

## One Flower For The Sake Of One Heart

### 1.

Before dawn, a young woman wrapped in a shawl, her hair unbound, had passed through the narrow streets between red brick factories, winding her way out onto the ghats fronting the Thames. The few initial eyewitness reports suggested she was crying, but as the story spread and more people came forward, the majority claimed she had appeared serene, surrounded by the light of sainthood. She washed herself in the dark river water before sitting to face the rising sun. After praying, she doused herself in oil and set herself alight. She was dead by the time the first boatman reached the shore.

It became a place of pilgrimage. It inspired his greatest work.

### 2.

Dazzling snakes of sun danced upon the surface of the river. He had looked up, rising from his purification, his face running with water and his hair plastered against his skull, to see the black eyes of a young woman staring at him. Like an answer to a prayer he had never dared make.

He saw that she was still watching him as he waded back to the water's edge. Eyes of dark glass, picking him out from among all the bodies attending the Puja.

Behind him, the garments of the drowned Goddess caught the currents and spread across the river's surface, diaphanous silks of deep and shining colours. The brown muddy water was briefly transformed before they sank, following the carved form of their mistress to the riverbed.

The same offering, the sacrifice of her form to the river waves, was made every year.

### 3.

He met her formally a week or so later, at a Senate House function hosted by his overseer, the distinguished professor of Sanskrit. Outside his work translating the Vedas for 'the great unwashed', as his professor put it, he was, by this time, acquiring some small reputation as a poet. Thought of as something of a curiosity, he wrote in both Hindi and English, but refused to translate the works of one language into the other. They remained distinct, separate bodies of work.

As soon as he saw her, he was sure it was the same woman. She stood with an elder man, her gaze abstracted. He watched the two of them as he circled the room, and as soon as the opportunity presented itself, he asked the professor of Sanskrit to introduce them.

“Ah yes, of course,” the professor said, leading him over by the arm. “He's the Vice Chancellor, you know. A very important man.”

He was introduced to Vice Chancellor Gupta and they exchanged the usual hollow nothings while the young woman hung politely back, staring at the floor. As the conversation stuttered, the professor of Sanskrit, desperate to keep hold of his Very Important Personage, spotted someone else to whom the Vice Chancellor must be introduced. “AJ Lakhani! He's here to sort out the Celtic Studies Department. They have been getting very rebellious - got in a spot of bother, or so I believe, something to do with sedition. So Delhi sent over this man... Would you two mind awfully? Goodness, I haven't introduced...”

“Indrani,” the Vice Chancellor supplied. “My daughter. Indrani, this is -”

“The poet,” she said coolly. “I know.”

Heaped her namaste as the professor of Sanskrit and the Vice Chancellor walked away.

“You were at the Puja,” she told him. “I watched you going through the motions on the ghat.”

“I saw you watching.”

“How improper of me. I'll remember next time to cover my head, like a good woman.”

“That wasn't what I meant.”

“No?” She smiled rather acidly. “I'll take you as a man of your word, for now.”

“I would be delighted if you did.”

“As a man of your word, then, allow me to ask you a question. I've heard you read your poetry,” she briefly dropped her gaze, a little too modestly, “and I can't perceive from it anything about you. There is the man I imagine you to be, but that's...” She smiled. “That's neither here nor there.”

“No indeed.”

“So what are you? I wonder, for instance, what you believe. Are you a Hindu?”

He watched her eyes glimmer like black moons, wondering what would be the appropriate answer.

“No,” he said finally.

She looked satisfied. “I thought as much. Not that one could tell from your Hindi poetry. But your English... You seem to have a knack of writing about miracles that never happen. As if religion constantly disappoints you. So then I was surprised when you seemed to take your Puja so seriously.”

“Prayer is serious business. Whatever one believes.”

“Tell me, what did you wish for when you cast your lotus upon the water?”

Heart pounding, aware of her eyes as the waves had lapped at his waist. Gently balancing his lotus upon the surface of the water, watching it borne away with all the others by the wake. Indistinguishable from the rest.

“That you would still be watching when I turned back.”

“Ach, Aungresi!” She half turned away from him, laughing bitterly. “Such impure thoughts at the moment of purification. The Goddess will torture you for sure.”

“She would have to exist to do that.”

Indrani stared at him askance. "Then why so much poetry about her? To her, even."

"It's expected of me. Would I get anywhere if I didn't? There are hoops I have to jump through."

"Is it only that?"

"She's a convenient metaphor."

"Metaphor? You would turn the world to salt, you English. Your souls must dwell in a harsh place, with little beauty, if you can see her as only a metaphor. And yet in your own language..."

He was entranced by her gestures, the delicate hands and the neatly pared nails, cut to the quick.

"Yes?"

"You're like two poets. One, the Hindi speaker, is elegant and precise, glossing over everything with his formalism. The other, the English, allows himself to bleed rather more publicly... I often wonder why you haven't translated those English poems. They would be rare enough, in Hindi, their godlessness, their strange devotions. Whereas what you do write purely in Hindi is nothing new. You could make quite a name for yourself."

"They don't translate. Nothing does. Each work has its own tongue."

"So we can never talk?" she asked him in English. "Truly?"

"We talk about different things," he replied, also in English. She laughed.

"Does this apply to love? Do we talk about different things? Should it mean a different thing to me than it does to you? What if I had an illicit love? Should I be seeking to burn myself on a pyre like Sati did for the love of forbidden Shiva?"

"Only if you believe you will be reborn as Parvati, as consort to what you were denied."

"And would I be?"

He laughed.

"Your Hindi poetry would seem to say so. Your English, maybe otherwise. Is, then, English love different to Hindi pyar?"

"As different as the waters from the waters, the earth from the firmament."

She smiled at his reference. "But wouldn't you condemn such an act of sati?"

"That would depend upon the faith of the act."

"Which by your admission, is a faith you don't have."

He looked away, and didn't answer.

"I find your English more honest. It reminds me of Chaucer. His Old English is much like your modern; I think I see flesh, smell blood. Not these glorious ideas but real people, yes?"

He shifted, staring into her eyes. "It would be dangerous to call anything that I do real."

"But even so. It is more real than Rama or Sita. Somewhere, under this Raj, still lies the same country he wrote about. You write about it too, and I see it. I catch it sometimes, walking through a street or passing a market. It's not dead."

He stared at her uncomfortably. "This sounds dangerously sentimental."

"Sentimental?"

"Ye Olde England. Before the Raj came."

“I wouldn't want that.” She uttered a strange laugh. “I wouldn't even be here. But surely you understand what it means to me - the Miller rather than Rama, the Wife of Bath rather than Sita...”

“Easy stereotypes on which to hang a glorious past.”

She blanched with anger. “You don't realise your own freedoms.” She folded her hands and bowed to him coldly, then walked away.

He was left staring after her, not a little amused. Native of this little outpost, the furthest corner of the globe-spanning Raj, managing to offend this Hindustani woman by denigrating his own literary history. He shook his head, perplexed.

#### 4.

He was surprised, four weeks later, to receive a letter from her. Moon passing through the House of Venus, particularly auspicious in matters of love. She had written her name and address on the back of the envelope in an elegant, flowing Devanagari. The letter inside was in English, a fat well-practised Roman script that he found almost girlish. Her words sat before him with the naked vulnerability of any handwritten letter.

*If we must talk [she wrote] about different things in different languages, then let us not argue in English as we did in Hindi. Please accept my apologies for withdrawing from you as rapidly as I did, but you struck at a subject extremely close to my heart. I could not, and still cannot, accept your argument that the characters within Chaucer are “ easy stereotypes on which to hang a glorious past.” What hope is there for you Aungresi if you cannot accept the truths written by your own national poet? You seem to forget that to which it must be compared. I have learnt to cherish the faults and good humour of the Wife of Bath over the womanly perfection of Sita, the Miller's ribaldry over Rama's strength. Alas, I am forced to live my life within the unreal dreams of one rather than the demotic humanity of the other. If you have no God, poet, what else but this humanity, so manifest in the Canterbury Tales, can you possibly believe in?*

*It is of course impossible for me to request that my apology be accepted in person. Which is why I await your invitation to allow me the pleasure of doing so,  
Your humble servant etc*

He smiled at her ironic address, under which her name flourished in Devanagari. Turning the paper on its back (it would never do to keep it; he was well aware of the terrible importunity she would suffer if it was found, an unmarried Hindu woman corresponding in such a familiar manner with a casteless ferengi) he composed a reply.

## 5.

On the day they were due to meet, he finished work early, a Sanskrit text still laying on his desk, half translated. He left the office to a perfect day outside, the sun blazing down like a bright hole in the silk-blue sky. They had agreed to meet in Hyde Park, reasoning that there was nothing wrong and no shame to meeting in the full public view. A clandestine meeting would only raise unnecessary suspicions, should it be discovered. One was the act of colleagues, the other of illicit lovers. Carrying a picnic hamper, he crossed the university campus, smiling at the students spread out across the grass of Torrington Square, saris shimmering and pale skins slowly turning red. Leaving the gate of the University behind, he cut across Tottenham Court Road, the bazaars selling elegant wares from across the Empire, white traders furiously arguing with Hindustani gentleman, the line of shops seeming to fade towards the horizon in either direction. He headed down through Fitzrovia to Oxford Street, slipping through the usual carnage of absently meandering cows, sedan taxis and bicycles, lumbering carts, Dalits begging in doorways, enticing aromas reaching out from the food stalls that fringed both sides of the road. Motorised vehicles chopped through the traffic, holy men stared from grizzled brows, sales screamed from shop windows, the owners hawking relentlessly for custom, calls in English and Hindi rising above the brightly-coloured canopies. He seemed to view it all from within the bubble of his own heart, its turbulence seeming far less than his own.

## 6.

He spread the rug on the grass, trampling down the long stems before inviting her to sit. They were almost lost in a sea of bobbing grass heads that sighed and bent in waves to the wind. He knelt by the hamper and began to remove items, one by one.

“You don't suffer from hayfever?” he asked her, watching as she settled herself upon the rug.

“No. I've always been lucky in that respect. Despite living in London my whole life.”

“You were born here?”

“Yes.”

He was surprised by such a candid admission. There were still some within the Raj administration who considered that to be born outside Hindustan rendered a Hindu casteless, an alien, a figure of bad karma. She watched him for his reaction as he carefully unpacked the food: vegetable pies, quail's eggs, English summer fruits, muffins with gooseberry jam.

“I thought,” she told him softly, “you would be able to tell. There is something in the accent.”

“Maybe to Hindustani ears. But not to me, no.” He possibly had not admitted it to himself. They were talking in English, at her insistence, her long low vowels decorating her consonants like rich chocolate about a cake.

“It makes me a lesser piece to be bargained with. As my father has found out to his cost.”

He handed her a plate with a piece of carefully divided pie upon it. He didn't meet her eyes, feeling her stare with insistent meaning at him. “I'm not sure what you're saying.”

“Don't pretend such a lack of ingenuity. Of course you do.”

Her eyes were filled with tears. He looked about himself, embarrassed. Dandelion spores caught the sun as they drifted past, brushing his face and catching in his hair. Nearby, the neglected old temple to Diana had been rededicated to Devi. Dressed in fresh clothes, the Goddess presided serenely over the park, staring out at this little picnic through inscrutable painted eyes.

He broke the silence at last. “You mean marriage.”

She wasn't smiling. “I am at last betrothed.”

“Congratulations. I wish you well.”

She stared down at her hands, which were clasped together neatly in her lap, and did not answer.

They ate in silence, listening to the hush of the wind.

“Your speech is as politic in English as it is in Hindi,” she told him eventually. “I had hoped it would be otherwise.”

She sat with her head uncovered, staring straight at him. It was not something he was used to.

“I'm sorry. I didn't know what to say.”

“Say what you feel,” she hissed. “You're a poet. You don't have to be like me, you don't have to accept what is given.”

“Who is he?”

“A university chancellor's son. It is a good match. My father is paying handsomely.”

“Not all fathers are so generous to their daughters.”

She shrugged.

“What's he like?”

She turned her head. “I wrote to you of Chaucer. You who do not believe in the Goddess but who asks me such things. Why do you tolerate me being given away?”

“Because it's the way of things.”

“So you believe it, and yet not. Like the poets in you, Hindi and English. One part says what the other denies.”

“If you will.”

“You Aungresi. How will you ever be rid of us if you can't even say what you mean?”

“And what would we replace you with? The same. The same inequalities, the same privilege and poverty, just with different names.”

“Yes, but that would be your freedom. Yours.” she paused amidst a furious gesture, fingertips pressed close together like a budding lotus, watching a passer-by curiously watching. “I shouldn't even be here. I dishonour my betrothed.”

“Yet you came.”

“And you invited me. An unmarried Hindustani woman. What were you thinking?”

“I trusted what you said.”

“What I said... I still will not believe your opinion of Chaucer. To me, he speaks of humanity. Imperfection. Hope... Rama and Sita are monsters. Their actions should be expected of no one.”

“You place too much faith in him. His characters, like Rama and Sita, are fictions. They can't exist.”

“If you won't believe in either, then what do you have faith in?”

“It isn't a matter of faith. But perhaps Rama is a better figure to aspire to than the Miller.”

“And what? I should act like the perfect Hindu woman? I should throw myself into the fire for my infidelities? For meeting you here? Would you wish that of me?”

“No.”

She smiled in tragic triumph. “You give yourself away. You gave yourself away by the river, but now you've said it, you've told me the truth.”

They stared at each other. He barely drew breath, tracing her luminous brown irises, reaching for her soul within the black pools of her pupils.

She held out her hand to him. “Come, let us pay our respects before Devi. I fear our prospects are neither good nor bountiful. But she may grant us moments.”

Her flesh was soft, warm, an incongruity laying upon his own. It seemed so easy, so perfect. She pulled him up, suddenly laughing, and half ran, half stumbled through the long grass to the little mandir.

Its classical lines still remained, the deceptive simplicity of the shallow eggshell roof and the smooth Doric columns, but now at the heart of its shelter stood the figure of Devi, two arms raised in benediction, a third holding a lotus and the fourth scattering grain upon the earth. Strewn on the ground before her were clusters of flowers, little trays of sweets, children's toys. Indrani carefully unclipped the flower from her hair and lay it at the feet of the Goddess. Then she sank to her knees and supplicated herself before the figure, praying softly in Sanskrit.

He followed suit, closing his eyes, his mind still full of her supplicated body, the curve of her hips, the thoughtlessly unbound weight of her hair.

Another profanity, he thought. She is driving the Goddess from me.

He uttered meaningless reverential words before raising himself back to a sitting position. Indrani still stretched out towards the Goddess, silent now and unmoving as the form before her. The world seemed to hang: the cries of birds and the shouts of people, the hush of the wind, the slowly falling sun cutting shadows across the ground. Painted, fragile as if made from glass, as if he could shatter it and find something else beneath, some undreamt of possibility. Then the moment passed, Indrani pushing herself upright and turning to face him, her skin torn by tears.

“What did you pray for?” she asked him.

“You.” He returned the nakedness of her stare.

She smiled gently. “I myself prayed for something I have the freedom to take. Myself and only me.”

The Goddess watched the two of them as they watched each other, ignoring her.

“Come.” Indrani reached out both hands, the soft flesh of her palms heating his cheeks. She drew him gently forward and, in front of the Goddess, they kissed.

## 7.

He knew that he could never expect to hear from her again. After the kiss they had walked back through the park, not touching and not talking, her sari pallu now covering her head. She stared at the grass, her face an unreadable mask. They exited by the fancifully wrought gates at Hyde Park Corner, she bade him goodbye and stepped out into the melee of Park Lane. His last sight of her was hailing a rickshaw in the middle of the road. Then she was gone.

He walked back to his lodgings. London is not a lonely city, the mandirs buzzing with electric light, clusters of clerical workers and message runners gathered about the food stalls, ramshackle pubs for the Aungresi hidden in run-down courtyards, elegant tumbling facades of Hindustani gentlemen's clubs and hotels lining Mayfair streets, paper sellers calling the news, the hubbub of conversation and the grind of traffic, music straining out from roadside cafes. He was enfolded by the noise, cries of traders, drunken Aungresi slurring aggressively, cows braying, a babble of English and Hindi. Church bells crashed for Evensong, the call to prayer lilting down from minarets, Krishna devotees led a bedraggled line of Aungresi Dalits in a dance along Regent Street. He usually felt the reflected glow of the sky like a womb enclosing him, loving him, but today he felt cold in the warm evening air, haunted by the memory of her falling hair, the taste of her lips, her breath, the liquid shape of her body. He felt tiny, alone. It was wrong, he thought, crossing through Soho. On-leave soldiers staggered from hareem to hareem, women collected from across the world clustered under dim lights, eyes dull and bodies pulled into poses they thought the men wanted. It was wrong and it is best forgotten. She maybe had needed to prove to herself the power she could wield. Now she could marry the nawab her father had chosen for her, bear him children. She had rebelled so she could learn to live, and everything would work itself out right, just as it always did. Dharma: she was not an evil woman, and evil would not come to her.

Shocked at the ferocity of this, the emptiness now inside him.

He ignored the calls of the women from the hareem doorways. Heart of stone, bending his path back towards his own cold bed.

## 8.

Several weeks later, summoned to his door by a sharp and urgent knock upon it, he found her standing before him like a ghost from his dreams, wrapped in a heavy shawl and staring at him from a carefully empty face. His lodgings were within a hall for men only, and he doubted she could have got in, thinking that he stared at the delirium of his own heart. Tempted to reach out, to touch... Then he remembered that she was the Vice-

Chancellor's daughter. She had absolute impunity, was beyond reproach. If she asked, of course they would let her in, just as he did now, standing back, dumb, to let her sweep through. He closed the door hastily behind her.

She stood, looking over his spartan room. He listened to her breath, watching her. When she spoke, it was in Hindi. "So this is where you craft those dreams. I've sat at the back of halls these last few weeks and listened to you read."

He blushed. He had tried to pour all his emotions into words, as if they were water and could be drained from him. Trying to make her again with poetry. In English as a lover, her taste and her scent, the meat and the bone he had held within his arms. In Hindi as something remote, impossible, the absolute separation from her the source of a thousand fantasies, just as Prajapati's tears had become the source and the sustenance of the world. He had written much, and read to the numerous poetry gatherings across the university. There had been much made of his latest efforts, even talk of an apprenticeship for him beneath the English Laureate. It seemed strange to him, feeding all the while as he had done from the illusion of her. He felt a thief.

"I thought I would never see you again."

"Have you no faith?"

"I thought I was just your little rebellion, after which you would -"

"You think so little of me?" She made to leave.

He blocked the doorway, heartbeats rattling through his entire body. "I think so little of myself."

She stopped, stared at him and then nodded, barely perceptibly. They stood watching one another. He longed to reach out, touch her flesh once more. She turned from him and walked to the window. "I waited for a letter from you, anything, telling me what you felt. Instead, you chose to tell everyone but me alone."

He looked at the floor. "I'm sorry."

"The things you wrote. Are they true?"

"Yes."

She smiled a sad smile, watching him. Tears rolled slowly down her cheeks.

"Don't you wish we could be free of this?"

"What?"

"This. The space between us. The space between you and me."

"It can't happen."

"Despite asking for forgiveness? Despite all the pilgrims on all the roads travelling to Canterbury, wanting that one thing, it can never be?"

"That would be a different world. Here we have duties and loves and sins that we carry beyond our lives. Beyond ourselves. We have to attend to that."

"And yet you said you didn't believe..."

"I don't. I don't believe in the forgiveness of Christ either."

"And yet what? I remain untouchable? You make me a Dalit with your unbelief."

"I don't make you anything. You are as you are." He stood across the room from her, powerless as she hid her face in her hands and cried.

## 9.

She flinched as if stung when he tried to comfort her. He gave her tissues instead and waited awkwardly as she dried her eyes. She sat down by his desk, leaving him to perch on the side of the bed, facing her.

“I can't marry him,” she said.

“What? But your father-”

“My father insists that I do. It's a good match, or so he says. He just keeps repeating that it's natural I should be apprehensive, but I have to trust his judgment. That it will turn out right in the end. That he wouldn't choose badly for me. He says this over and over. Nothing else.”

“He might be right. Sometimes we are not the best judges of what is best for us.”

“And would you rescind your freedom to choose?”

“My freedom is no freedom at all.”

“Only because it's me. Otherwise...”

He shook his head. “There isn't an otherwise.”

“Would you rather I was taken away? What then? You can write great poetry about it afterwards? Throw up your hands and tell yourself it was all meant to be like this, that someone else knew better...”

“Possibly they do, yes.”

“And possibly they make the same mistakes. Or worse ones. Some girls are married by the age of twelve, sold for whatever can be most afforded, because that is all we're worth. And you want capitulate to that? To these men who know best?”

“I don't have the choice.”

“And I won't marry him.”

“So what do you do? Defy your parents? Where do you run to when everything is... this...”

She didn't answer, staring at him with her dark-moon eyes. The dusk gathered outside the window, traffic hooting beyond the campus boundary.

“Leave with me,” she asked of him softly.

## 10.

They left the gates of the University and walked southeast through the jumble of Clerkenwell, dodging through the stream of carts and rickshaws, mingling with the crowds leaving mandirs after evening worship. Restaurants and clubs were ablaze with light, knots of men gathered at street corners, cleaners removed the rubbish from shop fronts and street stalls. High above them, families dined and stared out onto the streets below, dreamers dreamed and servants, crushed into tiny loft rooms, looked from their windows across the orange-hazed sky, the to-ing and fro-ing of so many people like ants about unknown tasks.

They held tightly onto each other's hands, inviting curious or disapproving stares. Where once he would have worried, now the world about him felt as distant as an act of

theatre, a performance that could not reach him. Only she seemed real to him, her movements as she walked next to him, her skin hot under his fingertips.

She had only the clothes she was standing in. He had little more. He thought as they had departed how little of himself there was to leave behind. His poetry, the Sanskrit translations, few enough things to suggest he was ever there. Indrani had taken the fresh flower from her hair and laid it in front of his little shrine, invoking prayers to the Goddess as she rocked backwards and forwards and wept. It became the only mark left of any human presence.

This is surely madness, he thought to himself. Running away, he didn't know where, with the Vice-Chancellor's daughter. He had no idea where they were going - they had not discussed it - they just walked, entranced that the fabric of their lives, a seemingly inevitable pattern laid out before them, could be changed so easily. He watched the unreal puppetry of everyday life dance before him: the constant interaction of talking, feeding, fucking, drunken beggars half hidden in pools of darkness, the endless shifting crowd of people moving beneath the constellation of streetlights. Possessed with a rage of incandescent love, his veins burning, air intoxicating as he breathed it in.

They passed St Paul's, the pale stone and leaden dome ghastly against the night sky, the eerie echoes of a civilisation lost, ghosts rising out from its form, as if the couple clutching hands before it would turn their eyes away and see a different city, grey with colossal temples to a different god stretched up to touch the clouds. But no, leading Indrani onwards, all he saw was the Vishnu mandir cascading downwards from shimmering heights, avatars staring out from the pinnacle towards all points of the compass, lords of everything they surveyed. Nothing had changed.

Plunging through ancient streets and courtyards, unlit windows peppering the buildings like toothless mouths, filthy children playing in the gutters, doors standing uninvitingly open. Arguments spilling out into the night air all around them, eyes glittering from the deepest shadows, muttered offers pitched just into their hearing, gods as they walked past. They emerged by the Monument and turned right on to London Bridge, following the figures hurrying across the black gash of the river. He had some vague idea about walking out of London, just walking and never stopping until they reached the sanctuary of green fields. What then, he didn't know.

They wound slowly along Borough High Street, ruddy white faces streaming constantly past, bellowed songs and wild laughter escaping from taverns, air rich with the smell of alcohol. Vegetable matter, vomit and horse dung lined the roadside, the detritus of the Raj washed in from the docks and laying ankle-deep. Shops, still open, sold all manner of provisions, meat carcasses hung from the ankles and seeming to mock, round cheeses, cured and salted fish, decaying fruit by the barrel load. Hungry, he felt forced to admit the perilous fragility of his body, while still so far from the green fields he longed to reach.

To lay down with her there, under the stars. A sharp fear caught him as he realised the distance between himself and these dreams.

Her nose wrinkled in polite disgust, sandalled feet treading carefully amongst the rotting matter and faeces, Indrani led him by the hand onto Tabard Street, its buildings shrinking away with the distant promise of Kent. She had wrapped her shawl about her head, maintaining a serene mask as the street roared all about her, the obscene comments

and lewd designs, half-heard offers of opium, of fortune telling, sad songs yelled in slurred voices by drunken sailors and market porters. Another land, this land of her birth. She stared at it through dark eyes.

“We should walk on,” he told her. “Get further out into the suburbs, at least.”

She shook her head. “I can't go any further, not tonight. I need to rest. Eat. Here...”

She had, he realised, chosen quite deliberately. All the time he thought he had been leading her.

The Tabard Inn. It had an awful significance.

She pulled him, unwilling, across the filth of the road towards the low, long building. It slumped over its own gnarled gables, the stables full and reeking, a night carriage waiting to rattle off into the darkness. The door to the inn swung open to a crescendo of noise, the stench of ale and gusts of raucous laughter. He tried to hang back, uncertain, remembering the words she had said to him when they first met: “the Goddess will torture you for sure.”

Face resolute, she led him onwards. They entered the Tabard Inn, seven hundred years after Chaucer's pilgrims had met here, at the start of their pilgrimage to Canterbury.

## 11.

Indrani stood in the public bar, shawl wrapped tightly about her, staring with distaste at the drunken revelry. People stared back, sailors and prostitutes and strange night dwellers. The chorus of a song dropped away. The landlady, arms crossed, regarded this interloper coolly for long moments.

“Yes, love?” when she spoke, she addressed him and not Indrani.

“Do you have anywhere we could stay for the night?”

She tipped him a dirty wink. “Just the one room, is it?”

He felt himself flush, not having the money for more. “Yes.”

“We do. You'll find it snug enough.” She handed over a key, leering at the waxen, rigid figure of Indrani. “Will you and the mistress be wanting to eat?”

“If we could, yes.”

“Come through the back then. We can't have the likes of a lady dining with *these*,” nodding her head to the crowd in the bar. The crowd chuckled appreciatively, copying her leering stare.

They were led through the inn, narrow corridors sweet with the illicit smell of roasting beef. The landlady left them in a cramped back parlour, setting down a pitcher of small beer before she withdrew.

Indrani let out a long, shaking sigh. She removed her shawl and placed it on a chair before walking round the table, seating herself at its far end. She stared straight ahead, not looking at him, and when he took steps towards her she motioned him brusquely to sit. He obeyed, carefully pouring out two mugs of ale.

“I smelled beef,” she told him in Hindi.

“Are you surprised? The banning of it has only made us eat more.”

“You too?”

He shrugged. "We define ourselves by whatever means against you."  
"Have you really so little identity?"  
"It's more that we find the iconography satisfying. Slaughtering the sacred things of the Raj."  
She shivered. "We. You. I don't like your terms."  
He looked down.  
"They surely wouldn't serve it to us, would they? Or do you intend to eat it and make me watch?"  
"No. They won't serve it, not to us. They're not stupid."  
"But they hate us. They hate *me*," she corrected herself, staring at the table. "Is this how it is across England? Is it?"  
It was an impossible question. He watched her face, the lines of her nose and mouth, the black moons of eyes, hair tumbling carelessly down. "We haven't done anything. You could go back."  
"To what? My marriage?"  
He didn't answer. She took a long draught of beer, swallowing it back and grimacing. Then she looked at him, her face grave. "It won't have consequences just for me."  
"I know. I realise."  
"And are you willing?" she asked him in English.  
"I am. Yes, I am."  
She reached out her hand to him.

## 12.

When the food arrived, it was not the rebuke Indrani had feared. Her face softened and she thanked the maid elegantly in English.  
"See. We're not so bad."  
"So there's a thin veneer of civility. Much like your Hindi poetry; a lying face. Beneath it, you still hate us."  
"Maybe not. At least, never personally."  
"You needn't shield me." She gave him a bitter smile. "I saw the looks out there when I walked in. The way the landlady stared."  
"But they did nothing."  
"No... It's a strange thing, is it not? They could have done anything with me, and they chose not to."  
"It's a very human thing." He regarded her across the table, every motion precious as she ate. The litter of food lay between them: chicken bones, runner beans, thick wedges of potato. "I don't think it's just the threat of retribution. I think, I hope, there's some compassion beneath it. You're still a woman, after all. Not... different."  
She dropped her gaze and for the first time he saw a flush creep into her cheeks.  
"But we are so different. Everything about us."

“If that were true, you wouldn't be able to understand my poetry, in English or in Hindi. You couldn't make sense of Chaucer...”

“Maybe I don't. Maybe it's just pride that makes me think I can. Look at this place. Look at the way they stared. It was something I had never believed...”

“It doesn't matter.”

“It does. Because I never understood. I don't know what I thought, but it wasn't this. While you don't have your own freedom to choose...” she laughed. “I should have realised.”

“Who's to say that, given our freedom, we would act in any better way?”

“At least then you could blame no one else. Why do you mean more to me than the man I am supposed to marry? Because I don't have to be here. I don't have to be with you, doing this.”

“Even though everything is against it?”

“Even then.”

### 13.

Her body lay upon his, skin burning where it touched his own, her breath sighing sweetly into his nostrils. Her ribcage moved, in, out, in, out, pressing against him, the stammer of her heart's rhythm dancing through him. Flesh slick with sweat, wet with the animal horror of sex upon them. Her hair spilled down in a veil across his face, hiding him from the bare plaster walls of their squalid room, from the accusing constellations of the city beyond.

There was no way back, now. They lay amid each other's shattered lives.

He clutched her to him as if he could push further inside, melt into her. This embrace all the protection they had. She watched him from dark eyes, saying nothing. They kissed, a slow and lingering taste taken of each other, his blood as painful as lime, as dangerous, every touch she drew shivering across his body.

“I love you.”

She smiled at him tragically, tracing the lines of his skull with her fingertips. “A dangerous phrase. One used far too easily.”

“Nevertheless, I love you.”

“Like Rama loved Sita? Would you build a bridge across the sea to fight for me? Would you stay true to me, whatever else was offered you?”

“Of course I would.”

Her face betrayed her pain. She kissed his cheek. “Love like that is just a story. It's beautiful, but...” she turned her head to stare out of the window, watching the heavens bathed in the city's glow.” There's still real life behind it. We still have to leave this room tomorrow, and out into what...”

“There's a whole world. We can go anywhere, it doesn't matter where.”

Her eyes were black, lustrous. “I am not Sita, and you are not Rama. We are not gods or heroes. We are weak.”

“No. You can't let yourself believe these things. Otherwise...”

“Otherwise, underneath all these words of love, we have what we have, here, now. Without having to hope for anything more.” She reached down, delicately touching his lips with her own before whispering into his ear. It was barely more than a rush of breath: “Mai tumse pyar karti huu.” He felt her admission like a physical wound.

At that moment, he felt it would always be enough.

#### 14.

Afterwards, he had cried, remembering her words. She held him close, stroking his skin. “Hush. Don't.”

“We can run away. Go to America, get married, live like everyone else...”

Her hands like a balm against this terrible pain. “You're babbling. Sleep, my love, sleep...” She cradled him, waiting.

#### 15.

When he awoke, she was gone. Sunlight struggled through the filthy window panes, starkly illuminating the dingy corners of the room. He stared about himself drowsily, the bliss draining slowly from his body. Nothing. Not her clothes, her shawl, her sandals. He put his hand to his head, dizzy, suddenly terrified. What if it had been some dream? But no, this bed, this room, the smell of her skin upon his fingers. She must be downstairs, waiting. He told himself this with the uneasy sense of it not being true. He hastily pulled himself out of the bed and put on his clothes, his heart thundering in his ears, veins quicksilver with fear. What had she said? There's still real life, we still have to leave this room, and out into what... He shook his head, certain he was being a fool. He followed the ghost of her out from the room, every tiny detail screaming, unreal, as if even now none of this was happening. Down the stairs, creaks and echoes, rising smells of breakfast from the kitchen, and out into the public bar. He stopped one of the maids. “My-”

“The Hindustani lady, sir? She paid both your board and lodgings before the sun was come up. Then she left.”

“Did she leave any message for me?”

“No sir. Not that I know of.”

Maybe she presumed he would wait. Maybe she had left to get clothes, money, whatever from her father's home before the household awoke. Perhaps he should wait... Telling himself that it was the right thing, that he shouldn't worry. At the same time sensing more and more that this wasn't so. The agony of waiting while maybe she... He didn't know. He didn't know anything. If he left, and she came back, she would surely wait for him here. He thanked the maid and walked out onto Tabard Street.

Carts laden with the bounty of the countryside rumbled their slow way past, heading for the city markets. Porters hailed each other as they moved about their business.

How different to nightfall, he thought to himself. When we arrived, her holding my hand, this street and yet a different one.

A silent scream raging through him as he stood helplessly and watched.

He suddenly remembered that Chaucer had, of course, renounced 'the Canterbury Tales' shortly before his death. Left them unfinished. Asked that we take heed as little of the Knight as of the Miller, or the Wife of Bath. He had urged his readers to live good Christian lives, as if all that humour, all that warm humanity, had been as nothing.

Under blazing blue skies that shone like silk, he began to run towards the river.

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Canning Town