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Narcopolis

Written by Jeet Thayil

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Narcopolis

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Lyrics quoted on pages 164, 168 and 169 are from ‘Dum Maro Dum’ from the film
Hare Rama Hare Krishna (1971, dir. Dev Anand). Lyrics by Anand Bakshi, music by
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CHAPTER ONE

Dimple

Before Dimple came to be called Zeenat, she worked part-time for Rashid and disappeared every evening to the hijra's brothel. I smoked at her station even if other pipes were free, and we talked the way smokers talk, horizontally, with long pauses, our words so soft they sounded like the incomprehensible phrases spoken by small children. I asked the usual foolish questions. Is it better to be a man or a woman? Dimple said: For conversation, better to be a woman, for everything else, for sex, better to be a man. Then I asked if she was a man or a woman and she nodded as if it was the first time she'd been asked. She was about twenty-five then and she had a habit in those days of shaking the hair into her eyes and smiling for no reason at all, a sweet smile as I remember, with no hint there of the changes that would overtake her.

She said: Woman and man are words other people use, not me. I'm not sure what I am. Some days I'm neither, or I'm nothing. On other days I feel I'm both. But men and women are so different, how can one person be both? Isn't that what you're thinking? Well I'm both and I've learned some things, to my cost, the kind of thing you're better off not knowing if you mean to live in the world. For example I know something about love and how lovers want to consume and be consumed and disappear into each other. I know how they yearn to make two equal one and I know it can never be. What else? Women are

more evolved biologically and emotionally, that's well known and it's obvious. But they confuse sex and the spirit; they don't separate. Men, as you know, always separate: they separate their human and dog natures. And then she said, I'd like to tell you more about it, about the family resemblance between men and dogs, because I have plenty to say, as you may have guessed, but what would be the point? There's little chance you'd understand, after all you're a man.



She'd learned English by conversing with customers and she was teaching herself to read. She knew enough of the alphabet to recognize some of the words in the newspapers and film magazines that came her way, or the paperback novels forgotten by customers at the khana, or the print on detergent packets and toothpaste tubes. Bengali gave her books sometimes, usually history, but also philosophy, geography, and illustrated biographies with titles like *Great Thinkers of the Twentieth Century* and *One Hundred Great Men of the World*. He found the books in the raddi shops around Shuklaji Street, which was a centre of the trade in used paper, rags, toys, junk of all kinds. He gave her books and she read in secret, because she didn't like to be seen reading. She read the way an illiterate person reads. She liked to look at the covers and trace the title with a finger, and if she was able to make sense of a line or a word, it gave her a thrill.



I was stretched out, the khana empty in the dead hour of the

afternoon, when Dimple asked what kind of book I was reading. It's not a book, I said, it's a magazine and this is a story about an Indian painter who lives in London.

'*Time*. What a big name for a small book. Is your painter famous?'

'Here, no, in England, yes. He's a school dropout. No, I have it wrong: he was expelled for making pornographic murals in the boys' toilet. He put himself through art school and won a scholarship to Oxford. The genteel British expected him to be some kind of Hindu scholar mystic. Instead, it says here, he paints Christ with more authority than British painters.'

'Read.'

"Newton Pinter Xavier's art is Catholic guilt exploded to devastating effect. He doesn't paint as much as eviscerate and disembowel. His altered Christs are more powerful than Bacon's because they come at us with no frame of reference, or none that we are able to recognize in a terrestrial context. They are adrift of history. As for geography, they remain firmly outside the purview of the British isles, and, I suspect, that of the Indian subcontinent. They drip sex, heresy and indiscriminate readings from the psychopathology of everyday life, they."

'Enough, stop, it's too much. Let me see the pictures.'

The editors had thought to include several reproductions of Xavier's paintings. There was a gory Christ figure wrapped in thorns the size of railroad ties, the figure appearing puny and abused against a backdrop of blood splatter. There was a self-portrait. And there were two pitiless nudes, soft white bodies spreadeagled on stainless steel, dead skin puckered in the harsh fluorescent light. Dimple was silent as she looked at the pictures. Then she handed the magazine back, squinting at me as if she couldn't see. She said, He's too angry to think. He's so

angry he's homicidal. He wants to make everything ugly. He wants to kill the world. She said, How can you trust a man like that? How can you agree with him when he says that people are sick and deserve to die?



After a while, she asked if I would read something else and she reached under her pallet and produced a textbook wrapped with brown paper in the schoolboy way, *The New Combined Textbook for Non-Christians: History & Moral Science Examination Syllabus*. Under the title was the author's name: S. T. Pande, Professor of History, University of Baroda. She held the book out to me and turned to a page she'd marked and I read a few lines.

“The founder of Christianity was the eponymous Christ, Jesus, whose personality, manic and magnetic in equal proportions, served a radical agenda that sought to overthrow the world's hierarchical social orders. His radicalism, which manifested itself most prominently in the guise of mystic uttering, can best be encapsulated by the following indirect quote: ‘Be not content with this state of things.’ He was possessed of a sharp tongue that aimed its barbs at priests, the rich, politicians, usurers, Jews, Gentiles, foes and friends. Some say his special gift was indiscriminate truth telling. Others say it was his curse. He was born of Mary, virgin wife and mother, who was blessed with a lovely pear-shaped face and whose devotees address her in the following manner: Hail Mary Mother of God pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen!

“Jesus was, among other things, an unlicensed medical practitioner who could cure the sick with nothing more than a single touch of his right index finger. Whether this ability was of di-

vine provenance or simply a matter of being adept in the use of herbs and plants is open to conjecture. What cannot be disputed is the miraculous effect he had on the sick and the dying. This is why diseased people became Christians, and the poor too; in other words, the lowest of the low converted to Christianity because they found in it a balm to counteract the caste-ridden ways of the world.”

Was this Professor Pande’s style, I wondered, to write as if he’d spent days and nights with Jesus and Mary, taking notes, accumulating the privileged information he was now sharing with us, his lucky readers? I told Dimple that the Professor, if that is what he was, seemed to me an unreliable source, though he was entertaining enough. I said there was nothing wrong with being unreliable. Who wasn’t? What, in any case, was the point in being reliable, like a dog or automobile or armchair? I said it was fine with me, as long as he didn’t call himself a historian and moral scientist. Dimple wasn’t interested. She was a story addict, the kind of reader – if she had been able to read – who hated to get to the end of a book. So I held Professor Pande’s book open on my chest and I continued.

“Jesus was crucified in a very cruel way, but he died smilingly. His happy face had a great effect on his disciples and so did the miracles he performed. In fact, he was a consummate performer: no matter what the circumstances he managed several performances a week. He once fed five thousand people with five loaves of bread and two fish only.”

Dimple said, ‘Five loaves of bread and two fish, which means with half a dozen fish he could have fed all the poor of Bombay, no, no, of course not, just the poor of Shuklaji Street. Even so, he should have been born in India.’

She went to the window and spat into the street. There were burns on her fingers and her toenails were painted black. She had a moon-shaped bruise on her collarbone and she pulled her shirt tight to cover it. She stood at the window for a moment, looking at the street, and for the rest of her life she remembered the way the dust from the handcarts boiled up into the sunshine and the way she lived then, the brothel with the red number on its door, ୦୦୭, and the bathroom she shared with the other randis, the peanut-shaped hole in the floor they pissed in, all of them, customers included. She remembered the women she worked with, the new and not so new women from all kinds of cities and towns, from Secunderabad and Patna and Calcutta and Kathmandu, sent to Bombay to earn money for their families back home, money the families never saw because the brothel-keepers neglected to send it. And Dimple would remember that it was around this time that she determined to make her own future, around the time she started to read, her head on a pallet, or cross-legged and hunched, laboriously deciphering letters until she fell into a nod. When she woke she knew that her stay at the brothel was coming to an end and soon she would be gone, that she had to sustain her determination and it would come true, the future, if only she persisted, and she knew that whatever happened, whatever she accomplished or did not, it would be in testimony to the brothel.

Was it that afternoon or some other that she pulled out a copy of *Sex Detective*, the true-crime magazine that Bengali was ad-

dicted to? She flipped pages until she found a story in photographs, *Womanizer Hubby Gets Comeuppance*. In the first panel, a man in a flowered shirt and bell-bottoms offered a sunflower to a bosomy woman. The text was enclosed in comic-book balloons. Dimple pointed to the parts she wanted me to read.

“You are very clever. You are offering me one flower and in exchange you want the flower of my youth.” Their hot breathing is merged. Eyes tell eyes how intense is the thirst. Prakash and Priya move together to drink the juice of love. “Prakash, your titillating touch is exciting the flower, please touch the virginity of the petals with the drops of your manly vigour.” Prakash with his fingers touches the lip of Priya and awakens her body.’

I read the passage with some involuntary inflexion, a dismissive undertone or jokiness, and she asked me why I was laughing.

‘Why are you so serious? It’s a story, someone made it up.’

‘Stories are real. Can’t you see that these people are heading for disaster? Give me back the book.’

‘It’s not a book.’

‘No?’

‘And this is not a pipe.’

‘Enough. You’re dreaming with your eyes open.’



Dimple may have picked up the idea from the tai, or from one of the randis at the brothel, but Dimple, being Dimple, developed it into a kind of classroom lesson, a mini lecture. She told me she had something to say, something I shouldn’t take

personally. She said she was telling me these things because of the questions I asked, and because her own thoughts were only now taking shape in her mind. She said that men, whatever their sexual preferences, had more in common with other men than with women. It was possible they had more in common with males of other species, with chimpanzees, goats and dogs, particularly dogs, as she'd explained to me before, than with women. This was not a harsh thing to say, she continued, and especially not to a man. Correct me if I'm wrong, but isn't it true that men aren't interested in tenderness as much as orgasm? Isn't it true that the main goal of the sexual act, for a man, is the discharging of semen into a suitable receptacle, or even an unsuitable one if nothing else is available? I don't mean to be cynical, but the truth is that the gap between men and women is unbridgeable and it extends to everything, from the taking of pleasure to the meaning of marriage. Genuine union is impossible; all we can hope for is cohabitation. I said nothing in reply. What surprised me about the speech was not its content. She spoke in English, unbroken English, and I wondered how she'd gotten so good at it.



Later, when the nod took me, I dreamed I was walking through the corridors of a house from which the electricity had long been disconnected. I followed the sound of water along unlit corridors to a dead end, and beyond that to a room. It took a moment to recognize the shape waiting on the bed. Old friend, I said, tell me the story of your death, and please, you have to make an effort, it's the only way we can speak to each other. Dimple smiled politely. She said, What? I can't understand

you. I said: I said, make an effort, an effort. As you wish, she said, this is your house, but why don't you open the windows? You shouldn't use electric light on a full moon. Light a candle, instead, and open the windows. Outside on the street, only one street lamp was working. A dog with a broken leg limped into the light. The street seemed to be moving and I realized it was under water. I heard the water lap against the building and I smelled the chemicals that floated on its surface. Dimple said, Be grateful, so many people don't have even this. Then she said, I died in December at three o'clock in the afternoon. People were walking on the promenade. A child asked, Is this the sea or the ocean? and her mother replied, Just drink your coco water, shut up for one second. The memorial benches were empty except for the crows. A couple stood gazing out to sea and I noticed that the woman was pregnant and it seemed to me that they were dead, like everybody on the promenade, but of all the dead people who were out walking, I was deadest and I was covered in blood, my own or some other's, I couldn't tell. The sea lay among the dirty mangroves and I imagined I was the tide that pooled among the rocks near Bandstand, a dirty blood-ringed tide that ebbed and was gone. Do you want to know what happened next? I died and my spirit hung upside down in a cave of creatures yearning to be born, hung upside down for many years or hours. A sign had been painted on the wall long ago, Pit Loka it said, and though the letters were faded, a group of us hovered near it, as if the proximity of the words would ensure our return to the land of the living. But I can't return, except like this, partially.

'I'm glad you're back,' I said.

'I've been here all this time. What have I been doing? I don't

know. People tell me things, secret things. They're kind to me because they like me and they tell me what to expect.'

'What do they tell you?'

'The same thing I will tell you, that we're here, close to you, invisible, of course, but we are here.'

'Where?'

'I've never met anyone who asks so many questions,' said Dimple, and she looked up at the window and smiled. 'On the other side of the mirror, our hands are resting against the glass, trying to touch your face. Only a veil separates us from you, a transparent veil as flimsy as the one that separates you from your dreams. If you want to talk to us you only have to dip your hand beneath the surface of the water. We're waiting for a glance or a word, some acknowledgement that we are here. If you dip your hand you'll hear us. You should listen. Even if you can't bear it, you should listen.'