

A NEST FOR LALITA

A NEST
FOR LALITA

A NOVEL

KEN LANGER

DRYAD PRESS  WASHINGTON, D.C.

© 2020 by Kenneth Langer

Publication Date: October 25, 2020

CIP applied for.

All rights reserved. This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the publisher.

This book is a work of fiction. All characters, places, names of political parties, and incidents are products of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, political parties, or persons living or dead is entirely coincidental.

ISBN: 9781928755555

To my wife and daughters



PROLOGUE

Babai, May 1970

The commute from Bombay's financial center to Babai was living hell. Lalita's feet ached as stinking workers crushed in on her from all sides, some on purpose, and eyes like hot coals raking over her body. As the rickety bus approached her village and slowed, she mustered all her courage and jumped off. Her mood lightened on the walk home. Finally, no jerks brushing against her breasts or pinching her buttocks.

She thought about Mr. Behera, so kind and gentle. Who would have imagined the big boss's son—heir to the Behera Group—would take an interest in a barefoot Dalit, an invisible sweeper girl? He noticed her burn marks and offered to take her to a real doctor. She pictured the gold necklace he gave her, saying she could sell it if she ever needed money to escape her husband. But how could she? For someone who grew up in Bombay's sprawling shantytown, it was like owning a piece of the sun. Lalita valued

the necklace more than her life.

Most of all, she treasured the man, who treated her like a goddess. The young heir to the Behera Group was always respectful, gentle, never trying to take advantage of her. Unlike every man she'd ever known, starting with her useless father. A pair of ruddy shelducks soared above. She shook her head—if only humans were so loyal to one another!

Lalita passed the neighborhood shrine to Shiva, where a yogi sat cross-legged meditating under a majestic banyan tree. A garland of *rudraksha* seeds hung over protruding ribs. Long coils of matted hair looked like aerial roots, as if he had merged with the tree. What a blessed life, sitting day after day in a trance. No job, no chores, no money problems, and best of all, no useless husband. She had been married only two years, but that was one and a half too many. The trouble started when Ram lost his position guarding a sprawling bungalow on Malabar Hill. Soon he was drinking away her meager earnings and stubbing out cigarettes on her arms.

She finally arrived at her hut at the edge of a wide field of bright yellow sunflowers. She made herself a cup of dark-brown tea—*ek sau mil chai*, the kind that could sustain a trucker for one hundred miles. She drank from the saucer and waited for the caffeine to kick in. After checking the rice and dal for small stones, she threw a cow dung cake into the mud stove and sprinkled it with kerosene. She was about to light the fire when Ram burst through the door.

“What’s for dinner?” he yelled, slurring his words.

“What do you think,” Lalita snapped, “beefsteak?”

“How about some meat, you slut? I’m craving goat curry!”

“Then stop banging every girl in the village and get a goddamn job!”

Lalita could smell fresh coconut oil wafting from Ram’s direction. Who’s he screwing now?

“Fuck you, whore! You’re the one who’s sucking every dick at that

fancy office of yours!”

On most days, the conversation would have ended there; Ram would make his way to the string cot in front of the hut, fall asleep, and snore like a bulldog until dinner. After filling his belly, he would slobber her face with kisses or rip off her sari. But not tonight. He stumbled around and kicked the earthen jug. Water gushed onto the dirt floor.

“Bastard, I got up at 5 a.m. to fetch that water!”

Ram pulled a small bottle of whiskey from his pocket, took a swig, and swaggered over to the shrine where Lalita did her daily *puja*. He grabbed the stone goddess and threw it across the room. Lalita scrambled to pick up the deity. It had landed at the foot of a small trunk, which she had recently inherited from her mother. Ram staggered over to the trunk and kicked it.

“What’s in there, anyway?”

“I’ve told you a hundred times, my wedding dress and some old clothes. Now get out of my way so I can cook.”

Ram flipped open the top and pushed the trunk over. The contents flew onto the floor. Lalita quickly charged her husband, hoping to distract him.

“What the hell is this?” he growled, picking up a folded silk sari from the wet dirt. The necklace tumbled out. Ram’s face turned red. He looked like a *rakshasa*, a wrathful deity full of bloodlust. “You tramp! Where’d you get this?”

“I bought it with money I’ve saved up.”

“Stupid liar.” He seized her by the hair and pushed her against the wall. Then he started rummaging through the items. “And what’s *this*?” he roared, holding a pen and ink drawing of Lalita dressed in a shiny green sari. The gold necklace hung from her neck. He slammed the drawing into her face, crushing her nose.

“It’s a drawing, what do you think?”

“It’s you, isn’t it? Wearing a silk sari and that motherfucking gold necklace! Who did this?”

“Shree Behera, the big boss’s son. He likes to draw. He draws all his employees. I don’t know why.”

“Even scum sweepers like you? He gave you the necklace, didn’t he?”

“No! I told you, I—”

“He’s fucking you in the ass, isn’t he, you wench?” Ram grabbed the tin of kerosene near the mud stove. He caught hold of Lalita’s arm and dragged her behind the hut. She squirmed and struggled, finally freeing herself. She ran like the devil, but he tackled her in the neighbor’s field. He doused her with kerosene, from head to toe.

“No! No!” she screamed, her lithe body flailing like a caught fish.

Ram jammed his knees onto her legs and chest, pinning her to the ground. With his arms free, he lit a match and tossed it onto her. Then he jumped back. In seconds, Lalita turned into a living torch. She screamed, running this way and that until she collapsed in a patch of yellow flowers. A woman rushed out of a nearby shed with a bucket of water. But it was too late.

PART I

APRIL-MAY 2005



CHAPTER I

Sompur, India

Meena dreaded the evening commute. Sompur's streets were a dusty, tangled mess—nothing like New Delhi, with its wide boulevards and stately bungalows. The roads were far too narrow for the crush of cars, trucks, and scooter rickshaws, let alone bullock carts and bony cows. They were clogged, like an old man's arteries. *And why do people think there's one lane when there are three?*

But the commute was a small price for her dream job. No one else in her master's program at Delhi University was already heading up an NGO. Stopping for a group of men who had stumbled into the street, she worried about her husband. Kesh had not been himself since they moved to Sompur five years ago. He was too far from his office in New Delhi and missed the hustle and bustle of his architectural firm.

As Meena maneuvered through the city, she recalled a conversation with Madhav Behera soon after they had moved to Sompur. The industri-

alist behind Behera House could not understand why she would refuse a car and driver. Even at thirty, Meena was not confident behind the wheel and surely would have benefited. But no self-respecting activist would dare to be seen in a chauffeured Mercedes. Behera finally gave in, but not without some stern advice.

“Meena, Sompur is not New Delhi. If you insist on driving, please remember to leave your manners at the door. To get anywhere, you must act as if you own the road. And don’t forget the streets have their own caste system. Oversized lorries and sacred cows are the Brahmins. Don’t mess with them. Then come Mercedes and other luxury automobiles—the Kshatriya warriors. After that you have Marutis and all the other mid- and low-priced cars—they’re like the Vaishya farmers. Finally, the Shudras, the bottom feeders, common scooters and rickshaws. Everything on two wheels or legs is untouchable.”

She remembered shuddering at the word *untouchable*, which nobody used any more. But, as a new hire, she was too shy to speak up.

“You must first know your place in the pecking order,” Behera had said. “Yield to those above you, negotiate with your equals, and sit on your horn to blow everyone else out of the water.”

Even the roads had their bloody caste system! Meena knew she could never change the country’s ancient social structure, but she was determined to make a difference. After all, domestic violence was a cancer eating away at the country. And after five years, Behera House had helped hundreds of women.

Meena drove around a cow standing perfectly still in the center of the road. She imagined what the new campus might look like. Their current address, Behera’s ancestral home, was charming, but they had outgrown it. The new site was an abandoned cement factory located twenty miles outside the city. How nice to be settled into a quiet rural area, perched on

a hill overlooking the ocean. She could hardly believe Madhav was willing to donate the land and fund the design and construction of buildings that would accommodate 250 women—four times the current number. Women of different castes, maybe even some Muslims and Christians. Would they change their name? After all, a campus could no longer be called *Behera House*, could it?

She swerved to avoid a herd of goats. When the coast was clear, she found herself thinking of her phone call with Madhav that morning. Her jaw tightened. He wanted to bring in a Western architect to design the community center—the flagship building proposed for the new campus. And he insisted *she* call her husband to deliver the news. Madhav should have made the call himself.

What an awful morning, with Kesh ranting about those “bloody Western *starchitects*.” He had every right to be angry. Hadn’t *Time Magazine* recently named him India’s premier sustainable architect? The first to design a building awarded LEED certification by the US Green Building Council—a full three years before India established its own association. And didn’t *Architectural + Design Magazine* call him a “game changer, crusading to break India’s addiction to fossil fuel?” She pictured one of his latest projects, a prize-winning concert hall in Mumbai. But what could she do? Still, Madhav didn’t have to go on forever about how Kesh couldn’t be trusted. How her husband was *too goddamn green*.

Meena turned a corner and almost hit a bicyclist. Her nerves were frayed; she leaned forward, almost pressing her nose onto the windshield. But she couldn’t stop thinking about Kesh. It wasn’t just that new buildings had to be green, but they had to produce one hundred percent of their energy from wind and solar. *Net-zero-energy buildings*, his mantra. Maybe Madhav was right. And so what if her boss wanted to show off his company’s latest air-conditioning system? Why shouldn’t those women enjoy a

little creature comfort after all they've been through? Especially this time of year, when the sun's rays pierced your skin like red-hot spikes.

Suddenly a deafening horn jolted her back to the present. She looked in the rearview mirror and saw a Tata truck barreling toward her. The road vibrated under its weight. She veered to the side until the eight-wheeler whipped by, belching clouds of smoke. As it sped into the distance, the motley crew of vehicles and creatures sprung back into action, and the scene returned to its normal state of mayhem.

Then, a thunderous crash, as if the monsoon had come three months early. But the sky was deep blue without a single cloud. Except for a few scooters and bicycles, everything ground to a halt. That dreadful lorry must have driven off the road and hit something! She turned off the engine and poked her head out the window, but all she could see was a line of cars and, in the distance, a wall of people. Soon sweat was trickling down her armpits and her sari clung to the vinyl seat. Spotting a brawny young man clomping toward her from the direction of the accident, she got out of the car and asked what happened.

"A lorry swerved to avoid a bicyclist and went paunch up," the man replied in the local language. "It fucking crushed a young boy standing on the side of the road." The man flipped the bottom of his shirt up and exposed his navel, an outie. He moved toward her as he muttered something about her sea-green eyes.

"Step back, young man, and don't raise your shirt like that at me!" Meena pulled her sari tight around her lithe body. She was used to men undressing her with their sleazy eyes whenever she walked through the bazaar, but this youth had crossed the line.

"All right," he snapped, "but you don't have to get all puffy." He backed off and let his shirt fall over his belly. He pointed in the direction of Chanakya Market and said the dead boy worked for the sari emporium,

bringing customers chai from the nearby tea stall. Tall plastic glasses were scattered around the overturned vehicle.

Meena felt like her limbs had been painted with varnish. Wasn't that A. J. Kalbarta & Sons? The rotund proprietor served his patrons chai, brought in by a wisp of a boy no more than ten or eleven. He had an angelic face and smiled whenever Meena entered with a new resident. She squeezed the end of her sari and blinked her eyes, burning from car exhaust. *Why can't these wretched men turn off their bloody motors? And why didn't I ever bother to speak to the boy or ask him his name?*

It was already seven-thirty, and Kesh would be pacing the house wondering where she was. Meena riffled through her purse for her mobile phone, but came up short. Her husband would be furious. If only he had made some friends. The only exception was Madhav. But what kind of friend would hire a foreigner to design the community center when he could call on one of the best architects in the country? Madhav wanted Kesh to be the junior member of the design team. The local architect. Now there's a recipe for disaster!

Vendors were popping up, hawking cigarettes, evening newspapers, and *paan*, betel leaves filled with areca nuts and spices. A boy wandered around with an oversized aluminum teakettle, calling out, "*Chai garam*," hot tea, while a barber worked his trade in the shadow of a banyan tree.

Reconciled to a long wait, Meena opened her briefcase and dug out a report on Indian women and dowry law. But the sentences were long and obtuse; her mind seemed frozen, unable to navigate beyond images of her angry husband and the dead boy. It was as if her head were stuck in a traffic jam of its own.

A good hour passed before the lorry was cleared and cars began to move. She finally pulled into the driveway of their lime-green bungalow. Kesh kept promising to call the painters, but never seemed to get around

to it. But he's never too busy to pour himself a drink and watch another cricket match! She entered the front door, unfastened the straps of her low-heeled sandals, and placed her briefcase and car keys on the side table.



CHAPTER 2

“**W**hat took you so long?” Kesh barked. “You’re two hours late!” Meena walked into the dining room, cringing at his sharp tone. Her husband was already seated at the dinner table, puffing a Gauloise and nursing a bourbon. With a deep frown, he leaned against the tall back of the wooden chair carved with frolicking elephants, their thick trunks wrapped around blossoming trees. Dressed in a white kurta embroidered with flowers around the neck and sleeves, Kesh was beginning to look like his late father—the former maharaja of a small princely state tucked into the Himalayan foothills.

“Sorry, Kesh, there was a terrible accident on M. G. Road. I wanted to call, but I left my mobile at the office.” She planted a kiss on his cheek and headed to the bathroom. “A young boy was hit and killed by a lorry—”

“Which swerved to dodge a goat,” Kesh added.

“Pardon?”

“A goat,” he called after her. “There are more goats than people in

Sompur. The ratio is twelve and a half to one. I read an article by a Professor Billy Gotra at Sompur Technical College. Get it, *Billy Goat-ra*? Anyway, what else do I have to do in Sompur, the armpit of the world? My office in Delhi seems to be running just fine without me.”

“Sorry, dear,” Meena called out as she dried her hands, “what did you say?”

Kesh raised his voice. “I said, what else do I have to do in this armpit of the world? Well, I suppose India’s got a lot of armpits, since every bloody deity has ten arms.”

“No, something about goats?”

“Forget it.”

Meena emerged, patting her cheeks with a towel, only to find Kesh’s face hidden in a cloud of smoke. She seated herself across from him. “Kesh,” she said, hoping for a little sympathy, “I’ve just come from the scene of a terrible accident. Remember the shop where you bought me that *Banarasi* sari for our last anniversary?” She took a deep breath and lowered her head slightly.

“A. J. Kalbarta & Sons. How could I forget? You must have taken two hours to pick it out!”

“Someone said the poor boy was bringing chai to customers. I can’t stop thinking it was that sweet child from the sari shop. The one who always served me when I’d bring in a new resident to buy her a sari. I remember you talking to him.”

“Sorry ‘bout the dead kid.”

Kesh’s eyes wandered to the servant, who entered with a dish of rice and a bowl of egg curry. At fourteen, she had been forced to marry a forty-four-year-old gold trader. Two years later, she ran away and ended up at Behera House with a deep scar on her cheek and burns on her arms. Kesh snuffed out the cigarette and fingered the soft blue pack for another.

“Please,” Meena pleaded, “not at the table.”

“Last one, promise,” he said and fired up.

“You really shouldn’t be smoking at all.” Kesh looked like a coal-fired power plant with jets of smoke streaming from his nostrils. Meena thought this was rather ironic for a man who wanted all new buildings to run on solar power. “Remember Doctor Chakraborty saying how all this smoking is giving you hypertension?”

“Hypertension is a sign of distinction for a man in his mid-forties.” He popped out of his chair and marched to the liquor cabinet. “In any case, a spot of bourbon will offset any bad effects.” He ripped the plastic seal from a new bottle of Jack Daniels, positioned his glass underneath, and turned the bottle upside down, as if he were pouring apple juice.

“So, Meena dear,” he said, plopping back into his chair. “Shall we continue our discussion on the phone this morning?”

Meena didn’t respond.

“Why do we need a bloody Western starchitect? I’m not good enough for your victims of violence? Your burned and battered brood? Sorry if it sounds like I’m talking about a batch of overcooked pancakes.” He looked exceedingly pleased with himself.

“Was that supposed to be funny? These women are suffering and this is my life’s work. I know you didn’t mean what you just said. If you could only hear yourself, Kesh!”

“Sorry, dear. You know I respect you and am *exceedingly* proud of the way you bring succor to those unfortunate women.”

“That’s better.”

“In fact, I idolize you, my one and only goddess.”

Meena’s blood was reaching boiling point, but she tried to stay calm. Kesh would be better in the morning when the alcohol was no longer streaming through his veins.

Kesh pulled the serving dish close, scooped a mountain of rice onto his plate, and, with his fingers, molded it into a giant doughnut. “It’s just that I’ve become so damn frustrated living in this rathole eight hundred miles from my office. Five fucking years! Last month we lost that commission for the new airport in Goa. Had I been in Delhi, maybe, just maybe, I could have . . .” He shook his head. “And now this blow from Madhav.” Kesh helped himself to two eggs and thick yellow sauce. He stuck two fingers through one egg to break it apart, twirled a piece with rice to produce a gooey ball, and popped it into his mouth.

“I keep telling you to spend more time in Delhi,” Meena said, picking up her fork. “You’ve made a huge sacrifice shifting to Sompur for my job, but that doesn’t mean you can’t travel more often. We could even take money from your father’s inheritance and buy a small flat there. You need more face time with your colleagues. Spending weeks on end all alone with your computer isn’t good for you, Kesh.”

“I know.”

It was hard for Kesh to be far from his company, where he reigned over twenty-five employees—most young architects in awe of his talent and forever seeking his advice when they weren’t fetching him a mug of coffee or a pack of Gauloises. Working remotely was no way to feed the insatiable tapeworm lodged in his ego. Especially now, as more architects brandished their green credentials and were beginning to win major competitions.

“Sometimes you act as if you no longer head up one of the top architecture firms in the country,” Meena continued. “Still, you can’t expect to win every commission.” She took a sip of water. “You really must get a grip.”

“Get a grip, you say, when Madhav wants to hire a bloody starchitect. He said he wants the center to wow people like the Bird’s Nest, the national stadium under construction for the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Fine,

that's one hell of a project, I admit! But then the bastard turns his back on me."

"Kesh, you just won an award for that new art museum in Rio—your first international success. The *Financial Times* critic praised it as one of the top ten designs of 2004, and he wasn't limiting himself to green projects. Why can't you internalize your successes? Forget the community center. There will be other opportunities just as good or better. Didn't you tell me the Taj Group was about to commission a new hotel in Udaipur and that you were invited to submit a proposal?"

"Yes, I suppose."

"What do you mean *you suppose*?"

Kesh slammed his glass on the table and a few golden drops flew onto his hand. He chugged down what remained and, tilting the glass, tapped the bottom a few times to retrieve any lingering drops.

"No veggie tonight?" he asked, glancing toward the kitchen.

"It's coming. *Arre*, Indu, the *subzi* ready?"

"*Hai*, memsahib, *aarahi hai*," came a voice from behind the door, indicating they were on their way.

The servant emerged with a large bowl of palak paneer. Kesh stole a glance at the young woman's dark midriff, punctuated by a deep navel. Indu quickly adjusted her sari and turned away. Kesh spooned the spinach and cheese mixture onto his plate and scooped some up with a piece of chapati.

"Everyone knows you're one of the best," Meena said, "but we've been over this before—Madhav is calling the shots, not me. And why not? He's the one shelling out a gazillion rupees to build the new campus. Go argue with him if you don't like it! Actually, don't—just get over it, Kesh. You're going to have to work with a Westerner. You should be happy he wants you on the design team at all."

“Here we go again,” Kesh grunted, “worshipping any fat slob with a white face. Why are we Indians so goddamn insecure, as if we all had small penises?”

“Pardon?”

“This bloody country worships the lingam, the holy sausage!” He held the empty glass in the air as if to make a toast. “To the millions of peckers—in every temple, under every banyan tree, in every home. Long ones, short ones, fat ones, skinny ones, even cold ones like the natural ice lingam in Amarnath. Now that’s original, huh, an ice-cold hard-on!”

“Are you finished?”

“I suppose.”

“Now, can we *please* have a normal conversation? I told you I’ve had a hard day.”

Kesh placed the glass on the table and scooped more curry onto his plate. A drop of yellow sauce splattered onto the new placemat. Meena cringed but held her tongue.

“You know, Meena, we’ve become too sluggish. I mean, as a country.” He mixed more curry with rice. “Isn’t that why every nation has been able to invade us and suck the tit of Mother India dry? Greeks, Huns, Scythians, Kushans, Lodis. Then the goddamn Moghuls and Brits with their mince pies and custard tarts. Well, at least the Russians had the good sense to stay away. Imagine eating stuffed cabbage leaves every day for lunch!”

Meena wondered if the Hindu Democratic Party was finally getting to him with their endless ranting about how India was too weak, how we needed to reclaim the “good old days” before the Moghul Empire.

“Just look at how we keep kowtowing, mimicking every Western fad, from rap music to Christmas!” Kesh said.

“Christmas?”

“Yes, I went into a store the other day and saw poor Krishna hanging

on a plastic Christmas tree.”

“Kesh, please!”

“No, my dear girl, it’s time we Indians unite and stand tall with our whim-whams erect. After all, are we not the land of Shiva, the ithyphallic god? Of course, the way Indian men adjust themselves every fifteen minutes, you’d think we were the land of the *itchy* phallic god!”

“Kesh, that’s disgusting.” She chewed her lip, knowing what was coming. Her husband’s soliloquies were the first tremors of a massive volcano, with boiling magma about to flow her way. She thought of yesterday evening, when a pleasant dinner conversation morphed into a lecture on how Hindus discovered the decimal system and could have invented the personal computer if they hadn’t been standing on their heads for the past three thousand years. “If you don’t want to have a proper conversation, let’s just eat in silence.”

“I’m damn serious!” He reached for a napkin and wiped his mouth. “I’ve been designing sustainable buildings for thirteen years, long before some white dick with an MBA from Harvard figured out he could toss a bunch of ancient design practices into a box, tie a ribbon around it, and sell it as some fancy-sounding green building certification. LEED. Well, LEED, SCHMEED! As if sustainable architecture were a fucking box of corn flakes.”

“*Aur pani lao!*” Meena called to the servant for more water.

“Why the hell should I have to play second fiddle to some foreign dickhead? Madhav is my personal friend. We have lunch every second Friday of the month. I have no problem telling him we don’t need any blue-eyed boy to design a world-class building. *I* can give him his Bird’s Nest, if that’s what he wants!”

“Look, Kesh, Madhav’s no dummy. He knows you are top notch. But he probably thinks hiring a famous Western architect will bring visibility

to our cause. Stop taking it so personally. This isn't just about you!" She feared her words slammed down like a gavel.

"Now you're siding with Madhav?"

"All I'm saying is the women who come to Behera House have been beaten, raped, and some nearly burnt to death. The new community center should be welcoming and comfortable. Sure, we'll have bamboo floors and cisterns to collect rainwater. But we're not going to sacrifice comfort just to be green. And is it a crime for a businessman to demonstrate his latest cooling system when it's his money funding the project?"

"So that's what it's all about—air conditioning! You don't trust me, do you? You think I'd design a building that's so bloody green it won't have air conditioning? Is that why you're siding with Madhav? Well, why didn't you just marry a fucking HVAC engineer? No backtalk. No hot air! Life would have just been a cool breeze."

"Go to hell, Kesh!"

Meena threw her napkin on the table and stormed out. She marched upstairs to the bedroom, slamming the door behind her. The quilt on Kesh's side of the queen bed was pulled back and the curtains drawn. Was he now napping during the afternoon? She changed into sweat pants and a T-shirt, then stretched out on the bed. Why even engage with him after he's had so many drinks? Then the dam broke. After crying a few minutes, she leaned toward her dresser to grab a tissue and caught a glimpse of a photo taken twelve years ago on their honeymoon. They were standing in front of the famous Meenakshi Temple in Madurai. Kesh looked so debonair. At thirty-three, he was clean-shaven with a shock of thick black hair.

Meena recalled the first night of their honeymoon as they sat on the steps of the famous Meenakshi temple. Her new husband described the "green" elements India's architects deployed over ten centuries ago: how large slabs of stone around the temple inhaled the cool nighttime air and

exhaled it during the hot day, as if the goddess were cooling the feet of her devotees with her own breath. That night, Kesh likened the clear rays of the autumnal moon to drops of milk. He recited an ancient Sanskrit poem about Soma, the moon god, whose nectar was supposed to bestow never-ending life. He turned to her and whispered how the ambrosia from her lips was all he needed to ensure his immortality; and that she, Meenakshi, was his private temple, since her body would confer its blessing on him night after night. No, it wasn't hard to fall in love with a man who made green-building strategies sound like love poetry and compared her young, insecure body to one of India's holiest temples.



Kesh remained at the dinner table, stewing. He shook some salt on the table and was trying to balance the saltshaker on its side when Indu entered to clear the dishes. Her swarthy feet bore heavy metal anklets. An open crack along the side of one foot looked like a groaning mouth. How he would love to chain her to his bed with those shackles and fuck her in the ass!

She shot him a poison glance, as if she had read his mind. He put his hand to his heart and whispered the words from his favorite Jimi Hendrix song: "I have only one burnin' desire, let me stand next to your fire." Then he shook his head violently, trying to rid it of his fantasies.

She turned toward the kitchen, revealing an arm disfigured with burn marks. Kesh cringed. How could a husband be so cruel? He stuck his finger into a pack of Gauloises and felt one last cigarette hiding in the back, as if it, too, were afraid of him. He fished it out and crushed the pack in his hand. Then he lit up and flung the lighter on the table. It slid clear off the edge.

Indu returned for the remaining dishes and saw the lighter on the floor.

Would she pick it up? She did, bending down slowly. The top of her sari fell from her shoulder and revealed her *choli*, the upper garment, which seemed too small for her ample breasts. She adjusted it and took hold of the lighter with two fingers, placing it gently on the table. *It's not a fucking landmine.* Or was it? Could the lighter have conjured up painful memories?

“*Shukriyan,*” Kesh said, but his word of thanks vanished in the air like the smoke from his mouth.

He meandered into the den. Above the TV hung a drawing of Durga sitting sidesaddle on her tiger. The independent goddess who never married. Her ten arms formed a perfect circle around her body, like a spinning wheel. He pursed his lips and blew a smoke ring onto her fleshy cheeks. For a brief moment, it looked as if a lasso had caught her around the neck. Then the smoke dissipated and she was free again.

He sank into the couch and picked up a book of Indian miniatures from the coffee table. The cover showed a husband fallen on his knees, supplicating his wife after he had returned home from a tryst. The man's lip bore his mistress's teeth marks, and his chest was smeared with the sandalwood paste that once adorned her breasts. Ripened mangoes bent the branches of a fruit tree in the background.

Kesh had read enough Sanskrit love poetry to know how the story would end. The wife would feign anger and the husband would demand she punish him with a kick. *Affair, anger, punishment, forgiveness—wasn't that the ancient formula? If only Meena would give me a good hard kick and fall into my arms.* But she didn't even notice his affairs, much less feign anger. He stubbed out his cigarette and bit off a torn hangnail on his thumb. Soon his cuticle was bathed in blood.