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Discussions are held on Sunday mornings at 162/92 Lake Gardens, Calcutta 45, India, and diffusion done through a series of books issued under the WORKSHOP imprint. A complete, descriptive check-list of more than 200 publications is available on request.

The WORKSHOP is non-profit and non-political; it consists of writers sympathetic to the ideals and principles embodied in creative writing: it is concerned with practice not theorising, helpful criticism not iconoclasm.

The WORKSHOP publishes a bi-monthly journal, *The Miscellany*, devoted to creative writing. It is not a house journal; as a rule it gives preference to experimental work by young and unpublished writers, its two chief criteria for selection being high imaginative awareness and mature technique. Established writers appear in its pages if their work meets those standards.

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Creative Writing

THE PURPLE-BRAIDED PEOPLE
A poem-play by Shree Devi



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**THE
PURPLE-
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PEOPLE**

*a poem-play
by Shree Devi*





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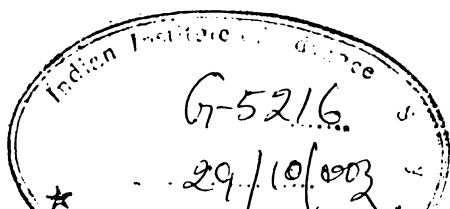
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DEDICATION



for Vera and Saleem

ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT



SHREE DEVI SINGH : *"Have lived all my life at Convents in Darjeeling ; graduated with English Honours from Loreto College, Darjeeling. Now doing M. A. in the University of Bombay. Hope to write a thesis, and eventually lecture."*

PLAYWRIGHT'S NOTE

I have called this a poem-play but regard it more as a poem than a play. The emphasis is on the poetry alone and I have paid hardly any attention to plot or characterization. I would not like to see it staged as it is meant rather to be read.

A few words about India's lost aristocracy. They ruled with all pomp and power till Independence, after which each Ruler had to sign an Instrument of Accession whereby his State merged in the Indian Union, and he received a privy purse on the basis of his annual revenue.

However, the present day reveals them as a fighting power, pathetically beautiful, "butterflies in amber". The poem-play deals with the minds of one fictitious lot of State people, and recurrent dream images of forests, outworn stone, lost laughter, or the redundant sparkle of diamonds . . .

Shree Devi

CHARACTERS

MAHAVIR BIRENDER SINGH	<i>H. H. the Maharaja Of Snehgarh</i>
VIKRAM	<i>His son</i>
REENA	<i>His daughter</i>
PADMA RANI	<i>His sister</i>
BALBIR SINGH	<i>A. D. C. to Snehgarh</i>
KAMALA RANI	<i>The Rajmata of Kherpur</i>
YASHWANT RAO	<i>Her son</i>
JOSEPH D'SOUZA	<i>A Member of Parliament</i>
ROCKY	<i>An Actor</i>
RAM SINGH	<i>An old servant</i>
PANDITJI	<i>A priest</i>
PROPRIETOR OF CAFE	

One

(The present day. A large drawing room representing days of glory gone to dust. In the midst of brocade depths in green and flowering crimson, frozen jade Buddhas, detached in the cross-legged sleep of centuries, catch the eye, lit sporadically by ornamented lamps. Here and there lie bits of scattered culture, undoubtedly the work of white hands ; like the milky marble nude — stretching yet still — or the many-angled crystal jar, heavy with age. To the right, thick curtains are swept apart to reveal the city's twinkling darkness.

BALBIR SINGH strides in, twirling his moustache. He looks outside for a vacant moment, turns suddenly on heel, yelling "RAM SINGH ! WHISKEY-SODA !" in a deep falsetto. An old servant enters with the whiskey-soda placed shakingly on a silver tray.

REENA emerges softly in a sari.)

BALBIR He said he couldn't sleep at all last
Night . . .

REENA Does everyone feel depressed
As the day goes down ? And yet
The moon looms large and light.

BALBIR One should trust nature. Not
Sleeping pills . . .

REENA There are no peacocks here to pluck
The turquoise eye.

BALBIR Or look at life heightened only by
Alcohol . . .

REENA Helpless father ! Living with the fury
Of his unfinished dreams.

BALBIR He was a great ruler once —

REENA (*interrupting*)

And still is, in his fairy palace
Poised upon the past.

BALBIR You were too young to feel the change.
After signing the agreement we were
Walking down the marble palace corridors,
Our heels clicking in echoing unison,
When suddenly he turned on me in pain
And said "Balbir, my flesh has been torn
From my bones."

REENA He could have resisted —

BALBIR And bring on a battle with rusted guns
And sleepy soldiers ? All the other
States had given in. He was the last to
Agree.

REENA So he lost his kingdom ! But he still had
His polo parties tiger shoots trips to Europe,
Flying like a kite that catches the wind. How
Many schools did he build for the little thieves
With their darting minds on a scrap of bread ?
In the midst of wines and smiles, caviar and
cheese,

Did he once see those shadows that shuffled
Somewhere in the gutters of Snehgarh ?

(*The Maharaja has entered unnoticed . . .*)

BALBIR You forget how loved he was —

REENA The love of ignorance ! The people grovelled
Thinking him God, unaware that he hated
And killed, or hungered and ate,
Just like they did.

RAJA But in 1947 everyone came out to breathe
The same air, and share the same sun.

(*looks around*) Where is my sister ?

BALBIR She wanted to go out alone, Your Highness.

RAJA The beauty parlour again with all the

Magic potions to recall youth ! The
Petals have fallen . . . the perfume gone . . .
What shall we do with the flower now ?

REENA Time does not matter much to me.

RAJA : While you talk child, do you feel old
And growing older ? And what of me ?
The dream voices were suddenly shouting
Slogans, waving skeletons in the moonlight,
Until the nightmare became a habit.

REENA Better this, Father, to have a single flag,
A single song into the future.

RAJA The green children ! How they love
A united roar of individuality — to you
I am nothing —

(Ram Singh enters with drinks)

Ah, but to him I will always be Ruler
God and King.

BALBIR (reverently) And to me, Your Highness.

REENA You wanted one ruling truth Father,
And you were that truth. We want all the
truths

That have been hidden under silent rocks
Since sickly roots sprung underground,
And microbes danced upon deserted sand.

RAJA And greedy for so much, your optimistic
Mask discovered nothing. You and Vikram
Are buds that wither wilfully before
The summer.

BALBIR Prince Vikram must rule one day, Highness.

RAJA Rule what ? A palace crumbling into time,
Libraries rich with moth-eaten volumes,
Cobwebs with a coat-of-arms ?

(Rani Padma arrives, her grey hair upswept regally.)

PADMA My poor feet ! An old hermit once told me
My feet would bring death closer. Born in
March, he said.

RAJA (*good-humouredly*)

And did he say, when Shiva puts the moon
Into a sack and strides across the night
Leaving silver footprints, you must bathe
In holy water . . . ?

PADMA I tried that last year, jostled in the river
By unlisted millions washing away dirt
Rather than sin.

REENA The neglected bullock cart scraping the
Dust . . .

PADMA Your daughter here is frozen at twentysix !

RAJA What is dearer to me than my gentle girl ?
On my knee she sat wide-eyed
At tales of indignant gods with fifteen heads
That swept across our foreheads
Leaving wisdom lines.

And with her dark water falling all about
Her eyes, she told me of her secret ghost
That wore a secret crown.

PADMA The Rajmata of Kherpur wants a bride
For her son who comes trailing clouds
From Oxford.

REENA A Romeo who o'erleaps love's walls
With his mother's permission ?

✓ PADMA What is love ? The touch your body longs for
Now and then ? When the sun crawls
Into the clouds it still is daylight.

RAJA What is this young stallion's breed ?

PADMA The pattern is complete. He does not smoke
Or drink and is royally obedient to his
mother.

REENA (*aside*) Sounds impotent.

RAJA The dowry ?

PADMA Sell your yellow metal ! Sell your stones !

RAJA They are Vikram's — for his wife and my
blood.

PADMA A tree that outgrows the forest is an easy
Prey to lightning. I see her mother in her.
Inside the womb the spirit is a large ruby
Hardening into human shape.

PADMA More good in ugliness than in beauty !
I have yet to meet one good man.

(Enter Balbir) Another whiskey please. What's for dinner?

PADMA (yawning) She'll eat soon enough to survive.

BALBIR It still hurts there ! It was thirty
Years ago — no, thirty-two to be exact . . .

Two

(A modern one-bedroom flat. Books lie untidily about. VIKRAM is deep in thought.)

VIKRAM He is my greatest enemy, having given me
No challenge to climb the diamond mountain,
No hate to value the passing stranger's smile,
No strength to bathe naked in a street-scene ;
As a boy I wanted a gun : he gave me a
 golden one
So I could never kill.
✓ Nothingness is having everything. Freedom
Is a bed of wild grass and wilder language
Whispered into night. My fingers form
A fan of ice, brushing her breasts in mystery.
With each breath
A pearl
Is born, gathering thickly around her throat.
Never gather flowers at her feet. Death
Is always watching for just-such-a-scene.

(the doorbell rings)

Enter ! Hell is interesting to the tourist !

(Enter Milly)

MILLY Hello !

VIKRAM Angels are not allowed in, unless they be
Fallen ones.

(laughing) Watch how her right hand flies to her left
Breast to steady her heart !

MILLY Vikram, don't confuse me —

VIKRAM (*dramatically*)

You are my only escape. Your mouth and
Shadow of your flesh is my only truth.

MILLY Why so rough Vikram ? Yet are enough
To make my nerve-ends tiny nestlings
Crying skyward in helpless hunger.

VIKRAM Who talks of love in such surroundings ?
We have a party tonight to celebrate
Rocky's new film.

MILLY But, I have Church early —

VIKRAM I thought you said the only God you knew
Was the bronze one before you, my darling !

(*telephone rings*)

Hello ! Why ? Aunt Padma ? Well, I
meant

To drop in. (*Pause*) The Kherpur boy ? Not
my type.

Spends far too much of his time at the
manicurist.

What ? Of course he's not in love with the
manicurist.

I mean he's having quite an affair with himself.
Poor Reena. Oh, do ask Ram Singh to finish
darning

My socks. Not with pink thread this time
please !

Good-bye.

(*replaces receiver*)

The world grows weary with interference.
Reena runs

✓ From tradition but an old fisherwoman
Casts her weedy net from aged waters to
stifle her.

We used to hide our childhood under thick
Wet-smelling curtains, but always the invaders
Came.

MILLY To love you. They do love you.
 VIKRAM Because they must, having extended life
 To me.
 Unlike your love that comes, and comes
 With no "because".

MILLY Your mother too ?
 VIKRAM Her I saw in a veil of incense, seated
 Before her mirrored images — a perfect
 Angry profile. She swept me up once,
 Looked closely through me. "Just Like
 His Father". I heard broken glass.
 "Take him away".

MILLY And later ?
 VIKRAM I waited in awe for those tinkling feet,
 Hiding when they came. I once saw Father
 Kneeling before her silken pedestal. She
 Pushed him aside ; her loud laughter echoing
 In my sleep, for his face was wet with
 Hurt. Then one day it suited her not to live
 Anymore, and so she died.

MILLY It's finished now. Lost in months and years,
 Change and growth.

✓VIKRAM If that were that ! The tree is eternally
 Spreading shades of memory. I am not
 Complete without the patches of the past,
 And must re-live to live.

MILLY Do you love me ?

VIKRAM What do you want of me ?

MILLY Not of you. For you. The leaping up into
 Joy, when in your eyes I see myself as you,
 An optical soliloquy of completeness.

VIKRAM But my pain is mine. Your tears yours.

(combs his hair before a mirror)

Milly, am I really getting bald ?

Three

(A small dark café. JOSEPH is seated at one of the tables talking to the PROPRIETOR.)

PROPRIETOR D'Souza saab, how are things in Delhi ?

JOSEPH Oh the same. Not worse mind you. The Same.

India is the only country alive to-day.
When you touch her she trembles like a
Woman oversexed, yet when you speak to her
She nods dumbly, being too shy to speak.
A man has a family he does not know. He's
Tired and wonders why each time he touches
His wife's belly there is movement within.
So he shuts himself in sleep. Where is
The problem ?

PROPRIETOR Perhaps in starch and sugar, saab.

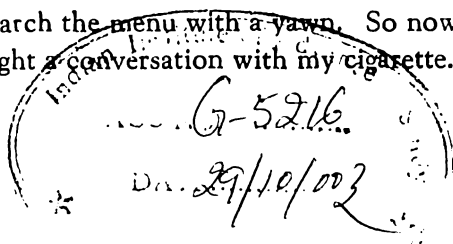
JOSEPH Never fear. Politicians will feed the hungry.
Are we gods ? Dictating births, shaping the
Sex-life of millions ? I raise my hand and
It rains . . . crops arise with swaying wind . . .
While children clap their hands around the
Snakecharmer. May I have some tea ?

(Reena enters)

PROPRIETOR Certainly, saab.

REENA Two teas please. Am I late ?

JOSEPH Is punctuality important to a princess ?
All my life I've waited for women. Some
Arrive powdered with apologies, others
Search the menu with a yawn. So now I
Light a conversation with my cigarette.



- REENA I have a book for you.
 JOSEPH No more books! When all the words had
 military
 Meaning, and all the wisdom changed books to
 Souls, I sat and wept at all the suffering.
 I regret everything. From the very beginning.
 REENA A . . . B . . . C . . . D . . . ?
 JOSEPH Who cares what follows ?
 REENA You're foul today !
 JOSEPH And every extra day I have to think, to earn.
 I see no strength in God. The years I've
 Known you — that gives me strength. To
 Travel far away to that spot where first
 You gave me life, I feel I can never be
 Uprooted. But most of my power is in my
 Lungs.
 REENA Your speeches ?
 JOSEPH Flung at the growing gallery of faces,
 I feel unlimited knowing how they watch.
 For right and wrong, like day and night
 Merge silently into each other.
 REENA You fly above the land like some
 Far-sighted eagle . . .
 ✓ JOSEPH But I shout artificially, for while I
 Talk of indolent India, I long to slide
 In satin sheets and fall asleep forever.
 REENA But the Press who never have eyes, just
 Hands, are always there. I saw that in the
 Papers about you. Why did you ?
 JOSEPH Why did I ? I felt I saw something at last.
 Not as myself. Only the steel framework
 Of my bones hard against the sky.
 For three minutes, I waited for day to dawn
 Slowly in their reason.
 REENA While they waited mechanically to destroy
 You, and you in turn destroyed the Privy

Purse of Rulers, hating this harmless
Layer of chocolate and cream !

JOSEPH This money makes an idle people. Then time
Becomes electricity converting night
To subtracted day.

REENA Who are you to judge ? Your justice
Is the green and yellow map that hangs above,
Showing Tibet as part of China.

JOSEPH (*pointing*)
Look at that tattered violinist scraping
Out a tune. He is deaf and cannot hear it.
Is he aware of giving pleasure, or only
Of the coins that drop into his hat ?

REENA Joseph, they want me to marry a strange
Man.

JOSEPH Marry the mystery then ! Many things you
Don't know about, are more exciting than
You think.

REENA You approve of this blind bargain ?

JOSEPH I stopped questioning the ways of life
Long ago. Good things are often bad, and
And the bad good in turn of question.
The more one values a rare jewel, the more
The chance of losing it.

REENA Perhaps I do need to fall in love.

JOSEPH It will give you more beauty, more
Unimportant things to ponder ! Come,
I'm late.

Four

(A verandah in the Kherpur house. A saffron figure sits scribbling on scrolls with the Rajmata looking on. YASHWANT RAO in the latest-cut suit, fiddles with his hair.

RAJMATA

Carry on Punditji. These Sanskrit signs of Centuries make no mistakes. Marriages work

Or are made to work. My world sustains No failures. Mark my son's horoscope —

PUNDIT

Yes, I see that —

RAJMATA

Yashwant Rao is the great-grandson of Abhay Rao

The fearless one, who with his wild warriors
On gold horses, their crescent swords slicing
The air, their beards on fire, their voices
thunder,

Won every battle he fought. Yashwant is
also the

Grandson of the only Raja who wrestled
with a

Wild leopard, naked and unarmed, to please
his

Watching Queen —

YASHWANT (interrupting)

They told me he was —

RAJMATA

Who was the last woman in history to leap
into

Her husband's funeral pyre.

YASHWANT (continuing)

Drunk. He used to show me his body in
sunlight.

Crushed eentipedes crawling around in ugly
Colours. I used to run.

✓ RAJMATA

Those were men ! Today your chests are as
smooth

As sleeping lakes, and you have no
moustaches to

Starch. Instead you tend your hair and
nails like

Rare plants.

YASHWANT

We justify our rareness to perfection. We are
Cut to please the eye.

RAJMATA

You don't have to please anybody but your
Betters. Let that girl keep her eyes cast to
The ground, and her feet lead often
To the prayer room. She'll get no garlands
From me till I see her natural face.

PUNDIT

I have studied the two horoscopes from all
Angles.

RAJMATA

And ?

PUNDIT

The sun signs in Saturn are in opposition
To those in Virgo. The Zodiacal table shows
The marriage will result
In a clash of personalities.

YASHWANT (*relieved*)

There you are ! The heavens will never agree
To adjust.

RAJMATA

You have not read the signs correctly. I shall
Have to send for someone who can.

PUNDIT

Your Highness, I have years of books and
Study to —

RAJMATA

Study never made men wise.

(*gives him a hundred rupee note*)

You are the most loved astrologer in all
Varanasi —

PUNDIT

I will have another try . . . Perhaps
If the moon signs are juxtaposed —

Four

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Her husband's funeral pyre.

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(*gives him a hundred rupee note*)

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PUNDIT

I will have another try . . . Perhaps
If the moon signs are juxtaposed —

RAJMATA I have not sent for you from Varanasi to
Give contradictory answers. The Snehgarhs
Will arrive any minute. Yashwant I expect
You to talk with intelligence.

YASHWANT Talk? What shall I talk about?

RAJMATA What does a man say to a woman?

YASHWANT How should I know?

RAJMATA It hardly matters what your dry throat brings
Forth as she won't be able to reply.

YASHWANT What?

RAJMATA She isn't allowed to speak to you
Yet.

(Exit Rajmata to the sound of cars arriving)

YASHWANT Damn these fool customs!

(Rani Padma's voice is heard)

PADMA There are a few fruit baskets in the
Car.

(Enter, with Rajmata and Reena whose head is covered with her sari)

I thought it wrong for us to come
Emptyhanded, since it is Reena's
First visit here.

RAJMATA This is my son Yashwant.

(He bows low in namaste)

This is Pundit Hori Dev, one of the most
Respected astrologers in the country.

(He scrambles to his feet)

This must be Reena — do sit down, child.

PADMA What has his holiness to say?

PUNDIT It is an excellent match of blood meets
Blood. The ceremony should take place
On the fifteenth at 12 p.m.

PADMA So late?

PUNDIT Better late than at the wrong moment.

I knew one couple who —

RAJMATA That is all Punditji. *(Exit Pundit)*

I would like to show you my plans for
The invitations.

(Exit Padma & Rajmata)

(There is silence for a while)

YASHWANT I don't know much about you, in fact
I know nothing. I can't see
Why you want to marry me. You can still
marry

Someone with brilliance.

With mother by my side I can hope
For nothing.

She frowns at the way I tie my shoelace,
Hold my teacup, sign my name. I'm just
Not right. I tried to build a life to
Call my own. Even that seems quite
Impossible now, with you and all that.

(excitedly) Perhaps you could see it my way. Can
We meet? Tomorrow? Oh, I forgot you
Can't reply —

REENA I don't see it your way. I can see mine.
And to meet is an awful idea. My
Problems are displayed in the silence
Of my eyes.

(Rani Padma's voice is heard calling her. Exit Reena)

✓ YASHWANT She's right. Yet there flowed
A contradictory understanding between
Us. Perhaps she has no time for men.
We are alike. But she and I are helpless
As the gods. It's mother who makes and
Breaks us.

Five

(Vikram's flat — he is relaxing in bed. The door-bell rings and Rocky enters)

ROCKY Hello everybody ! Here is your favourite
 Hero. Women fall in love instantly as I
 Sign my name across the universe. I walk
 On fame, but posterity gives me less than
 A passing glance, for the dead are dead.
 I am alive and share this secret
 With the living.

VIKRAM I am your other image. I say "Look into
 The mirror, Sir. Your teeth are capped,
 Your eyebrows shaped, your skin perfumed,
 There are some secrets in your shoes and
 Shoulders, and you've convinced your
 mirror'd

 Reflection that you haven't a wig on."
ROCKY Beauty is made not born. I must have the
 best :

 Give me the largest bunch of darkest grapes.
VIKRAM I am already jealous !

✓ROCKY And you will be, till you learn to live as
 One should live.

VIKRAM Fiddling surreptitiously with the unripe
 Foetus, Satan scuttles off having distorted
 The soul.

 Later,

 Grins objectively to hear

 Psychologists blame heredity or environment

As the delinquent sums up his life in
Jail sentences.

✓ ROCKY

Under studio lights those whispered words
Of fiction, those creamy arms, are reality
To me. I see you, I don't know your real
Thoughts. So *this* world is the make-believe
One.

VIKRAM

You seem to have found your identity.

ROCKY

I wish I could help you find yours.

VIKRAM

I can see it in the distance, like an
Unread letter in space. But when I strain
My eyes towards it, the writing is illegible.

ROCKY

I'll remember you —

VIKRAM

I'll be breathing without you.

(Door bell rings and MILLY enters)

ROCKY

Ah, here's your fresh air. Don't forget
The drinks are on you.

(Exit ROCKY)

VIKRAM

Yes, I must contribute generously to the
Prime Minister's fund. My love I —

MILLY

Your drunken brawls again. You'll die
Like Marlowe.

VIKRAM

Only without fame.

MILLY

But drunk —

VIKRAM

Just like my Father ! I'm no bastard.

MILLY

Is it all over ? Do you still love
Me — or is it my body ?

ROCKY

Will you look after me always ? Put
My weariness in your lap and cover my
Knowledge with kisses ? Will you take my
Helplessness in your palms and make me
A man ?

MILLY

Not until you distinguish between the
Important and the trivial.

VIKRAM

They are the same. Each room makes a
House, each door an escape. When

Look closely at me, Milly. Do I appear a
Loser ?

S i x

(The Snehgarh drawing room again. It is evening. RAM SINGH shows VIKRAM and MILLY in. Milly is awkwardly dressed in a sari with her hair in a bun.)

VIKRAM Enter the court jesters. Do look less
Nervous my love. Your hair looks better
Flowing through my fingers.
Ram Singh, whiskey on ice please.

(to himself)

I am not here to take my Father's permission.
I am here to inform him.
What will you have to drink ?

MILLY Nothing.

VIKRAM Lord, how she trembles !
This old servant who understands only
Love and fear, held me in his arms
As a child. When I was ill, he burned
With my fever. When I broke my Mother's
necklace
He took the blame, bearing the lash, with
His eyes on me. I promised to give him the
World when I could. Now I hardly
remember

He exists !

MILLY His palms are outstretched — let's take him
With us.

VIKRAM His life is service. He nursed my Father.
Then me. Expecting nothing. Getting
nothing.

(BALBIR enters)

Milly, this is Balbir Singh, my Father's Secretary.

MILLY How do you do, Sir ?

BALBIR Would you like a drink, Miss — er . . .

VIKRAM I've already asked her. It's my house too
You know.

BALBIR It was my duty, Vikramji.

VIKRAM An entire life spent bowing to people you
Hardly respect. I admire your discipline.

(REENA enters)

REENA Milly ! You do look sweet !

VIKRAM (dryly) And artificial.

How long will Father take ?

REENA Can't you wait ever ? Or is another party
Burning in your time ?

VIKRAM You have a shallow brother who lives on
Stolen laughter and jobless friends. I
Feel a conspiracy closing about us, a net
In the forest to trap our uncertain
Hearts. I must escape Sister, and you
Must try to follow.

(Enter RANI PADMA and MAHARAJA. BALBIR bows low and
leaves. REENA slips away.)

VIKRAM (continuing) Ah ! The hunters close
In for the kill.

Aunt Padma, this is my fiancée Milly.

MILLY How do you do.

(PADMA nods. They seat themselves)

RAJA What's all this I hear Vikram about
You buying a car ?

VIKRAM I had to get another. The old one's been
In the garage for months. Haven't paid
For it yet.

PADMA Where do you propose getting the money
From ? Everybody thinks the aristocracy

Is rich, and the aristocracy think so
Too. And now a wedding ! When does this
Foolishness materialize ?

VIKRAM (*quietly*)

Soon.

PADMA Miss, er . . . Milly, I'd like a talk with
You.

VIKRAM Go ahead Milly. She's almost as fierce
As she looks.

(Exit PADMA and MILLY)

RAJA You didn't tell me you had lost your
Job.

VIKRAM I kept oversleeping.

RAJA (*aside*) Just like me !

I understand your fiancée works . . .

VIKRAM She's a stenographer. I intend to live
On her earnings, grow a beard, and
Travel while I can.

RAJA Your talk is brave and airy. Remember
I am your Father.

✓ VIKRAM All I want to forget, is that I am your
Son.

RAJA You will leave me then, even now, Vikram.

VIKRAM With the saddest feelings.

RAJA I have never had a moment with you —

VIKRAM I cannot give you that. It's what I fear
Most.

RAJA I do too. Having too much to say to you.
Fearing my heart would come to my mouth.

VIKRAM Fear ?

RAJA Love !

VIKRAM The worst weakness.

RAJA Must you do this ?

VIKRAM For myself. Yes.

RAJA To hurt your Father proves nothing except
That you are as brutal as I used to be

To mine. It gave me a strange power to see
him

Flinching at my words. Yet it hurt me
Most to hurt him. Don't revenge yourself
On your own manhood.

VIKRAM

I love her. Why waste words ?

✓ RAJA

Love her then. I lost my kingdom but I
Still had my son, and my empty wish for
My son's son. Was it wrong of me to dream
Ahead ? I don't do it often. The past brings
My failure into the present. And now,
There is no future !

VIKRAM

I'd better leave !

RAJA

I try to understand, but I am not strong
Enough. When you have decided what is
Right —

VIKRAM

I have.

RAJA

Then you must not see me again. I am
Lost to you in the forest where first
I taught you the names of leaves, herbs
To heal a snake-bite, the leopard's prints
To show which way his whiskers brushed
The breeze. You are no more a Hindu. Or
my son
And heir. You are nothing to me and do not
Exist.

VIKRAM

If that is your desire, let it be so.
But I am there, somewhere, trying to
Forget you.

RAJA

You already have. Goodnight.

(PADMA and MILLY return. MAHARAJA leaves.)

PADMA

So, your Father is in the Railways ?

MILLY

Yes, he's an engine-driver.

VIKRAM

Bravo for him ! I longed to be one once
And watch the patchwork of gold and rust
Of agricultural India unravel before me.

(puts his arm around MILLY)

Come, let us to a happier place.

MILLY

Goodnight. (Both exit)

✓ ~~F~~ADMA (as lights dim each line is uttered slowly as an echo.)

Goodnight. I too loved, but not more
Than reason. So here I am a virgin at
Fifty-seven !

I wonder where he went . . .

They say he died of small-pox . . .

Seven

(The Snehgarh drawing room two evenings later. Vikram and Milly are seated, talking.)

- REENA How splendidly he rode ! The dull sound
 Of horse hooves scattering brown earth and
 Leaves into dawn . . .
- VIKRAM And now the horses sold — the Rolls
 auctioned —
 The land gone to the Government — the
 elephants
 Dead — the tennis courts overgrown with
 violets —
 The Durbar Hall thick with ghosts —
- REENA That crystal hall of glistening sun-drops
 I loved to watch in tiny silver slippers . . .
 Father in brilliant blue and gold . . . sword
 At his side . . . scabbard scattered with bright
 Gems . . . and stars spanning his chest . . .
 On either side rainbows of bowed turbans of
 Lesser princes, and Father's eyes resting
 Lightly in pride on them . . .
- VIKRAM You and me running out into the brocade tent
 To distribute thick sweets, heavy with milk
 and
 Sugar . . .
- REENA Shivajee trumpeting through the town with
 Father in a golden cage of tasselled umbrellas
 Fixed on his shoulders that moved steadily

Like soft grey stone . . .

(BALBIR enters)

BALBIR Mr D'Souza is here.

VIKRAM What does he want ?

BALBIR An official visit from the Government.

VIKRAM To shatter Father even further ?

REENA Show him in, then.

(Exit BALBIR)

VIKRAM Poor Father's woes increase. I must be gone.

(Exit VIKRAM)

REENA (*wistfully*)

Oh, what it is to be caught in the
Purple web of duty, spun by the spider,
Love.

(BALBIR shows in JOSEPH)

JOSEPH Reena ! I had hoped you wouldn't be here.

REENA He'll be out soon. Can I get you a drink ?

JOSEPH I'd rather not. How've you been ?

REENA How does a Princess spend her days ?

Splashing her skin with cold water each
Morning like any country girl, while her
Hair makes fragile sunlight patterns.

JOSEPH What happened to the young man ? Did
He find you beautiful ?

REENA Yes, beautiful and cold. To be admired
From afar. No, I must remain single like
Aunt Padma : We have no use for the
moth-eaten

Womb, she and I.

JOSEPH Were I not a struggling homeless man,
I would —

REENA (*interrupting*) Go down on your knees and
Implore the Princess to marry you. But,
She is used to a life laced in gold and
Too rare for you, Joseph.

JOSEPH Too much of a risk to suddenly happen ?

✓ REENA Oh no, Joseph. Each moment is written about
And crossed out as we live the present.
When all the ink is dry — we die. Joseph,
Will you marry me ?

JOSEPH I could love you easily enough. I do love
You but —

REENA You cannot —

JOSEPH No, will not —

REENA Fear of ?

JOSEPH Losing myself —

REENA Or finding yourself

As you really are . . .

JOSEPH A politician !

Who

REENA Pretends his people matter more to him
Than himself ! Wake up, Joseph. Your
Eyes, they mirror traitors to your soul.
Your flame of ideals is lit by ignorance,
Unhappy you ! Your future is a brown
Blood-spattered victory-battle-field,
When the night comes you wonder,
“Was it worth it all ?”

(Enter the Maharaja)

RAJA Good evening, Mr D'Souza. The lion stands
Before you but he roars feebly so you are
Not afraid. Yes ? What is it ?

JOSEPH (*shuffling papers*)

Your Highness, according to Clause I —

✓ RAJA I don't understand official language. As a
Child I ran my hand along the ivory tusks
Of elephants and felt their thoughts, touched
Quivering leaves to know the rain, or
Listened to nervous monkeys betray the
Panther's lair . . .

JOSEPH The Government will discontinue your
Allowance from next year. All Privy

Purses are to be abolished.

RAJA

As a boy I had a tiny python for a pet
Caressing it till it grew thicker,
Watching its dark length slither heavily
Into my soul, but never into my heart.
The day it tried to crush my breath, I
Shot it in the demon eye.
How are we expected to live then ?
Perhaps take our jade bowls and go
Begging ?

JOSEPH

You take too pessimistic a view —

RAJA

You have done your duty, Mr D'Souza. It
Must be time for you to return.

REENA

He hasn't finished as yet. Have you, Mr.
D'Souza ?

JOSEPH (*aside*) Enough, Reena.

I am sorry to have upset Your Highness.
I'll explain the details to your Secretary.

REENA (*aside*) Coward !

(Exit Joseph)

RAJA

I'm tired than I ever was. I am
Prime past and have outlived my will.
Today means nothing. I dread tomorrow.

REENA

But yesterday we had such floating
Gardens of lotus buds . . . of goldfish
Darting in marble bowls . . . strange
Scarlet flowers creeping silently over
The palace walls cascading into
Your bedroom bringing perfumed birds
At dawn with so many songs you tried
To remember them all but never could . . .
Or . . . glow worms with
Insomnia,
Waking tiny sleeping insect
Hearts with false alarms of morning
Rays . . .

RAJA

You are all I have left, Reena ; you
Must marry royalty — the Kherpur boy —
Give me my last living sign. Vikram
Had been a wilderness of hope
Covered with the dome of despair.
I promise you anything you wish,
Father.

— REENA

Eight

(Bedroom of the Maharaja — the furnitnre consists of a few old pieces. On the walls there hang three large portraits — one of the Maharaja when young [in coronation robes], the other of his Queen in her heyday, and the last of Shivajee, his favourite elephant in all the royal regalia.)

RAJA Not to sleep one night is permissible.
 I haven't slept for twenty years. My
 Thoughts are a woman who keeps giving
 Birth to a dead child.
 I am out of time, out of touch. I feel
 Insane people around me with their
 Brains luminously exposed. Am I
 Accustomed to seeing in the dark ?
 Am I the only one to whom pride and
 Honour stand snow-capped ?
 I cannot sink with this earth. I
 Must end, before I become a pimp that
 Prostitutes his sweetheart.

(To portrait of his Queen)

 Have you found your destination, dearest
 One ? To you I was a school-boy animal
 Tearing at your clothes,
 Silent at your victory,
 Confused at your laughter.
 Did you know I watched you through
 Ivory filigree ?
 How when you bathed the soap slid down

Your breasts forming a creamy pool
Where brown buds bloomed ? Or how
The jasmine around your wrists was
The tender perfume that foretold your next
move ?

Or how I stared at your sleep fearing to touch
Lest the curve be disturbed ?

(To portrait of Shivajee)

I still see you. Trunk uplifted in salute,
Ears of flapping palm leaves, beaded eyes
Dancingly-shy. We were one. Elephant-
man in

Flowing strength.

I had to watch you dying. A mountain
collapsed —

Your legs stiff uprooted trunks
Taking with you the glory of shikar.

(Enter Reena)

REENA I heard something. Did you call, Father ?

RAJA I did. A dream ago, when with small
bejewelled

Hands you tugged my cloak, wanting to know
what

Death was —

“It is an invisible land, my child, full of
Invisible people.”

And you danced away on your toes.

REENA I spoke so often to Mother after that
In open fields dipping with butterflies
Delicately flitting on ice.

RAJA What do you owe me, child ?

REENA You have been Father, Mother, teacher, God,
All in one.

RAJA Attempting too much as usual, I failed.

✓ REENA My devotion to you makes me untrue to
Myself. Must I marry Yashwant Rao ?

RAJA And must you ask knowing my thoughts ?
 You are Indian, so live by Indian customs.

REENA That you should talk of India ! You who
 Speak in a different tongue, whose eyes
 Appreciate another culture, whose ears
 Are tuned to a distant music !
 We wanted colour from the West, but
 Got boredom instead. Let them remove
 Their dust-filled shoes before entering
 Here : I have said too much. Sleep,
 Father. I am always near.

(Exit Reena)

RAJA I have at last found myself ; as one
 Who watching the thinning mist of
 Sunrise alone in youth, now see
 The purple-braided sunset, still
 Alone, but old.

(Takes out a scroll)

 My horoscope ! Prepared by priests
 While cannons thundered from the palace
 And people ran out to watch fireworks
 Painted on the night . . . It says I
 Will live to be an old man . . . So
 There are rows and rows of waiting
 Sleepless nights . . .

(Takes pills. The room is dark except for light-rays on the three portraits. Suddenly the room is full of sounds — people shouting 'Maharaja Ki Jai' — cannons being fired, elephants trumpeting, a woman laughs hysterically, horses neigh. The sounds abruptly disappear. There is darkness.)



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