How did she do that? Nag them to death? No wait, maybe she sharpened her high heels and used them to... *(stabbing motion)*

Chellam: *(to Devesh)* Fuck you.

Prab: Chandi was small, but she knew this made her strong.

Devesh: Small but strong..? Like a... goat?

Chellam: Just hear him out, will you?

Prab: Like a *diamond*.

Devesh: Hmm.

Prab: Her enemies underestimated her. And she was cunning, and wise beyond her years, and spoke in such a way that people rallied to her cause.

Devesh: Sounds like Gandhi in a skirt. I mean. A real skirt.

Chellam: People are ready for something more radical. You go around thinking you're better than everyone else but our audience is way more sophisticated than you think.

Devesh: *(to Prab)* You in the union?

Kajol: /No no.

Prab: /No, definitely not.

Devesh: Communist?

Kajol: /Ore *baba* – no way!

Prab: /No, *sir*. I'm not political. Not at all. Never have been. I'm a company man. I like it here. I love my job.

Devesh: Alright, alright, take it down a bit. It's okay to be pissed off.

Prab is too intimidated to say he's pissed off.

Listen, I couldn't give a shit what you do in your spare time, but baba will.

Prab: Mr Nag..?

Devesh: Can you write something up?

Prab: I... write something...(up)?

Devesh: Are you deaf or something? Yes. Can. You. Write. Us. Something?

Kajol: He would be *honoured*.

Prab: Of course, of course I can.

Chellam: Excellent. Can't wait.

Devesh: How long do you need?

Prab: ...Um... I'm not sure... a month..?

Devesh: You've got two weeks. (*slapping him on the back*) It's called an opportunity, my friend. You look like I told you I'm fucking your sister.

Prab tries his best to laugh.

Do you have a sister?

Prab: No.

Devesh: Only joking. Lighten up, lighten up. Baba lets us use the backroom at the factory to rehearse. Bring it over when you're done and if it's any good, we'll take you on.

Chellam gives Prab a thumbs up behind Devesh's back.

Prab: Thank you...

Kajol: Thank you for the opportunity, sir...

Devesh starts to usher them out.

Devesh: (*to Chellam*) Happy now?

Chellam gives him the finger. Prab and Kajol exit.

Chellam: Do you enjoy being such an asshole?

Devesh: Day *and* night.

They start to passionately make out.

Scene Four

That night. Kajol gets ready for bed in their room while Prab works on the sewing machine, overlocking a pile of sari blouses. The hubbub outside of neighbours chatting, street sellers shouting and the hum and occasional blared horn of traffic.

Prab: You're the one who told me to 'get ahead'.

Kajol: Not by *lying*.

Prab: What's arse licking if not lying?

Kajol: It's not shooting your mouth off to your boss' son about some fairytale. You bloody... *lunatic*.

Prab: How was I supposed to know they're having an affair?

Kajol: Who said anything about an affair?

Prab: He's not interested in the theatre - he's just found a way to spend time with his girlfriend without everyone gossiping about them.

Kajol: Wow... She's *much* better looking than him. But... An actor..?

Prab: As long as I write something she likes, he'll go along with it.

Kajol: She wants something 'radical'. You can't do that.

Prab: She means something real. A story that will inspire ordinary people, light the spark that lies dormant in every one of us.

Kajol: That sounds like what *you* want.

Prab: She's an artist, she's interested in connecting with her audience, her *true* audience.

Kajol: She's an actor, she just wants a decent part, without some drunk mauling her every two minutes. Write what Devesh wants and take the money.

Prab: What's the point in that? They might as well carry on with the *Mahabharata*.

Kajol: It just has to *feel* new and exciting. Give it a... radical... flavour if you want, but don't go all out bloody Lenin, okay? You'll get us all in the shit.

Prab: You make it sound so mechanical.

Kajol: And we just pray he doesn't do his homework and find out you've been lying to his face.

Prab: I've thought about that. I'll tell him Chandi was written out centuries ago. Erased from history.

Kajol: So how come you know so much about her?

Prab: I'll say my uncle was a porter at Hansraj College and overheard some of the lecturers talking about her.

Kajol: Which uncle?

Prab: Boloram.

Kajol: Boloram's a deadbeat junkie.

Prab: He was a good student when he was younger. Maybe if he'd just had a break or two he could've made a decent life for himself.

Kajol: I don't think so, Prab. I think he likes heroin too much. Also, I think your plan stinks.

Prab: *(of their surroundings)* How long have we been here? Packed together in one room listening to your ma snoring on the floor downstairs? I'm just trying to find some creative solutions.

Kajol: Okay, okay. I know...

Prab: I'll come up with something.

Kajol: And when the factory opens again, Mr Nag'll realise you're too talented to still be a machinist after *five* years. How much do you get to write a jatra..?

Prab: Don't know.

Prab finishes the last of the blouses.

Prab: I forgot to say goodnight to Amba.

Kajol: Don't wake her – school tomorrow.

Prab pulls aside the curtain that separates Amba's sleeping area from the rest of the room. Lights dim as he settles down beside her bed.

Prab: *(pretending to pinch her nose off her face and holding up his thumb)*
Ore baba, what's this, what's this? You've lost your nose – how careless. Okay, okay, I'm sorry. Too old for this, yes, yes, I know. You're practically a grown up now. Now, where did we leave Chandi? What does she do next, chotto?

He makes a few shadow puppets on the wall.

What kind of terrible enemies does she encounter? The wiley wolf..? Or how about... a... demonic dragon? That is a bit too much like the ogre, isn't it? You're right... Then how about a story about these poor animals Chandi protects? Who are they, chotto? What's happened to them..?

Scene Five

A week later. Chellam sits reading in the back room at Khub Bhalo factory. Prab enters, carrying a jute bag.

Prab: Oh, sorry...

He goes to leave. Chellam puts down her book.

Chellam: Where are you going? You just got here.

Prab: I'm early. I'll wait outside.

Chellam: You're not early, Devesh is late. He's always late. If you stand around waiting for him we won't get anything done.

Prab: ...Oh. Okay. Yes.

Awkward beat.

Chellam: *(of his bag)* Is it in there?

Prab: Sorry?

Chellam: This new script we've been waiting for?

Prab: Would you like to take a look?

Chellam: Tell me about it. Get me up to speed before his majesty gets here and starts picking holes in everything.

Prab: Okay... Yes... Of course... Um... So, it's about this girl, Chandi...

Chellam: Where? When? Set the scene for god's sake.

Prab: Sorry. It's set in the past – say, a few hundred years ago...

Chellam: That's so... *vague*.

Prab: It's not really a historical piece. There's a blurring of real life and fantasy, so it doesn't need to be pinpointed in time.

Chellam: Fantasy?

Prab: Yes.

Chellam: The whole point of this project was to get away from all this mystical bullshit and finally look at *real people's* lives.

Prab: It is, it is. In the ways that matter – theme... Moral message...

Chellam: There aren't any dragons?

Prab: No... No dragons.

Chellam: Unicorns?

Prab: No.

Chellam: And it's set here?

Prab: Yes. I mean, not *here* here. It's set in the countryside.

Chellam: And this Chandi – does she know about her dad? Her royal blood?

Prab: As far as she knows, she's just an ordinary girl.

Chellam: How old is she?

Prab: Young.

Chellam: How young?

Prab: Um...

Chellam: This is my part, yes?

Prab: Late 20s?

Chellam: Great. And what does she want, what does she do?

Prab: Chandi lives by her wits alone, in the forest. She's poor, but she's kind, and she's...wiley. Resourceful. The animals in the forest know they can rely on her if they're in trouble.

Chellam: Sorry, what? The *animals*? Did you say the animals?

Prab: ...Yes.

Chellam: Fucking hell.

Prab: They live on land owned by Lord Sengupta. He's never bothered the animals much. A bit of hunting, yes, but there is an... equilibrium.

Chellam: An understanding.

Prab: Then he hears his arch rival, Chandok Sri, has a new venture. They're sworn enemies. Sure, they chit chat at cocktail parties but they wouldn't spit in the other's ear if his brain was on fire.

Chellam: What kind of venture?

Prab: Chandok Sri has always made his money by allowing peasants to live on his land while he collects taxes from them, just like Sengupta. They grow rice, maize, keep a goat or two – whatever they want. As long as they pay up in extra taxes whenever he fancies a new wing to his palace, or the dowry for another wife. If not, he sends his men to beat it out of them. But now suddenly Chandok Sri has cleared his lands of peasants. He's cleared the paddy fields, the maize fields, cut down all the forests. Most of the serfs are wandering the route between their two kingdoms, hungry and homeless.

Chellam: Drought? Famine?

Prab: Nothing like that. Sengupta's mystified – he sends his best spy over there. Seems the strongest and biggest peasants are still working Chandok Sri's land, but they're planting something new. A magical crop, whose fruit turns into money.

Chellam: A cash crop?

Prab: Exactly.

Chellam: Cotton?

Prab: Could be.

Chellam: Tobacco?

Prab: All that Sengupta knows is it's an amazing crop that can be harvested, stored, transported, and sold far across the sea. But what makes Sengupta apoplectic with rage is the limitless wealth it's brought to his archrival. He will not tolerate being the *second* most wealthy landowner in the region. He orders his men to clear the peasants from *his* fields. To clear the paddies, the maize and the forest. Most of the animals are driven out, but they capture the biggest and strongest to cultivate the land.

Chellam: And the weaker animals? The... little bunny rabbits, and the, I don't know, squirrels?

Prab: They're forced up into the mountains, to rebuild their lives. Sengupta's plantation flourishes and the small animals accept the new status quo. They find new streams to fish in, and forage berries on the craggy surface of the mountains. But just as they're establishing a new life for themselves, Sengupta's spies come to him with terrible news. Chandok Sri is expanding his plantation. He has extended his crop, achieving even bigger profits. He has a new island on which to holiday – just him and his entourage – and a new cruise ship to sail there on. This is unacceptable. Sengupta sends his men to clear more land and secure more animals and peasants to work his crops. The smaller animals find themselves pushed further up the mountains, and now they struggle against cold and hunger.

Chellam: So they turn to our heroine?

Prab: You've got it.

Chellam: Hm.

Chellam thinks about this for a moment.

So it's a story about the Naxalites?

Prab: ...No. No.

Chellam: Okay, but... the peasants fighting for land rights, a decent wage, dignity, all that?

Prab: It's not political. It's actually, er, based on a long lost story from the *Mahabharata*...

Chellam: Yeah, yeah, not *(bangs the table)* 'political', but it's an allegory, right? The animals are poor low caste fuckers being pushed around by the big shits and Chandi embodies the spirit of social justice and change.

Prab: ...That's a bit of a leap.

Chellam: Well, otherwise it's about some kid and a bunch of talking monkeys, so I think you should go with the allegory.

Prab: Mr Nag... Devesh said you were interested in exploring something... more... daring.

Chellam: It's definitely that.

Prab: But I think maybe he has... a slightly... different idea of what... that... means.

Chellam: Let me put your mind at rest. He has no fucking idea what he means.

Prab laughs nervously.

Shit, man, I was sick of Adil and his sloppy bullshit, but you're the exact opposite. You're so buttoned up it's like you're wearing a straightjacket.

Prab: I'm not sure I... (understand)

Chellam: Devesh is a simple soul, okay? Think of him like a... child. Smile, tell him what he wants to hear, he's happy.

Prab: Hmm...

Chellam gives him a gentle slap on the cheek. Prab's discomfited.

Chellam: I like the sound of this Chandi. I like the crazy magical realism shit. No one else is doing that right now.

Prab: Great.

Chellam: And don't worry about Devesh, okay? He wouldn't know an allegory if it fucked him up the arse.

Prab: Ah.

Devesh enters.

Devesh: Shit, new boy's keen.

Chellam: You're late.

Devesh: I don't think so.

Chellam: You are.

Devesh: *(checking his watch)* No. *(to Prab)* Look at you, big man. Other side of the gates for a change.

Chellam: What are you talking about?

Devesh: Most of them look alike, you know? This sort of, terrible desperation in the eyes. Certain smell. A *needy* smell. But you're... different, somehow.

Prab: Thank you..?

Devesh: Are you out there in the morning with the others?

Prab: ...Most days.

Devesh: *(to Chellam)* Crack of dawn. Seriously. I think some of them even sleep out there? *(to Prab)* Is that right? Do they?

Prab: Um... I wouldn't know...

Devesh: Have you ever slept out there?

Prab: No.

Devesh: You know some of them try to bribe me, just for a shift? You wouldn't *believe* some of the freaky shit I've been offered. *(to Chellam)* Mainly I Owe Yous. Or my Wife Owes You. Know what I mean?

Chellam is disgusted.

(to Prab) How're you managing? Got a sideline or something?

Prab: I do a bit of work at home. Tailoring, alterations.

Devesh: That's some *entrepreneurial* spirit, right there.

Prab: It's not a big deal.

Devesh: Your own machine?

Prab: It's a rental.

Devesh: Where did you get your start up costs?

Prab: A loan from the kabuliwala.

Devesh: Shit, man. Bet those repayments are killing you.

Prab: ...We manage.

Chellam: Shall we talk about consolidating his debts or shall we get on with the play?

Devesh: Yes! The *play*. (*of Devesh's bag*) So what have you come up with, my friend?

Prab takes out the scripts and passes them around.

Chellam: (*to Devesh*) We've finished casting. You're pond dwelling toad number 2.

Devesh: (*to Prab*) Brave man, alone in a room with this firecracker.
(*weighing the script in his hands*) Ore baba, got a good weight on it.

Chellam: It's not a bag of rice.

Devesh: So what's it about?

Prab looks anxiously at Chellam.

Chellam: It's a tragedy. A... cautionary tale.

Devesh: Oh?

Prab: Lord Sengupta is a... visionary. A modern man who changes the way we think about business.

Chellam: He has to make tough decisions.

Prab: Agonising decisions.

Chellam: We see the man behind the crown.

Devesh: That's me. Sengupta? Handsome bastard, is he? Witty? Good fighter?

Prab: All those things.

Devesh: (*to Prab*) So who are you?

Prab: I'll read Arun.

Devesh: *(flicks through)* Wait... He's a... monkey?

Prab: Yeah.

Devesh: *(bursts out laughing)* If you're happy with that, my friend.

Chellam: There are a variety of animals in the play.

Devesh: Didn't realise we had some Disney Shmisney hit on our hands.

Chellam: *(to Devesh)* You've played Hanuman.

Devesh: Yes, but he's a *god*. *(to Prab)* Is this guy a god?

Prab: Just an ordinary monkey.

Devesh: Wow. Dream role, my friend. Okay, let's go.

They begin to read.

Chellam: *(as Chandi)* The forest is so beautiful, this time of year. The leaves so thick above my hut, the sun casts shadow puppets on my walls. Now is the time to swim, and play, and rest. Good morning, Arun.

Prab: *(as Arun the monkey)* Hello, Chandi. *(reading the stage directions)* He grabs a banana from her bag.

Chellam: *(as Chandi)* Hey, that's my lunch! *(reading stage directions)* He runs off, she chases after him. She manages to grab his tail and they fall to the floor, laughing. *(as Chandi)* What's this stuff on your fur..?

Prab: *(as Arun)* I can't see anything. *(reading stage directions)* He turns around, trying to see his own back, and falls over again.

Chellam: *(reading stage directions)* He winces as Chandi cleans his fur. *(as Chandi)* Feels strange... Sticky... I know what this is. It's that special tree sap. *(coming out of character, to Prab)* Oh, it's rubber! Clever.

Prab: Thanks.

Devesh: *(to Prab)* Your line, monkey.

Prab: *(as Arun)* There are barrels and barrels piled up at the edge of Chandok Sri's land.

Chellam: *(as Chandi)* I've told you not to go there.

Prab: *(as Arun)* I was having a great time hopping from one to the other, but one of them tipped and splashed me. It was full/ of this stuff.

Devesh: /Are these two fucking or something?

Prab: No. God... *No.*

Devesh: And what's Sengupta doing? Having a wank somewhere?

Chellam: *(to Devesh)* Your opening scene's coming up, baby. It's about their two worlds colliding. *(to Devesh)* Right?

Prab nods.

Devesh: And I don't have to perform against an orang-utan, or anything?

Prab shakes his head.

Chellam: Let's go back... *(as Chandi)* The forest is so beautiful, this time of year.

Scene Six

Prab rattles off some overlocking at the sewing machine in his and Kajol's room later that night.

Prab: He wouldn't be my first choice for Sengupta/

Kajol: /Sengupta?/

Prab: /He's not that bad but Chellam is such a gifted performer he seems weak against her.

Kajol: You didn't tell him that, did you?

Prab: God, no. He's one thin-skinned bastard.

Kajol: Course he is. He's rich.

Prab: His only notes were about making his character more heroic and attractive.

Kajol: Just do what he wants, okay? Don't fuck about.

Prab: It's just a shame. Not to have... quality across the board.

Kajol: Ore baba, listen to you. Think you're some jatra big shot, now, do you?

Prab: And Amba's the *ideal* test audience. She likes an idea for a new scene - she's so excited she can't sit still. She thinks it's boring - she goes to sleep. Instant feedback.

Kajol: That's why she's yawning all the time, bags under her eyes?

Prab: Don't be so melodramatic.

Kajol: Jatras aren't for children.

Prab: I haven't got Shiva cutting off his son's head, or Durga smashing demons in the balls.

Kajol: You ever stop to think maybe your stories are *why* she gets bullied? Other kids dream of being on Boogie Woogie Kids Championship. She has 'profound' jatras filling her head.

Prab: Now I'm not allowed to tell her stories?

Kajol: Depends what kind of stories.

Prab: Stories are *hope*. Stories are dreams we tell ourselves when we're awake, and... pray we're brave enough to make a reality.

Kajol: What fucking bullshit is this? Just remember what this is for, okay?

Prab: Everything I do is for you and Amba.

Kajol: Seems you're more interested in impressing your actor schmactor.

Prab: Are you... jealous?

Kajol: Fuck off.

Prab: Because she's *way* out of my league.

Kajol: Oh, is that right..?

Prab: Joking, I'm joking, I'm joking. *(Beat)* Come on... You're the one who wanted me to do this.

Kajol: Do it, don't enjoy it.

Prab takes out a carefully folded bill from his pocket and hands it to Kajol. She unfolds it with amazement.

500 rupees..?

Prab: And they'll pay me more when I finish the next draft. Devesh thinks his dad will fund another season.

Kajol carefully puts the money away.

Kajol: We'll pay the kabuliwallah, give some to ma, and save the rest.

Prab: Let's see if they have ilsha at the market.

Kajol: We'll never be able to afford our own place if we throw all our cash away on treats.

Prab: Amba is looking thin.

Kajol: She takes after me. *(Beat)* A friend of Archana says a flat's come up in her building.

Prab: We can't afford a place in Dum Dum.

Kajol: Rents are low right now. They'd rather someone move in quickly than lose it to squatters. We could at least see it.

Prab: I'm not getting Amba's hopes up.

Kajol: Oh god forbid she has any hope.

Prab: Your ma will miss her.

Kajol: Ma wants her to do well at school. She has to do her homework on the floor. Gets woken up by the sewing machine every night.

Prab: ...So I'll move it downstairs.

Kajol: Ma won't let you do that.

Prab: It's no different to what we grew up with.

Kajol: And look at us.

Prab: I thought you were happy?

Kajol: I didn't say we were happy, I said we had *dreams*.

Beat.

Prab: Wow. Fuck. Okay.

Kajol: You cavort around with your jatra buddies, I think of ways to make our lives better. Make a decent future for our daughter.

Prab: That's not fair.

Kajol: You know what I've been doing the three hours you've with been with your...*jatra* friends?

Prab: It's been more like two/ hours.

Kajol: /*Three* hours. I cleaned the Basu's place, the Chatterjee's place, the Guptas, the *Dasguptas*. I haggled over half a pound of rice, a bag of moog dahl and four kohlrabis at Koley Market. I cooked dinner for ma and swept her floor, I swept *our* floor. I listened to Amba read her homework. I finished overlocking the blouses left in your pile/

Prab: /You didn't have to do that.

Kajol: I didn't mind. I *don't* mind. As long as we agree we're working towards the same thing. As long as all of this is for a reason. Space of our own. Space to *breathe*. Space for Amba to... *thrive*.

Beat.

Prab: Okay.

Kajol: Okay what..?

Prab: ...We'll see the place in Dum Dum.

Kajol pats him affectionately on the chest. He holds her in his arms – sneaking a tickle.

Kajol: Oi.

They kiss.

The lights dim, as Prab joins Amba in her section of the room for her bedtime story, making shadow puppets on the wall.

Prab: So, chotto. Where did we get to? Yes, that's right, it's called a 'cliffhanger'. And our characters are in the mountains so it's a really big one. There they are, their tummies rumbling, shivering with cold, watching their friends down below, slaving away in the fields they once called home. One of the elders comes to Chandi and Arun, scared their teenage grandsons are planning to leave, to seek work on the plantation. They're ready to abandon their families just to survive. Chandi realises she has to stop running away from Sengupta, and instead outwit him. But how can she do this without making him look stupid, which is very important? Why's that? Well, yes, in a way I suppose he is the 'baddie'... But

that's the problem, you see? I need to make him less bad. Give him a bit more light and shade. We all have different masks we have to wear, depending on who we're talking to. You can complain about your homework as much as you like to me and your ma. But I bet you're very polite when Mrs Das hands out your assignments, aren't you? So what happens? *(Beat)* Well, what if he doesn't *make* them stay? What if the bigger animals don't *want* to be saved? What if Chandi finds the hardest cages to break are the ones in their minds..?

Scene Seven

Devesh unlocks the door to the apartment in Dum Dum, and enters with Kajol and Prab.

Devesh: Here we are.

Kajol: It's bigger than I expected.

Devesh: But then a public urinal is bigger than your place.

Kajol's offended, but Prab gives her a warning look. She forces a smile.

Kajol: ...Least it doesn't smell like one.

Devesh: Bedroom one, through there, bedroom two there. That one's smaller – space for a single bed and a desk for little Amba.

Kajol: She's never had her own room.

Devesh: Bathroom. Power shower.

Prab: 'Power shower..?'

Devesh: Oh, you're going to love it, my friend. It's like having a wash and a massage at the same time. *(to Kajol)* Even more fun with two.

Awkward laughter.

Prab: Is it an emersion heater?

Devesh: How the fuck should I know?

Prab: Just wondering what the bills will be like.

Devesh: Hot water's included in the rent. I've paid the deposit and first three months up front.

Beat.

Kajol: Really?

Devesh: Of course. You can move in today. Think I'd be wasting my time showing you around otherwise? What am I – an estate agent?

More laughter.

Kajol: This is very generous of you.

Devesh: I like to help out where I can. And I usually can.

Prab: ...Thank you.

Devesh: *(to Kajol)* What I want to know is, is he always so serious?
(impression of Prab) How can you stand it?

Kajol: Ohhh... He has his moments.

Devesh: *(to Prab)* I'd like to see you let your hair down one of these days.
Unclench those butt cheeks.

He slaps Prab on the back.

Prab: ...Maybe... after a power shower...

Devesh: Oh ho, was that a joke..? That *was* a joke – yes! *(to Kajol)* His writing is very serious too. *(Prab impression)* Go on, why don't you have a look around?

Kajol: I will. Thank you.

Kajol exits.

Prab: We'll pay you back. Every pesa.

Devesh: I'll take it straight out of your wages. Make it nice and simple.

Prab: ...You've thought of everything.

Devesh: All set for Monday? Back on the shop floor after all this time.

Prab: Can't wait.

Devesh: Your own team.

Prab: Big responsibility.

Devesh: Be able to stretch your legs, go for a piss whenever you want.

Prab: That too.

Devesh: Aha, there it is – cheeky! And no favouritism to your wife now she's on the team too, okay?

They both laugh. Devesh hands him the keys to the flat.

Enjoy, my friend.

Prab: Amba will be so excited.

Devesh: Glad it's worked out.

Prab: Thank you.

Devesh: And one night a week she gets to go back to her didima's.

Prab: ...Sorry..?

Devesh: You don't mind?

Prab: Um...

Devesh: My cousin's moved to a new place across the road from Chellam, so her place isn't so... *discreet* anymore.

Prab: Oh...

Devesh: And I can't have her round mine, can I?

He laughs. Prab does his best to join in.

That's okay?

Prab: That's okay. That's... more than okay...

Devesh: Good man. See you later.

Devesh leaves. Kajol re-enters.

Kajol: Has he gone? I didn't even say goodbye.

Prab: Don't worry. He'll be back.

Scene Eight

Prab, Chellam and Devesh are in the backroom at the factory, late at night, mid rehearsal.

Chellam: *(reading the stage directions)* Chandi empties the bag of seeds onto the rug before Sengupta's throne with a flourish. *(as Chandi)* Here are the seeds. The same ones Chandok Sri is now using.

Devesh: *(as Sengupta)* Aha! I knew that bastard was cheating. *(reading the directions)* He picks up one of the seeds and inspects it closely. *(As Sengupta)* They look the same as the ones my workers have been planting.

Prab: *(as Arun)* They only show their strength, abundance and resistance to disease when they've sprouted, your excellency.

Chellam: *(as Chandi)* It will take several weeks but you will be astonished, I promise you.

Devesh: *(as Sengupta)* How much?

Chellam: *(as Chandi)* Nothing, your excellency.

Devesh: *(as Sengupta)* Nothing?

Prab: *(as Arun)* They are our most deferential gift, to you.

Chellam: *(as Chandi)* All we ask is you allow our friends to leave with us.

Devesh: *(as Sengupta)* Oh ho. Trying to pass these seeds off as some sort of bargain of the century. We all know nothing in this life comes for free. Come, let's go down to the pens and tell your friends the good news.

Chellam: *(reading stage directions)* Scene Nine. Chandi finishes unlocking the cages of the larger animals. *(as Chandi)* Aziz! Priya!

Prab: *(as Arun)* Bapu! Gurvinder!

Chellam: *(as Chandi)* you're free! Come, we leave for the valley in the morning. *(she reads the directions)* She waits. None of the animals move. *(as Chandi)* I said you're free. You're *free*.

Devesh: *(reads directions)* Sengupta laughs to himself. *(he laughs)*

Chellam: *(to Sengupta)* What have you done to them?

Devesh: *(as Sengupta)* I've given them somewhere safe to sleep at night.

Chellam: They sleep in cages.

Devesh: *(as Sengupta)* Provided three nutritious meals a day.

Chellam: *(as Chandi)* Gruel and bugs..?

Devesh: *(as Sengupa)* Guaranteed gruel and bugs. Maybe they prefer that to the... lavish fish suppers that are only a promise from you.

Chellam: *(as Chandi, to the animals)* I know you're scared, but you're strong, and... we're even stronger together. Don't listen to him. Life can be so much better than this.

Prab: *(reading stage directions)* Only Aziz the brown bear steps out of his cage. Sengupta forces a smile.

Chellam: *(as Chandi)* Anyone else?

Devesh: *(as Sengupta)* The problem is, it can also be much, much worse. And they know that.

Prab: *(as Arun)* Come on, Chandi, let's go.

Chellam: *(as Chandi)* I'm not leaving them.

Devesh: *(as Sengupta)* Oh ho, what's your plan? Beat them? Tie them up and *force* them to leave with you?

Chellam: *(as Chandi)* ...This isn't over...

Prab: *(as Arun)* Come on...

Devesh: *(as Sengupta)* No one mentioned what a sore loser you are, Chandi. You should be grateful I'm letting you leave at all.

Prab: *(reading the directions)* Arun has to hold an enraged Chandi back. Sengupta laughs at them as they leave.

Prab and Chellam look to Devesh.

Chellam: *(to Devesh)* It's your line.

Devesh: ...These seeds. They're a load of crap, right?

Prab: ...There's nothing *wrong* with them... They'll grow a strong crop...

Devesh: But all that stuff about disease resistance shmesistance – it's bullshit, right?

Chellam: ...They're no better Chandok Sri's seeds.

Devesh: So Sengupta, this wise leader and business mogul, is hoodwinked by a little girl and her monkey?

Uncomfortable beat.

Prab: But he wins. Only Aziz leaves.

Chellam: Stupid Aziz.

Prab: What a simpleton.

Chellam: Sengupta keeps the rest of his workforce.

Devesh: And why is that..?

Prab: Because he's... kind to them. I mean, not kind, but... fair.

Chellam: He gives them security, stability.

Devesh: In cages. And what is the simple working man in the audience supposed to make of that? What is the... take home message for the overlocker, or the seamstress?

Chellam and Prab look to one another, panicking.

Prab: ...It might make them reflect on how... grateful they are to Khub Bhalo...

Devesh: Most of them are currently unemployed.

Awkward beat.

You think everyone who comes to our shows is a simple-minded salt of the earth sister fucker just because they're poor, is that it?

Prab: No, not at all.

Devesh: You know how those bastards talk in their lunch hour? Hearts of steel, some of them. They'd sell their first cousin for a hundred rupees and a hand job.

Chellam: What's your point?

Devesh: You really think they're going to buy Sengupta allowing Chandi to escape to some lush new valley on the other side of the mountain? Sentimental, idealistic rubbish.

Chellam: Let me guess. You've got some other big idea? Something that's all blood and gore and ends with my head on a spike?

Devesh: *(to Prab, of the play)* Maybe this isn't working out.

Prab: I'm sure there's some sort of... compromise.

Chellam: Are you a fucking invertebrate? *(to Devesh)* Let's read through it again.

Prab: *(to Chellam)* I think we should... hear him out.

Devesh: *(to Chellam)* You're the one always going on about the jatra being about 'collaboration'..

Chellam: Yes, not *capitulation*.

Prab: *(to Devesh)* What were you thinking?

Devesh: Realism, my friend. I think they can handle that, don't you?

Scene Nine

Prab adjusts Amba's familiar nightlight in her new room in the duplex. He sits beside her and starts to make the usual shadow puppets on the wall.

Prab: I've tried everything. Opening the window. Closing the window, putting on the fan. Turning on the hallway light. Opening the door a little. Opening it a lot. Turning off the hallway light. Bringing in the radio. Turning down the radio. Every time I try to leave, she wakes up. "It's too quiet, daddy." All this space seems to make her feel... lost. Adrift. I remember when she was a newborn, and she could only sleep swaddled in a muslin, every limb tucked tight. Dreaming of being back in the womb... Okay, okay, chotto. Let's see – where were we? The new ending. Yes... Chandi and Arun and Aziz and all the little animals... They're... struggling. The valley is a beautiful place to live, but at night it gets too cold, and in the day it gets too hot, and nothing good grows there, and the fish in the river are too quick for them, and they are *hungry*. Scared, and hungry. And this is where... Chandi realises sometimes the bravest thing to do... The...*wisest* thing to do... Not just for her, remember, chotto? For everyone. The old, tired animals, and the little baby ones who need their grown ups to make... difficult decisions for them... She realises that the time has come to admit... defeat. They can't survive out here on their own. They need their... old friend Sengupta to help them out. What's that, chotto? He's not their friend? He's a baddie? But no, Amba, remember he's not all that bad? We talked about this. He's a pig? You hate him? He put Aziz the bear in a cage? No, Amba, don't say that. Shit, she's never cried at one of my stories before. Not even the one where Chandi teamed up with an army of zombie snakes. Okay, chotto. You're right,

you're right. You know Chandi. What a joker. Of course she has a *plan*, she *always* has a plan. Who is more clever, or brave, or cunning than her? It's okay, come on. You sleep on it, just like Chandi. Good night, chotto. *(Beat)* Finally she's snoring, her little face pressed into my neck. Lying on my arm, which is going to sleep alongside her. The only time I have all day to let my thoughts wander. And it's here, in the weird stillness of this new place, which I will *never* get used to, whatever Kajol says, that I realise something. Something Devesh will never say. Something he perhaps can't even articulate... It doesn't matter to him that Chandi and the animals escape, what matters is their plans for the valley fail. Because what if they try something new, and it works? What if they render him... obsolete..? There's a story he can't afford for me to tell. For *anyone* to tell. And I wish I hadn't realised that. Because now it's the only one I'm interested in...

Scene Ten

Two days later, Prab walks out of the factory in his overalls in place of Devesh, clipboard in hand, mobile phone between his shoulder and ear. The machines in the factory have whirled into life and can be heard from inside.

Prab: Work today, work today. Big new order. *(pointing at some of the expectant workers)* You, you, Budhedev. Yes, you. We need three more machinists. Yes, yes, come on, come on. *(Beat)* No – sorry. No, no work for you. You have to be 14 or older – you know the law. How old is he? What?

Some of the new workers are children. The sound of the machines becomes deafening.

Prab meets with Devesh in the backroom after his shift, that evening.

Devesh: His ma came to us on her knees, begging us to take him on. "Please bhai, he's a good worker, give him a chance, he'll prove it." Do you know what she was doing for money before baba gave him a job?

Beat.

They moved here from their tiny latrine of a village to find work, and ended up in Hatgachia. Her husband died last year. Left her with two crore of debt. He was a drinker and a gambler. Owed money to every goondah in town. What do you think she had to do to keep up those payments, my friend? How do you think she managed to stop them breaking her children's legs and taking what's left of her honour?

Prab: ...It must have been very hard for her.

Devesh: It's still *hard*, we've just made it less impossible. What sort of man would he be to say no to her? What would she have done if he had? Hobbled her kids' feet herself? Sent them to Howrah to beg for a few pesa every day? Instead she has a little room to breathe. A tiny bit of dignity. But you'd have us take it away again?

Prab: ...No.

Devesh: Why don't you tell her? There's no place for her son at the factory.

Prab: I... That's not what/ I meant...

Devesh: /Go on. I'll explain to baba. Allocate the boy's work to someone else in finishing. Who deserves it?

Prab: ...Your father is a... kind man.

Devesh: You think it's easy, running this place? Tough decisions have to be made. And all the time the unionists and the reds sit on their backsides and judge his every move.

Long beat.

Prab: I've noticed the boy doesn't have... gloves.

Devesh: So we should provide him with some?

Prab: ...Yes.

Devesh: And the other children?

Prab: ...Yes.

Devesh: Health and safety.

Prab: And... I would like to line manage them.

Devesh: Oh..? You see yourself as some sort of pied piper?

Prab: ...Exactly.

Devesh: If that's what you want, my friend. And I have another little job for you.

Prab: Oh..?

Devesh: Some firingi journalist has been sniffing around, asking about the children. Speak to her, will you?

Devesh slaps him on the back.

Scene Eleven

Prab and Kajol are in the living room of the duplex.

- Kajol: You think anyone else on the shop floor gives a shit about them?
- Prab: The boy on the picker can't be any older than Amba. You should have seen him – he hardly knows what he's doing.
- Kajol: So you train him. Train all of them.
- Prab: How can I do that? What sort of fucking bastard do you think I am?
- Kajol: You care. You notice things. Make sure conditions are decent and... it could save that boy's life.
- Prab: 'Decent?' I used to stand at Brigade Parade and help people sign up to their trade union.
- Kajol: I know.
- Prab: I used to think we were on an... upward trajectory. (*motions*) We were here, with the worst of the shit behind us. Progress was inevitable, was already happening. People were waking up and realising they had a right to demand more. Just a... fair wage, a roof over their heads...
- Kajol: I know, Prab, I know.
- Prab: Is that too much? Were we asking for too much?
- Kajol: ...Times have changed.
- Prab: You remember Nik? He moved to Maharashtra. Beed. To help organise the cane cutters there. Every other woman he met – every other woman in those fields, had had a hysterectomy.
- Kajol: ...There were... older woman working the fields?
- Prab: No, no no, women in their 30s, in their 20s. No toilets, you see? Nowhere to change your underwear ... No rest for anyone suffering from period pain... So - simple solution. Remove their wombs. And you have a reliable 100% model worker. One who can put in longer hours, take less breaks.
- Kajol: ...But... no one... made them..? I mean... They weren't forced?

Prab: Of course not. It was their decision. Their rational decision. How to provide best for the children they'd managed to have. How to keep a roof over their heads. That's just common sense, right? Right? *(Beat)* Nik's spending all his time trying to sign them up for a class action. But no one wants to be blacklisted. When he told me I thought 'fuck me, this is as bad as it gets.' But it turns out I just didn't have the imagination required. Couldn't, at that point in time, see myself working out how to make the shopfloor more comfortable for children. For *children*. And I guess, thank God they're not *our* children,,?

Beat.

Kajol: So what are we supposed to do?

Prab: ...Something... *Anything...*

Kajol: If you walk away now, what will happen? They'll never let you return to Khub Bhalo. They'll make sure every factory in the state knows you're a troublemaker. And how long has it taken for you to shrug off that reputation? What would happen if you had to wear it again? Not just us, hungry, on the street, or at Hatgachia. Ma's already got lodgers in our old room. Not just us. Amba too.

Beat.

Prab: The union are planning to picket.

Kajol: You can't get involved.

Prab: Dozens of them – all replaced by kids. What do they have to lose?

Kajol: If they had any sense they'd move on, see if they have work at Evergreen or PMC. Or over the border.

Prab: The neverending search for a factory owner who won't screw them over.

Kajol: They're not all like that.

Prab: Name one.

Kajol: They have to make a living too.

Prab: They have to make a *profit*. And eventually those numbers stop having *any* connection with people's lives – they're just zeros piling up on a screen.

Kajol: But they need us to do the work.

Prab: Until we're replaced with children. They'll always be cheaper.

Kajol: A child cannot be a manager – exactly why you have to make sure you keep this job.

Prab: Devesh has told me to deal with the picketers.

Kajol: How?

Prab: He's given me a budget. See if they'll accept a bribe to call it off. And he wants me to lie to some journalist for him.

Kajol: What are you going to do?

Prab: I don't know.

Kajol: ...All I'm asking is you think of me and Amba before you decide.

Scene Twelve

Prab is interviewed by a journalist in the living room of his and Kajol's new apartment.

Prab: All the young people working at Khub Bhalo are 14 years or older, as the law permits.

Journalist: Many of your former staff are threatening a picket.

Prab: We're dealing with them and we'll do whatever we can to protect our hard working staff.

Journalist: They say they've witnessed children as young as eight going into the factory. Why would they make that up?

Prab: They might be in the pay of our competitors, seeking to undermine our business. Or... acting out of jealousy.

Journalist: Jealousy?

Prab: Khub Bhalo is one of the few companies resilient enough to re-open, despite the recession. That might not sit well with some of our rivals.

Journalist: So why not give us access to the shop floor?

Prab: It's a basic health and safety measure.

Journalist: You haven't allowed us to speak to any of your current staff.

Prab: I am a current member of staff. I've worked there for almost ten years.

Journalist: None of that time alongside children?

Prab: Never. And the factory has a monthly visit from auditors – they've already been since we reopened.

Journalist: But we understand many companies pressure their staff to lie about conditions or face dismissal.

Prab: Mr Nag is a fair and generous boss. We're lucky to work for him.

Journalist: Almost sounds too good to be true.

Prab: I... We... are the victims of Western anti-Indian bias. The jealousy of our competitors is nothing compared to the jealousy of the British when faced with the successful economic development our country has achieved without you.

Journalist: You're talking about... independence..?

Prab: You're only happy when we're on our knees, begging for aid. The first sign of autonomy and growth and here you are, accusing us of the most debased crimes.

Journalist: Your excuse is 'the British'?

Prab: We have nothing to make excuses for.

Journalist: Very good. You're very quick.

Prab: I have to get back to work. *(of the Dictaphone)* Turn that off.

He goes to leave. The journalist turns off her Dictaphone.

Journalist: Wait.

She grabs his arm.

Look I know you probably didn't want to do this.

Prab: I'm happy to defend Khub Bhalo...(I'm proud to work here)

Journalist: It's okay, it's off. *(shows him the Dictaphone)* Take this.

She gives him a small disposable camera.

If it turns up on my desk with pictures from the shop floor, I'll have no way of knowing who took them or who sent it.

Prab: No thank you.

Journalist: I don't expect anything. Just take it in case. Please?

She stuffs it into his pocket. He lets her, then exits.

Scene Thirteen

Devesh speaks on his mobile, agitated, while Prab and Chellam rehearse in the backroom of the factory.

Prab: *(reading the stage directions)* Chandi is on her knees before Sengupta, Arun and the other animals behind her. *(to Chellam)* Your line.

Chellam: Fuck you.

Prab: *(reading the stage directions)* Arun puts his paw on Chandi's shoulder. *(as Arun)* Being right isn't everything, Chandi. Sometimes it's just enough to survive.

Chellam: Am I the only one who actually cares about this fucking jatra?

Prab: Just give it a try, please..?

Chellam: *(as Chandi)* Oh benevolent Lord Sengupta, will you please open your heart to me and... *(my poor, hungry friends)*

Chellam throws down the script.

That's what you get for fucking monkeys.

Devesh finishes his call and joins them.

(to Devesh) Well done, the new ending stinks.

Devesh: Tough crowd. Let's just get it on its feet?

Chellam: We'd be better off putting it out of its misery. *(mimes shooting herself in the head)*

Devesh: Just do your fucking job, will you? *(to Prab)* Have you heard from Protam?

Prab: No...

Devesh: What about his ma?

Prab: Sorry.

Devesh: He hasn't been at work all week.

Prab: I thought he must be ill.

Devesh: A few of them have been off – you must have noticed?

Prab: Kids are bags of germs. One of them comes down with something, the rest fall like dominoes.

Devesh: Go round there when we've finished, okay? Have a word with her.

Prab: ...It'll be really late.

Devesh: It was close to midnight when that bitch was begging me to take him on. Now she can't even come and explain herself?

Chellam: God's sake, can't you just find someone else?

Devesh: Don't tell me how to do my job, okay?

Chellam: Why not? You're always telling me how to do mine.

Devesh holds up the new play.

Devesh: *(to Prab)* This is what I mean, my friend. We've got *(to Chellam)* what is it that you're always going on about? Pathos? Yes, we have got *pathos*.

Chellam: For me, you mean?

Devesh: This is our culture, okay? We are *realistic* people. We don't close our eyes to the pain and suffering in the world.

Chellam: They're going to hate it. They've been rooting for this young woman from the beginning, and now she's reduced to begging on her knees?

Devesh: It's for the greater good. That's true to her character.

Chellam: You can't tell me that – I fucking know her.

Devesh: You're not the writer.

Chellam: *(to Prab)* Will you grow some balls and back me up, here?

Prab: ...I... don't... (know)

Chellam: What's the point in writing something if you're not going to defend it? *(to Devesh)* The union shmunion are breathing down your neck and you don't want to fire them up with a jatra that actually means something.

Devesh: That's funny. No, that's *hilarious*. I know you're a confident performer but that shows a *supremely* inflated idea of your influence. I mean. Wow. Pure fantasy.

Chellam: Why, then?

Devesh: Because this isn't fucking Soviet Russia and we're not sponsored by the Communist Party. Entertainment comes first.

Chellam: Oh, shit, someone's explained the ending to you. *(to Prab)* Or maybe he finally looked up 'subtext'.

Devesh slaps her. Prab instinctively grabs Devesh and pulls him away.

Prab: Don't.

Devesh slowly pries Prab's fingers off his shirt.

Devesh: I think you should let go, my friend. Don't you?

Chellam: *(to Devesh)* Bastard.

Devesh: There's an elephant in the room, here. Can you feel it? *(beat)* You're too old to play the main part. You know that. We know that. Everyone's too polite to say it.

Beat. Chellam looks to Prab, but he's too scared to say anything.

I was at that new place behind Park Street last night. I saw a very talented young performer who really impressed me.

Chellam: ...What new place..?

Devesh: "Starlight".

Chellam: That's' a strip joint.

Devesh: She would be a fantastic Chandi.

Chellam: You're disgusting.

Devesh: I've got a feeling she wouldn't make all this fuss. But then, I'm sure she's not as...experienced as you.

Chellam swallows her anger.

Prab: ...It won't work without Chellam.

Devesh: What's that?

Prab: ...I wrote the part for her. We need her...soul... Her... like you said, her *pathos*.

Devesh: You two have made quite the fucking artistic alliance, haven't you?

Chellam and Prab glance at each other uneasily.

Is that the only kind?

Chellam: Don't be ridiculous.

Prab: *(to Chellam)* You'll make it work. I know you will.

Chellam is too furious to respond.

Devesh: *(to Prab)* Careful, my friend. There's a touch of the snake woman about this one.

Chellam: You've never been scared of my bite.

Devesh: Oh, I wouldn't say that. *(to Prab)* Let's start, shall we?

Tense beat.

Prab: *(as Arun)* They're all packed and ready...

Scene Fourteen

Prab returns home later that night. Kajol is working on some blouses on the sewing machine.

Prab: What are you doing?

Kajol: Archana had too much to get through so I said I'd take a few pieces.

Prab: You should be relaxing.

Kajol laughs derisively.

Kajol: Didn't want to take the risk.

Prab: What're you talking about?

Kajol: I saw Protam's ma on the way to work this morning. Said I could stop by with some moog dal later. Only thing Amba will eat when she's sick. But he's not sick. He's been at *school*.

Prab: Good for him.

Kajol: You're not surprised? How can they afford that? They live in Hatgachia.

Prab: I gave them the money, okay?

Kajol: I know you did, Prab. She told me everything. You think I'm such an idiot I wouldn't find out?

Prab: It's not a secret. You could have asked.

Kajol: I think it had better be a bloody secret, don't you? Do you want Devesh to find out you're acting like some sort of social worker? With *his* money?

Prab: He told me to use it on the strikers. He didn't specify how. I cut a deal with them. Get the kids into school, and suddenly there are shifts available at the factory again.

Kajol: How long will that last? You think you can be their lifelong benefactor?

Prab: It's a start.

Kajol: It's a fuck of a lot less security than Devesh was offering.

Prab: You've got to be joking.

Kajol: You don't think they'd rather be working than given hand outs?

Prab: It wasn't a hand out. It was an... investment.

Kajol: One little act of charity and you think you're Bill Gates.

Prab: Sorry I'm not a bigshot bebsayi like Devesh.

Kajol: He's given us both work. You've got a promotion. We've got somewhere decent to live, for the first time in our lives. What sort of *idiot* jeopardises that?

Prab: I did what he asked.

Kajol: You think you're so fucking clever. Swanning around with all these romantic ideas in your head. Like you're... above everyone else. Like we're all too... small minded and ... petty... to want *social justice* and *equality* and.... a *fucking revolution*.

Prab: I never said that. I would never say that to you.

Kajol: There's a reason no one tells all those stories about the little workers and the big bosses anymore, Prab. The world's moved on.

Prab: Why are you so angry?

Kajol: He'll throw us out.

Prab: What if he does?

Kajol: There are already lodgers at Ma's house. Do you want to end up in the slum with Protam and his family?

Prab: It wouldn't come to that.

Kajol: Glad you're so confident.

Prab: *(of the duplex)* You don't think we can do better than this? Some... shiny duplex we get to live in *part time*? When my boss isn't using it for his... love nest.

Kajol: It's only one evening a week.

Prab: At least at your ma's place we didn't panic every time we spilled something.

Kajol: I just want to keep the place tidy.

Prab: He's put us in a cage – fuck, I'm a performing monkey in his show.

Kajol: I took Amba to the shoe shop today. You know that? She's never been inside. Never had her feet measured. New shoes. Amba has new shoes for school. Do you know how I felt when I paid for them? Do you have any idea how good I felt?

Prab: Like a caged bird being fed.

Kajol: Fuck you. You stupid, fucking bastard.

Prab: And what happens when things end with his girlfriend? Minute he gets married we'll be out on the street anyway.

Kajol: He'll always have a mistress. He's that sort of guy.

Prab: Sounds like he's your new hero.

Kajol: He's given us a new start. He's given us a *life*.

Hurt beat.

Prab: Funny, I thought that was me.

Kajol: A real one. Not some fairy story no one believes in.

Prab goes to leave.

Where are you going?

Prab: To play with my imaginary friends. What do you care?

Kajol: Go, then. Arsehole.

Prab exits. Kajol starts to cry.

Scene Fifteen

Prab follows Chellam into the living room of her apartment. She is in her pyjamas and dressing gown.

Prab: ...I... I didn't know where else to go...

Chellam: Domestic?

Prab nods.

Why don't you go and see Devesh? Ask if he'll let you have your balls back for a few hours?

Prab: I know you're angry...

Chellam: I finally get a role where I don't get beaten, or raped, or murdered, and you take it away from me.

Prab: She doesn't get raped or murdered.

Chellam: No, you found another way for her to lose every shred of dignity.

Prab: I need the money, okay? If he wants some bullshit ending, that's what he'll get.

Chellam: Oh ho! So you admit it is bullshit?

Prab: I fought for you to keep the part, didn't I?

Chellam: That was 'fighting'?!

Prab: You could have voiced up too.

Chellam: My god, is that some kind of joke? All I ever do is voice up. In between having my ass grabbed by bullshit actors who aren't fit to clean my shoes.

Prab: With questions, though. Not with answers.

Chellam: I've seen you. The *real* you.

Prab doesn't know what she's talking about.

Made it to rehearsals early last week. Saw you... *galvanising* the men on the picket line.

Prab: You're spying on me..?

Chellam: I didn't mean to. It was just so... *compelling*. Like seeing a zombie come to life. Or... no, like when the tin man finally gets his heart, at the end of that movie.

Prab: Fine... If that's what you think.

Chellam: You held their attention, my god, every one of them. What were you saying?

Prab: Devesh told me to... negotiate with them.

Chellam: He told you to mobilise the picket line? I don't think so.

Prab: I've worked with most of them for years.

Chellam: What were you saying?

Prab: Nothing interesting.

Chellam: And this week, suddenly no picket line.

Prab doesn't respond. Chellam taps his forehead.

Devesh is right. There's more going on up there than you let on. And here. *(She taps his chest)*

She lets her hand rest there. Beat. He takes it in his.

Prab: Look, if it was up to me I'd do what you want.

Chellam: Why's that?

Prab: Because you're smarter than him. Because you're right. You're always right.

Chellam: Wow. The words every woman wants to hear...

She tentatively kisses him. Beat. They kiss again.

Let's see what's really going on underneath here, shall we?

An increasingly passionate embrace.

Later, Prab and Chellam are post-coital in her bed.

Prab: How did you two get together?

Chellam: Oh fuuuuck. Not this.

Prab: What?

Chellam: I'm not comparing your dicks, okay?

Prab: That's not what I meant.

She hits him with a pillow.

The two of you are just so... different.

Chellam: Always hoped I'd find some poetic, sensitive type who I'd inspire to greatness. One with really rich parents.

Prab: *You're* great.

Chellam: You're sweet.

Prab: I mean it. I've seen you in some *terrible* work.

Chellam: You really need to work on your pillow talk.

Prab: But there you are, shining anyway. Always shining. *That's* talent.

Chellam: The ability to polish a turd?

Prab: The ability to find your voice in any story.

Chellam: I know what you're doing, you devious bastard. "Just put up and shut up about this bullshit ending, Chellam. You'll 'shine' anyway."

Prab: ...Well, if you put it that way...

She hits him again – a bit too hard this time.

Owwwww.

Chellam: Oh shit, sorry.

She kisses him better. They both get the giggles.

How does it really end?

Prab: ...I don't know. I just... do what I'm told.

Chellam: Oh come on, as if you haven't thought about it? What would it be? If you could do anything you wanted?

Prab throws shadow puppets onto the wall in the light of the bedside lamp. Chellam joins in – she's able to make some shapes he can't.

Prab: Is that an elephant?

Chellam: Of course.

Prab: Impressive.

Chellam: Come on. Does it end in a... huge interspecies orgy, or something?

Prab: Is that what you'd want?

Chellam: I'm not the writer.

Prab: Tell me.

Chellam: I know – Chandi and the little animals drug Sengupta and his men, and when they wake up they've been forced into a re-education programme and all die because they're soft, bourgeois scum?

Prab: Didn't have you down as a Maoist.

Chellam: That's it! Is that it? Tell me.

Prab: I think something more like... Chandi leaves for the valley with Aziz, and Arun, and the other small animals. They have no choice - she can't force the others to join them.

Chellam: Ah, but our intrepid heroes forge a new life in the valley?

Prab: But it's a struggle at first. There isn't enough food, and the valley's a wind tunnel and we think they're all going to die.

Chellam: But spring comes, and somehow they've made it... So they start... planting...? Like Sengupta. But not exactly the same. Diversity.

Prab: Biodiversity.

Chellam: They respect the land, and it rewards them.

Prab: Sengupta sends his spies over and they return with good news – Chandi doesn't have a clue what she's doing. He almost feels sorry for her. But... his profits are healthy, and growing, so he quickly forgets about the little sideshow in the valley. He's finding the larger animals are dying annoyingly young, but there're always others to replace them. So he keeps expanding.

Chellam: He's an idiot. All he knows is... raping, pillaging, destruction.

Prab: Months pass. A trader comes with supplies for Sengupta. His men argue a good price, and before he leaves, the trader mentions he's on his way to the other plantation. 'Happy Valley'.

Chellam: Oh shit.

Prab: Yep.

Chellam: And Chandi's become this shrewd businesswoman. Sengupta *hates* competition. He won't put up with that.

Prab: That's what you want to see?

Chellam: ...No... It's worse than that. There's no hierarchy in Happy Valley. No... *exploitation*.

Prab: She and the animals have made their farm a cooperative.

Chellam: Are people going to buy this?

Prab: Why not? They've used their first round of profits to build a school, and a medical clinic on site.

Chellam: Run by who?

Prab: They all do a shift teaching – each of them has something useful to offer. And... they hire a medic for the clinic.

Chellam: Wow. Okay. And what about the land? Does it farm itself?

Prab: They draw up a... rota. They know their shit - they've been doing this their whole lives. All of it. They've had to share, and compromise, and collaborate. That's what it's like when you don't have enough, right? But... in Happy Valley, *all* work is recognised – and... valued equally. Planting, weeding, invoices, childcare.

Chellam: Fuck, okay.

Prab: Looking after the elders, cleaning, cooking. Everything that contributes to the community.

Chellam: Alright. But... I'm a... I dunno, a... lemur monkey. I'm great at planting seeds but I'm not so hot at paperwork. Can't do the... Qwerty keyboard. How do I fit into this rota?

Prab: All the work is assigned according to their strengths and weaknesses. What they want to be trained up for, or avoid at all cost. And... it's recognised some of the work is more repetitive and tedious, so you get time to work the land because it's therapeutic. And some of the work is much more physically demanding than others, so, the more you do of that, the more time off you're given.

Chellam: There is time off, then? In this communist utopia?

Prab: That's the whole point of it. To find a way to make all our time feel... worthwhile. And you're the one giving it a label.

Chellam: What would you call it?

Prab: Sometimes I think the problem is people like the idea but not the... branding.

Chellam: Well, yeah, there is an image problem.

Prab: They trade some of their crop when they need things they can't grow themselves. Or, fuck, when they just want stuff – that's fine. But they keep a tally of everything, so they only take as much as they need. And... because of that they're able to plan ahead. Store any excess for the winter months. Keep waste to a bare minimum. And... they share stuff. They... don't have to all buy a... ladder, or... a...

Chellam: Hoover?

Prab: Exactly. They have one, or two, and they share them.

Chellam: I'm guessing there are a lot of meetings?

They both laugh.

Prab: *Off stage.* Sengupta's gotten wind of this place though.

Chellam: Oh come on, can't we just leave them in peace..? The People's Republic of Talking Animals is a huge success and proves to be an... *inspiration* to mammals around the world.

Prab: That isn't good story structure.

Chellam: Who cares?

Prab: Thought you did!

Chellam: It's too easy to tell the sad story.

Prab: Sengupta and his men travel to the valley, and accuse Chandi of tricking him. Of saving the magical, disease resistant seeds for herself, selling him the shit ones, and abducting Aziz under false pretences.

Chellam: Right. So he kills her?

Prab: Worse than that. He has her arrested on trumped up charges.

Chellam: And of course he's bribed the jury.

Prab: It's a kangaroo court. Even as Chandi is finally given the chance to speak, the judge is deciding her sentence.

Chellam: Which is..?

Prab: Death.

Beat.

Sorry.

Chellam: A heroic one, though?

Prab: Extremely heroic.

Chellam: But Arun won't take this lying down. Even as they drag her away, he makes a last chance bid to rescue her.

Prab laughs. She starts to play fight with him.

(as Chandi) Leave me, Arun. Save yourself.

Prab: Stop it.

She continues to jostle him, but he doesn't join in.

Chellam: And as the executioner drags her away, her voice is heard one last time. *(melodramatic, as Chandi)* Poor Sengupta, don't you realise you can kill me, but you can never kill an idea?

Prab: That's good. That would definitely go in.

Chellam: Thanks.

She tries to wrestle him.

Her words have badly affected Sengupta. He's lost *all* of his fight.

Prab: Cut it out.

Chellam: What is it? Scared I'll actually hurt you?

Prab: No...

She starts to slap him, a bit too hard.

Stop it.

Chellam: I'm only joking.

Prab: I know, but...

Chellam: What?

Prab: Everyone shoves you around. I don't want to do that.

Beat. Chellam starts to tear up.

Prab: Sorry, I'm sorry...

Chellam: No, it's fine. It's... You're a good guy. A really good guy.

Beat.

Things are over with me and Devesh.

Prab: I thought so.

Chellam: Nothing much gets past you, does it?

Prab: What will you do now?

Chellam: Who knows? Mumbai, LA, New York, London... So many places where people have zero interest in my skills as a jatra performer.

Prab: You don't know that.

Chellam: We both know that.

Long beat.

Prab: You've changed my life.

Chellam: If only that was worth something.

She kisses him.

So which ending will you tell Amba?

Prab: ...I don't know...

Chellam: But that's what really matters, isn't it?

Scene Sixteen

A few days later. Prab enters the backroom of the factory in the early morning. Devesh is already here, agitated. Something lies on the floor in the corner, covered with a blanket.

Devesh: Where have you been?

Prab: I'm sorry, I got here as fast as I could.

Devesh: Can you drive?

Prab: Er...

Devesh: *Do you drive?*

Prab: Yes, yes, I do.

Devesh: Take him to Medical College and drop him off at the entrance to emergency admissions.

Prab: Who..?

Devesh points to the blanket on the floor. Prab jumps as it moves and groans.

Devesh: My car's parked on Eden Gardens. Here.

He holds out his keys.

Prab: Who is it?

Devesh: We don't have time for this.

Prab: Did you hit a dog or something..?

Prab uncovers the figure. He's shocked to find one of the child workers – Protam, injured and unconscious.

Devesh: Why would I take a dog to A and E? Shape up. I can't take him – they might recognise me.

Prab: What... what happened to him..?

Devesh: It's his own fault. Told them not to touch the zigzag machine.

Prab: But I thought he... (didn't work here anymore)?

Devesh: What?

Prab: He hasn't been in for over a week.

Devesh: Maybe he wanted to make up for all those sick days. Stupid little shit. I'll bring the car round, you carry him out to meet me, okay? I've given him some morphine.

Prab: ...Morphine..?

Devesh: He was screaming the place down.

Devesh exits. Prab drops to his knees and tries to comfort the injured child.

Prab: It's alright, it's alright. It's going to be alright.

He takes out the camera given to him by the journalist and quickly takes some photos of the boy and his injuries.

You're going to be alright.

He carefully picks up the boy, still wrapped in the blanket, and exits.

An hour later, Prab is back at home, in Amba's room.

I go straight home from the hospital. I have to see Amba. I'm desperate to. I have this feeling of dread I know will never go away... She's asleep –still an hour before she has to be up for

school. I lie on her bed and hold her tight. Try not to think about him. The gap where his fingers should be... Like he was doing that trick. That stupid trick that would only fool a child...

End of Part One

Part Two

Scene One

This afternoon. Amba waits in her car on the street, sheltering from the rain between pick up and drop offs, in her 'EatRightNow' courier uniform, her infant baby in the backseat. Sasha, also in an EatRightNow uniform, sits in the passenger seat next to Amba. Amba's eating a power bar, Sasha has a bag of crisps.

Amba: He grabbed your tits?

Sasha: Yeah. I mean, he tried to. Had my parka on with my high viz on top, so he sort of, yanked down the zip and shoved in his hand. And then I was trying to get away but his hand got stuck so I was dragging him along with me. And I was screaming, and he was shouting. We were in this, like, communal hallway, but not a single fucker came out, yeah? So I bit him on the wrist, hard as I could, and I legged it.

Sasha eats more crisps.

Amba: Are you okay?

Sasha: They've blocked me from the fucking app and rent's due in two days, what am I supposed to do?

Amba: I mean, are you *okay*, Sash?

Sasha: Always said that one was bare creepy.

Amba: What did he say? In his complaint?

Sasha: Like, that I stole one of his sides, and when he called me out I called him a dirty cunt. Said he was with his niece and I scared her. Left them both 'shaken' blah blah blah. As if I want his skanky fries.

Amba: ...I'll split my takings with you, this shift.

Sasha: You don't have to do that.

Amba: Pay me back next week.

Sasha: What if I can't? *(of the baby)* Things are even tighter for you.

Amba: I'll do you a letter. An apology. *Heartfelt*. Worked for Mo, and for Danni.

Sasha: And they'll let me back on the app?

Amba: Just gotta hit the right note – equal amounts grovelling, remorse and desperation.

Sasha: Sick. Thanks Ambs.

Amba: No prob.

Scene Two

West Bengal, the early 2000s. The opening performance of the jatra. Devesh, Chellam and Prab have reached the final scene.

Devesh: *(as Sengupta)* I'm a fair man, Chandi. You know that. I have no desire to see anyone suffer. There is room for you and your little friends on my plantation. I will make sure all of your... talents are put to good use.

Chellam: *(as Chandi)* Oh Lord Sengupta, we are unworthy of such benevolence.

Devesh: *(as Sengupta)* I have worn this heavy burden of responsibility for you and the other weak-minded souls in my care for so long it's like a second skin. And your friends will tell you, I reward loyalty. All you have to do is pledge yours.

Chellam and Prab look to each other. Doubtful beat.

That's all I ask.

Beat. Chellam reluctantly sinks down to her knees. Devesh holds out his hand for her to kiss.

Chellam: *(sings as Chandi)* On my knees
And it's a blessing this journey's come to an end
And at least we've survived it, hand in hand.
On my knees.
Because there were many long dark nights of the soul
Where living itself proved an impossible goal.

What use is my stubborn pride?
When there is nowhere left to hide?
No shame in me following reason
When my heart would only lead to treason.

On my knees
Time to put away all those childish fancies
This life can't be all singing and dancing
On my knees
No honour at all in living in debt
This way we'll find peace in the next life, yet

What use is my stubborn pride?
When there is nowhere left to hide?
No honour at all in living in debt
This way we'll find peace in the next life, yet

Prab: *(as Arun)* I'm scared, Chandi.

Chellam: *(as Chandi)* No need, old friend. Lord Sengupta is a man of his word.

He ducks just in time as an empty coke bottle is hurled onto stage.

Prab: Hey.

Devesh: *(direct address)* Who threw that?

Chellam tries to continue.

Chellam: *(sings as Chandi)* No use in our stubborn pride,
Now there is nowhere left to hide.
No shame in following reason
When our hearts would only lead to treason.

More missiles and jeers from the audience. A can narrowly misses Chellam. Prab quickly shields her.

Prab: *(direct address)* She hasn't done anything to you.

Devesh: *(shouting, direct address)* I'll find out the name of every bastard here – believe me.

The shouting and jeering gets louder. Cans and bottles are thrown onto the stage.

You fuckers will pay for this.

Devesh quickly exits. Prab shields Chellam from another bottle, filled with urine.

Chellam: Let's get out of here.

More bottles, cans and jeers. Prab shields Chellam and they exit quickly.

Scene Three

Kajol holds a damp cloth over Prab's injured eye in the living room of their duplex. Things are tense between them.

Prab: There were men roaming all round the backstreets. Didn't recognise most of them. They weren't from Khub Bhalo. Union must've rallied outsiders.

Kajol: And told them to attack *you*?

Prab: Why not? They can't get to Nag.

Kajol: What about Devesh?

Prab: He left before it got really bad.

Kajol: Bastard.

Prab: I did exactly what he wanted. Still ended in a riot.

Kajol: People have been out of work for so long – they're looking for any way to vent their frustration. It had nothing to do with the jatra.

Prab: That ending is a *provocation*. Nothing less.

Kajol: You're in no state to argue. And I'm too tired. Get some sleep. You need to be at the factory early tomorrow – smooth things over with Devesh.

Prab: I can't sleep now.

Kajol: It's just adrenaline.

Prab: It doesn't matter what I do. Doesn't matter what I say to him.

Kajol: He's put his faith in you. Give it a try.

Prab: I want to say goodnight to Amba.

Kajol: Fine. I'm going to bed. Don't wake her.

Prab: I won't.

Kajol goes to leave, but Prab stops her.

Wait.

He takes her in his arms.

Don't... (go like this)

Kajol: What?

Prab: Don't go to bed angry.

Kajol: It's okay, I'm used to it.

Prab: Funny.

Kajol: I know.

Prab: ...I'm sorry I make things hard work, sometimes.

Kajol: Sometimes..? *(Beat)* That fucking conscience of yours.

Prab: I love you.

Kajol: I know.

Prab: Hey.

Beat.

Kajol: Me too.

They kiss. Kajol exits. Prab quietly joins Amba in her room. The nightlight is on.

Prab: Chotto? Are you awake?

Beat. He sits down beside her bed and makes shadow puppets on the wall.

My baba taught me how to do these. The mule... The rabbit... The wolf... The monkey... I don't remember much else about him. He had the day shift while I was at school, and by the time I got home he was getting ready for his other job. Now I wonder when he ever slept..? Ma was the one who taught me things. She taught me everything. And *your* ma is very clever. Much cleverer than me.

He takes out the small disposable camera from his pocket, rolling it over in his hands, deep in thought. He kisses Amba on the forehead.

All I want for you, chotto, is for your life to be a gift. Not a trap.
(Beat) Goodnight, little one.

He exits with the camera.

Scene Four

Two days later. Prab is tied to a chair in the backroom of the factory in the early morning. He is beaten and bruised. He is trying to free his hands but the cord is too tight. Devesh enters, flicking through newly developed photos.

Devesh: The photos are hot off the press, and it does not look good for you, my friend.

He holds one up, too close to Prab's face.

This doesn't look like your cousin's wedding. No bride, no groom, no saptapadi. Unless your family has a really fucked up idea of a party. Maybe little Protam was the guest of honour. Is that it?

Prab doesn't respond.

Who did you take these for?

Prab: ...Doesn't matter now.

Devesh: It matters to me.

Prab: You know who.

Devesh: I gave you a job, I gave you a promotion, I gave you a duplex for your sweet little family. I let you fucking write for us. But some firingi journo still wins your loyalty?

Prab: ...Wasn't for her.

Devesh: Oh no. You were doing it for the kids. Fucking We Are the World now, you're bastard Bono, is that it?

Prab: ...He lost his hand. He almost died.

Devesh: And he's *still* better off than all the other kids in Hatgachia, because we've covered his medical bills and given him a generous severance package. Get it?

Beat.

Fuck you, then.

Prab: Only to keep him quiet.

Devesh: He's not going to keep quiet, my friend. We've made sure of that. People are already saying how suspicious it is you were here, all alone with a child, so early in the morning.

Prab: You're the one who found him.

Devesh: And soon, people will be wondering if maybe he got injured because there was some sort of struggle. People will be asking what a young boy would be struggling against, alone with a grown man, early in the morning.

Prab: I helped him.

Devesh: Couple of hundred rupees a month to his ma, and his memory will get a bit hazy. Poor kid. That's what trauma does to you.

Prab: No one will believe him.

Devesh: People have perverted minds. I blame the media. They'll look back at the money you gave to all those little shits, and they'll think, 'fuuuck. He was a serial paedophile. Living here. Right under our noses.'

Beat.

Think you're clever, don't you? Smarter than me, definitely. Thought I'd make you my right hand man, without having a left hand man to keep an eye on you. Never underestimate your audience, remember?

Beat.

Poor Kajol and Amba. Where will they find a priest to bless the ashes of a paedo? It's going to be such a stigma for them.

Prab: If you hurt them...(I'll kill you)

Devesh: What? What will you do to me?

Beat.

You've left the apartment in a real mess. Had to get the place professionally cleaned – know how much that cost? Clothes everywhere, books on the floor.

Prab is disturbed by this but doesn't say anything.

They didn't take much. Guessing they didn't go far? ...Have to admit, my friend, I never recognised this... steely core you have under all that nodding and bowing.

Prab: Just do what you have to do.

Devesh: I've been reading up, and there isn't a lost story about a monkey fucker called Chandi from the *Mahabharata*.

Prab: Shit. You've got me there.

Devesh: What happened six years ago?

Prab: Don't know what you're talking about.

Devesh: I hear when you were younger you were out there, giving fiery speeches, leading demonstrations, handing out leaflets, making people feel unhappy with their lives. Making people *angry*. I hear some of your friends disappeared into the forests. Joined the Naxalites. Took up arms against decent business people like my father. But not you. So what happened?

Prab doesn't answer.

What dampened that fire in your belly?

Prab: Just get it over with, will you?

Devesh: That's very practical of you. I'll make sure to let people know you begged me to end it. Probably out of shame.

Prab: I don't care what you say about me.

Devesh: What's the reputation of a dead man worth?

Prab: That isn't important to me.

Beat.

Devesh: You know, everyone thinks I had it really easy. Rich father, beautiful ma, ayah, staff, big house. But we didn't have all that shit when I was little. Everyone thinks baba's a class A bastard. You think we were spared his bastarding? When he was starting up Khub Bhala, me and ma were free labour to him. Every afternoon, I'd run straight to the workshop from school, do my share of the overlocking, and the seam unpicking, and the cloth cutting. I was allowed home for dal bhat, then it was back to the workshop until bedtime, sometimes long after. My teacher called ma and baba in to complain I was always tired. Baba just wanted to know one thing – was I one of the smart ones? Could I get somewhere, really get somewhere, just with my brain? I was in the middle set for everything – not about to set the world on fire. The teachers told him I could get into the local college if I worked hard. Baba said, what's the point in schooling him, then? Being smart isn't everything. Why waste his time at the shitty local college when he

can start working on something bigger, right now? And he was right. I might not be the smartest guy in the room. But I'd rather make everyone shit themselves than start some... philosophical conversation.

Prab leans forward and sniffs.

Prab: I don't smell power. I smell... desperation.

Devesh swallows his anger. He starts to roughly untie Prab's wrists, making sure it hurts.

Devesh: *(of Prab's injuries)* Kamal's speciality is a razor to the eyeballs. He says they burst like ripe tomatoes being sliced. But I told him I wanted you to be able to see the sky, one last time.

Devesh helps him to his feet. Prab can barely stand.

Come on then, my friend. One last walk under the stars.

They exit.

Scene Five

Chellam meets Kajol in the room the family used to share at Kajol's family home, a few hours later. Two bags wait by the front door.

Chellam: When you get to Delhi, head to the Kasmere Gate car park. My brother's number plate is DL1YA3551.

She hands Chellam a scrap of paper with the information she needs.

He's skinny and has a salt and pepper moustache. I've told him to wear his brown corduroy jacket. If he's with anyone else, or isn't exactly as I've described, don't get in the car. Just hold onto Amba and keep walking.

Kajol: They wouldn't hurt her..?

Chellam: They *would*. You have to understand that, okay? You have to let yourself imagine the very worst, so you realise the danger you're in and keep yourselves safe.

Kajol: I *have* imagined the worst. All I can do is imagine...

Chellam: I'm sorry. I'm... being a bitch... I don't know what to say.

Kajol: They hurt him first, didn't they?

Long beat. They both know the answer.

Thank you for helping us.

Chellam: He was a good friend. He became a good friend, I mean.

Beat.

Kajol: We were happy here. Sometimes.

Kajol starts to cry. Chellam tries to comfort her. Kajol gestures to the other family's clothes piled neatly on the shelves.

It's strange seeing it like this. Ours, not ours.

Chellam: ...You will be happy again. One day.

Kajol: You don't know that.

Chellam: ...Okay. But right now it's enough to just keep you safe.

Kajol: Will you marry him? Devesh.

Chellam: ...No.

Kajol: Because of this?

Chellam: He'll find a nice girl from a rich family. Soon, probably.

Kajol takes an A4 manila envelope out from one of the bags.

Kajol: I thought you might want this.

Chellam: *(taking out a neatly bound script)* No, you should keep it.

Kajol: What am I going to do with it?

Chellam flicks through to the end.

It has a different ending. He said you didn't like the other one.

Chellam: No. Not really. *(Beat)* He talked to you about the jatra?

Kajol: All the time. You must know how excited he was about it?

Chellam goes to look out of the window.

Chellam: Your taxi's here. Go straight to Amba's school, then to Howrah. Take the back streets wherever you can.

Kajol picks up the bags. Chellam puts the envelope back in Kajol's hands. They go to hug – it's too awkward. Chellam clasps her shoulders.

Good luck.

Kajol: ...Thank you.

Kajol exits with the bags.

Scene Six

A few days ago, evening. Amba drives, in her EatRightNow uniform, her infant baby in a car seat in the back.

Amba: *(to the baby)* It's okay, lovely, it's okay.
(sings, a bit desperate) On my knees,
Just begging for this bloody journey to come to an end
If I can just make it without going round the bend...

The baby cries harder.

Don't do that, don't do that. It's okay, it's okay. *(waving a toy at the baby in the rear view mirror)* Look, look, look.

He continues to cry.

How about a story, how about a story?

Another car speeds past, horn blaring. Amba gives the driver the finger.

(shouting to the other driver) Fuck you, buddy. *(soothing voice to the baby)* Okay, what was Chandi doing? Hey? Hey, lovely? Where did we get to? That's right, she puts two fingers in her mouth, and she whistles.

Whistling from the back. Amba ignores this.

And she... whistles. And the ogre looks up, and before he can say anything, a great flock of eagles have lifted him up, up, up into the air. Chandi waves and laughs as they fly him away from the forest, so far he'll never be able to bother her or her friends again.

The voice of Prab's ghost from the back seat, as he takes the baby's place.

Prab: That's *not* how it goes.

Amba: We do the child-friendly version.

Prab: Mine has talking animals in it. Children *love* talking animals.

Amba: Not getting their eyes gouged out and shit.

Prab: Where are you going with him? In rush hour?

Amba: It's not rush hour.

Prab looks out of the window, bewildered.

Prab: It's like a car park out there.

Amba shrugs.

You're not back at work already, chotto? He's tiny.

Amba: He's four months. Almost.

Prab: Looks just like me.

Amba: No he doesn't.

Prab: Come on – look at that chin.

Amba: He takes after Kav's side.

Prab: Handsome little bastard. Can't Kav have him for a few hours?

Amba: He's working too.

Prab: Don't you get time off for the first few months?

Amba: Yeah, but I'm only eligible for 50% statutory maternity and it barely covers our gas and electric.

Prab: I mean from your company.

Amba: I'm self-employed.

Prab: *(reading the logo on the food carrier beside him)* You're 'EatRightNow'?

Amba bursts into laughter.

Amba: Fuck, dad. You are... jokes, that's utter jokes, man. Am I EatRightNow..? *(laughs again)* As if I'd be driving this shit heap if I was. *(laughs again)*

Prab: I don't get it.

Amba: *EatRightNow*, dad. They're like... fucking... *global*. They probably got *EatRightNow* Kolkata by now. And we're on our way home, anyway.

Prab: How was your shift? Do you still call them shifts?

Amba: Just have to swing by Sasha's first.

Prab: Go home. Get some rest. You look tired.

Amba: Don't look so hot yourself, dad. And I promised I do a favour for her.

Beat.

Prab: How many 'epic apologies' are you going to write, chotto?

Amba: Here we go.

Prab: What?

Amba: "How's it going, chotto?" You know how it's going. You see your chance, and you swoop in.

Prab: I don't swoop.

Amba: You're only here to rile me up. Incite me to... revolution, or whatever.

Prab: I'm not here for 'revolution or whatever'. I'm here to see how you're doing.

Amba: We're getting by.

Prab: If people are making *vexatious* complaints, you need to put them right and clear your name.

Amba: Not me, Sasha.

Prab: So it's not your problem. Go home and leave her to it?

Amba: She's my friend.

Prab: You're making her confess to something she didn't do.

Amba: Not just confess. We're gonna have to grovel, like really go for it. Looked up this creep – he spends a hundred quid a week on *EatRightNow*. Lazy twat.

Prab: How often does this happen? The grovelling?

Amba: You already know, so why you asking?

Prab: Just give me a rough estimate.

Amba: Our mate Mo got caught putting through extra fries and wedges on every other order. Like, for ages... So when he got caught we had to make a big show about how much he needed the work and we sent photos of the tent he was sleeping in to HQ to make them feel sorry for him and shit.

Prab: He had to pretend he'd hit rock bottom?

Amba: No... He really was living in a tent. He stayed with us for a bit but we ran out of room when babs arrived.

Prab: What's your union rep say?

Amba: Jesus Christ, dad. It's not like that anymore.

Prab: How can you not have a union?

Amba: EatRightNow's an app, not a company.

Prab: One with a shitload of people working for them? Sorry, grovelling to them. Your ma didn't come here for you to live like this.

Amba: No, we came 'cos *you* fucked up.

Prab: If it's happened to more than one of you, you need to stand together.

Amba: I'm trying. Doesn't help anyone if we all get fired.

Prab: You can't get fired by an app.

She looks in the rearview mirror, but Prab has gone. Amba slams the steering wheel.

Amba: *Hate* it when you do that.

Scene Seven

Earlier this evening. Amba drives at night in the pitch black, her headlights on full beam. Prab is in the backseat, alongside the baby and bags and bags of takeaway food.

Amba: It's almost closed up.

Prab: I would've heard about that.

Amba: How?

Prab: I keep on top of these things.

Amba: Things have changed a *lot* dad.

Prab: Not so much, chotto.

Amba: They stopped putting CFCs in hairspray and shit and now it's almost closed up.

Prab: The ozone layer?

Amba: The hole. The hole in the ozone layer.

Prab: How did they do that?

Amba: It wasn't 'them' really... We sort of all just... started doing things a bit differently.

Prab: ...Where are we..?

Amba: Melton Road.

Prab: What's happened..?

Amba: Nothing.

Prab looks out of the window aghast.

Prab: Why are all the shops shut..?

Amba: They've been closed for time.

Prab: Where is everyone..?

Amba: It's almost 7.30.

Prab: What about all the cafes and restaurants..?

Amba: It's *dark*, dad.

Prab unzips one of the food carriers beside him.

Prab: What is this..?

Amba: *(checking in the rear view mirror)* Beetroot Soy burger, jackfruit wings, spicy seitan fries and a Vitality juice.

Prab: Looks disgusting.

Amba: Better than fucking power bars.

She eats a power bar.

Prab: I looked up your big boss online. Californian guy.

Amba: Is that where you are, dad?

Prab: California?

Amba: The internet... It doesn't matter.

Prab: Seems like a smooth character?

Amba: He doesn't seem so bad. If you reach the power rider list he gives you shares in EatRightNow.

Prab: Wow.

Amba: I know. That shit is *worth* something. ...Not that I'll ever be a fucking power rider now.

Prab: You'll be something better, chotto.

Amba: Like you?

Prab: ...Better than me. *(of the baby)* He's fast asleep.

Amba: Only way to get him to drop off, now. Wakes up soon as we get home.

Prab: It's the motion.

Amba: And the hum, you know? Of the engine?

Prab: It's so peaceful.

Amba: I know.

Prab: No one else on the road.

Amba: Smooth sailing. Gliding. Rolling. *Dreaming.*

Prab: Dreaming...

Amba: Sometimes when he's asleep, I pretend someone's following me.

Prab: Like... a convoy?

Amba: Like, someone's on my tail. Make it more exciting. Keep my adrenaline up. Helps me stay awake.

Prab: You don't look tired anymore.

Amba: No, I'm buzzing. Sometimes I pretend it's like... a monster. An amorphous, rampaging monster, like... Godzilla, or... The Fog.

Prab: The Jamie Lee Curtis version or the remake?

Amba: Either. Or a tsunami I have to outspeed. Or a volcano erupting and I have to go faster or we'll be caught forever in lava and metres of ash like those poor fuckers in Pompei who never saw it coming.

Prab: They probably did know it was coming. Apparently.

Amba: Something else you read online?

Prab: Accounts from that time describe an increase in earth tremors leading up to the eruption. Vesuvius was still active – it just hadn't exploded for a long time. They knew a cataclysmic event was on the way.

Amba: Why didn't they leave, then?

Prab: Complacency? Or... maybe they thought they couldn't change anything so why bother worrying about it?

Amba: Because they all died.

Prab: That's pure conjecture, though. *(of the bags of food)* How many people are you expecting?

Amba: I don't know.

Prab: Better to aim high.

Amba: So it hurts more when you hit the ground?

Prab: They'll come, chotto.

Amba turns on the radio – Chellam sings a Mumbai filmi version of the song from Prab's jatra. They both hum along.

Scene Eight

Amba and Prab wait on the grassy hill on the outskirts of the city at night. Amba's baby is asleep in the infant car seat next to the EatRightNow food carriers.

Prab: Do you have a blanket? Grass is a bit damp.

Amba: Didn't think of that.

Prab: *(of the food)* Shall we put it out, anyway?

Amba: ...We don't know if anyone's coming.

Prab: They will. I can feel it.

Amba: Is that something they give you? In the afterlife?

Prab: They don't give you anything.

Amba: Sounds shit. *(Beat)* What am I supposed to say if they do? I don't do speechifying.

Prab: You'll know. Those words have been running through your head often enough. Been right there on the tip of your tongue.

Amba: Someone did a painting of you, you know? A mural. Came up on my Insta feed a few years ago. 'Indian Street Art'.

Prab: ...Do I have horns? Cloven feet?

Amba: It's nice. You look... nice. Whoever did it knew you. Or... I dunno. Had a photo of you or something. *(Beat)* One day I'd like to take babs and Kav to see it.

Sasha enters. Only Amba can see and hear Prab.

Sasha: Alright...

Amba: Hi.

Sasha: This it?

Amba: Said 7... *(checks her phone)* It's only quarter past.

Sasha: *(of the food)* How many you expecting?

Amba: Dunno... Pays to... aim high...? Help yourself.

Sasha: For real?

Amba: ...Fuck it, why not?

Amba puts out the food, picnic style. Sasha helps her.

Sasha: Shit me, Ambs. Enough to feed an army here... (*opening up another container*) What the fuck's this..?

Amba: ...'Seafood tower'.

Sasha: Is this...?

Amba: Lobster.

Sasha: Oh my god. I've never had lobster...

Sasha eats some lobster.

Sasha: Tastes like tuna.

Amba tries some as well. They're underwhelmed.

Sasha: Can't believe you thieved all this food.

Amba: I didn't.

Sasha: Don't tell me you *bought* it.?

Amba: Told Maria at Top Burger, and Wayne at So Sushi, and Hels at Wings 'n' Stuff/

Sasha: /Love her/

Amba: /She's sweet. They all sneaked through extra orders.

Sasha: Why?

Amba: To... feed us.

Sasha: Why?

Amba: As a... you know, a... gesture.

Sasha: Of what?

Amba: Solidarity.

Sasha: With who?

Amba: Told them what happened. Didn't say who.

Sasha: They gave up all this free food for some bitch they might not even know?

Amba: ...Yeah.

Sasha is lost for words. They eat. Other EatRightNow riders enter, still in their uniforms: Mohammed, Danni and Remi. One of them parks up their bike.

Mo: Hiya.

Amba: Take a seat... Help yourselves...

They all take off their cycle helmets, rucksacks, etc, and help themselves to food. Everyone is hungry.

Danni: Didn't know there was gonna be food...

Sasha: Why'd you come, then?

Danni: Heard about that girl. *(to Amba)* Was it that perv in Blaby with the soft top Audi?

Amba: Um... No, I don't think so...

Danni: Didn't want her to think she was... I dunno. Alone..? She coming?

Amba: ...Yeah. Hope so.

Remi: Heard they blocked her login.

Mo: Wastemen.

Remi: For real. Like, some twat in California blocks you and suddenly you've got *no* work. And the rent's due in five days so what you supposed to do, exactly? Happened to me just after Christmas – spent fifty quid on the helpline trying to sort it.

A couple of nods.

Danni: Last week, this bitch in a gated estate in the middle of nowhere got my fee waived 'cos I was five minutes late. Spent 20 minutes just trying to find her place.

Mo: Let me guess – no door number?

Danni: Bitch was so flash she didn't even have a *doorbell*. Like, you want a mind reading service, not EatRightNow.

Mo: Every night I have to find somewhere new to hang between orders. Feds move me on every time. As if I'm there trying to chirpse women.

Danni: They know we're not allowed in the restaurants - do they give a shit?

Remi: Do they fuck.

Mo: Beyonce herself could strut past, wouldn't notice her ass.

Remi: Just trying to keep the cold out of your bones.

Mo: Preach.

Remi: Like, when you get home after 12 hours and all you want to do is have a shower and cotch but you have to clean and Hoover the whole place because your landlord's just 'dropping by' first thing.

Danni: When you go into work with a temp of 39, even though you were up half the night puking.

Mo: What else you supposed to do?

Danni: The Gaviscon isn't gonna pay for itself.

Sasha: My mum always said you can rest when you die.

Mo: Truth.

Amba looks to Prab for guidance. He just shrugs.

Amba: How is that the truth?

Sasha: I'm saying... it helps to know... I can keep going, knowing there's a rest on the way.

Amba: How'd you know dying's restful?

Sasha: It's like going to sleep.

Amba: ...What if it isn't..?

Sasha: What the fuck? You all god-fearing and shit now?

Amba: What if you're putting up with all shades of shit 'cos you think the afterlife's gonna be better and it turns out to just be a... different shade of shit?

Mo: You don't believe in Heaven?

Amba: It's the 'unknown' – that's the whole point.

Sasha: Heaven's real, it's a thing. Otherwise it would just be fucking wrong.

Amba: All sorts of things are fucking wrong. No reason the afterlife should be any different.

Sasha: How come you know so much, Mystic Meg?

Amba: We can't take a sick day if we're sick. We can't take maternity leave if we're pregnant. If we get harassed *we're* the ones who have to write epic apologies. We can cycle around twelve hours a day right now – what about in twenty years time? Thirty? Think you're gonna have a pension? We're not allowed to get old – we don't have that luxury. Own our own place? Shit, you think you're ever gonna be able to do anything but flatshare?

Wry laughter. Amba takes a letter from her pocket. She unfolds it and holds it aloft.

I wrote an apology for... this girl. Our friend.

Mo: Our *sister*.

Amba: Yeah. That's it. And I'd do that for any of you. You know that.

Mo shakes her hand.

And if she wants, she can ping it off tonight. But I wrote another letter too. One from all of us.

Amba takes another letter from her pocket. She passes it round the group to read.

Sasha: Why?

Amba: To tell them we won't turn up, we won't log in. No picks ups, no drop offs, until they let her back. Let our sister back.

Mo: Should pay her for all the time she's been blocked.

Danni: As if. That's what UC's for.

Amba: He's right.

Amba hands Mo a pencil.

Go on. Add it in.

Mo adds to the letter.

Danni: What about the guy? Creep with the soft top Audi?

Sasha: He's the one who should be blocked.

Remi: Get the feds on *his* ass.

Nods of agreement.

Danni: Maybe he'll think twice next time.

Remi: Make it so he *has* to.

Amba hands Danni the pencil.

Danni: Me?

Amba: Why not?

Danni: I don't know what to write.

Amba: Yeah, you do.

Beat, then Danni adds to the letter.

Sasha: How we gonna strike? We're freelance?

Amba: They say we don't work for them. Let's see what happens when we don't work at all.

Long, contemplative beat.

Sasha: Let's do it. I vote for the second letter.

Amba: You sure..?

Sasha: Yeah.

Sasha holds up her hand. Beat. Then more hands go up, until everyone's hand is in the air.

Danni: So we just cotch here with our picnic?

Remi: We should take all this down to City Centre Zone. Relocate the whole thing to the high street. You have to stop traffic before anyone pays attention.

Mo: How long 'til the feds show up?

Danni: Who gives a shit?

Mo: I give a shit.

Sasha: But people will join us, right? Like you all did.

Some people nod.

Maria, and Wayne, and Hels.

Amba: I'll put a callout on the RiderChat.

Danni: They can't arrest everyone.

Mo: I'm sticking to the pavement.

Danni: Long as you're with us.

Mo: I am. Hundred percent.

Remi: So when? Tonight?

Amba looks to Prab. He nods.

Amba: Yeah. It has to be now, right?

Everyone votes again. Blackout.

Ends