

10 Manjula Padmanabhan

Harvest

India

Until 1997, when her play, *Harvest*, won the inaugural Onassis Prize for Theatre (the world's richest playscript award), Manjula Padmanabhan was better known as a cartoonist, and for a while had a daily comic strip in *The Pioneer*, a Delhi-based newspaper. However, she had previously written several plays that address complex moral and social issues while evincing flashes of the penetrating wit that is honed to a fine art in *Harvest*. Of these earlier works, *Lights Out!* (1984) examines communal apathy in relation to a pack rape, *The Artist's Model* (1995) deals with metaphysical questions relating to art and exploitation, and *Sextet* (1996) comprises a series of six short skits about aspects of sexuality. These dramatic experiments notwithstanding, it is perhaps Padmanabhan's book of short stories, *Hot Death, Cold Soup* (1995), that best anticipates both the matter and the mode of her award-winning play. Using surrealist and Gothic forms, several stories in this collection focus on issues such as sati, dowry murder, and suicide, while others satirise government bureaucracy in India and the culture of acquiescence that leads the public to accept the status quo. In one Kafka-esque tale, 'A Government of India undertaking . . .' (Padmanabhan 1993), the image of the common citizen worn down and mystified by an endless process of queuing and form-filling suggests the kind of dehumanisation taken to the extreme in *Harvest*. The story's metaphysical exploration of its protagonist's efforts to exchange her body with that of someone rich, famous and indolent more specifically anticipates the global trade in body organs that is the play's central focus.

Padmanabhan explains that her storytelling tends to 'veer off into science-fiction or the surreal' because these modes allow her to 'cut loose from the annoying constraints of

realistic detail' (Sethi 1997: 101). Her refractive vision of contemporary Indian society reveals little about her personal life, unlike some of the more autobiographical works in this anthology. Born in Delhi in 1953, Padmanabhan, whose father was a diplomat, had a fairly itinerant childhood, followed by several years in boarding school as a teenager. After attending college, her determination to make her own way in life led to various kinds of work in publishing and media-related fields. As well as creating comic strips and writing newspaper columns, she has worked as an artist, illustrated children's books and devised scripts for television. Her early knowledge of theatre was shaped by exposure to Shakespeare's works and Broadway musicals but, after returning to India in her teens, she became aware of such notable dramatists as Vijay Tendulkar and Girish Karnad, whose *Tughlaq* was the first modern Indian play she had ever seen performed. Padmanabhan's dramatic endeavours have been frustrated, however, by the generally weak infrastructure of India's English-language theatre, which is poorly resourced and inclined to stage well-known foreign plays catering to a Westernised elite. With these constraints in mind, she says that she wrote *Harvest* knowing it would surely languish in a filing cabinet unless it won something in the Onassis competition. Fortunately, the prestigious award has ensured a very different fate for the play: it was given a much-lauded production in Greece as part of the prize benefit, and has since been broadcast by BBC Radio, as well as being translated into German, and adapted for a film version in Hindi that is soon to be released under the title of *Deham*.

Sunil Sethi has described *Harvest* as 'a modern morality play' in which Padmanabhan questions the limits of

poverty, material ambition and individual dignity (Sethi 1997: 98). Om Prakash's Faustian pact with InterPlanta organ transplant services brings into focus the spiritual emptiness of a society so seduced by the promise of wealth that its members will sell their body parts for material profit. As the narrative progresses, the full horrors of this kind of trade are suggested not only by the gradual disintegration of the donor body but also by the complete breakdown of the Prakash family as a social unit. Ma's bizarre retreat into the media-controlled oblivion of her SuperDeluxe VideoCouch with 750 channels represents only a slightly more palatable future than Om's grovelling capitulation to the InterPlanta world-view, or his brother Jeetu's eventual disappearance into the abyss of the organ bazaar. In their hollow quest for affluence, all have betrayed family members and/or lovers, and, perhaps more critically, they have compromised their humanity. Only Jaya refuses to be taken in by the glittering illusions of Western-style capitalism, her lone stand against exploitation suggesting a glimmer of hope in an otherwise bleak vision of human society at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

The science-fiction elements in *Harvest*, while crucial to the play's tightly plotted narrative, are held largely within the bounds of late-twentieth-century life, so that the future presented remains on this side of plausibility. Most of the hi-tech devices that fascinate, and fool, the Prakash family derive from technologies currently available in many parts of the world: the contact module, for instance, suggests a video-conferencing unit with added virtual reality features, while Jeetu's artificial replacement eyes operate on the same principle as the bionic ear, sending external stimuli direct to the brain rather than through a damaged sensory organ. Even Ma's elaborate VideoCouch sarcophagus has recognisable elements, being something of a cross between a dialysis machine and an entertainment unit, though its features are comically exaggerated to enhance the text's critique of rampant materialism. Such gadgetry aside, the portrayal of InterPlanta as the sinister face of corporate business in the twenty-first century also draws from current models of large, transnational corporations staffed by human automatons with little sense of individuality.

Padmanabhan's visceral satire is not without some sympathy for the Prakash family. Like many parables, *Harvest* is just as concerned with social structures as it is with the individual's moral choices. In particular, the play highlights the ways in which poverty can limit moral options and degrade human lives, and it also demonstrates that a modern trade in body parts can be understood only within the context of gross material inequities between first and third worlds. The selection of the global organ trade as a compelling metaphor through which to dramatise the West's exploitation of its cultural Others suits the futuristic bent of the play because it draws on the familiar science-fiction motif of body-snatching; yet this trope is also based in historical fact. A number of media reports, some more factual than others, claim that, along with Cairo, Indian cities such as Calcutta and Bombay are major locations for a multimillion dollar trade in human organs, especially kidneys and corneas. Such reports frequently employ the image of the oriental bazaar to suggest the development of a rapacious 'commerce' that seems to be premised on the general assumption that the bodies of the poor are worth more as spare parts than as living persons.

While examples of organ trade between rich and poor nations *within* Asia and the Middle East show that this kind of commerce sometimes operates along unexpected routes of capital dependence (Frow 1998: 51), Padmanabhan's particular take on the issue suggests the ease with which Western nations position themselves as the 'natural' recipients of other cultures' human and material resources. In this respect, the macabre trade dramatised in *Harvest* readily evokes its imperial precursor, the trans-Atlantic slave trade, which saw millions of racialised bodies bought, sold and exchanged for the benefit of European mercantile expansionism. By presenting images of the colonised body plundered for its specific parts, the play also recalls such imperial practices as 'souveniring' native heads, bones and skin in the names of science and anthropology. These resonances between past and present forms of traffic in human bodies and/or body parts situate the contemporary trade in organs within a continuum of exploitative cross-cultural relationships. That InterPlanta also administers a transnational sexual

economy of sorts, encompassing a trade in exotic babies, strengthens the suggestiveness of the historical parallels. Hence, *Harvest* can be read not only as a cautionary tale about the possible (mis)uses of modern medical and reproductive science, but also as a reflection on the economic and social legacies of Western imperialism, particularly as they converge with new technologies.

With skilful irony, Padmanabhan employs the always loaded motif of cannibalism to distil some of the moral issues raised by the organ trade. Om's taunt that Jeetu has been sent to a human game sanctuary where the rich hunt socially disadvantaged types neatly refigures the connotative reach of cannibalism so that it points to characteristics of developed rather than 'primitive' societies. The Western cannibalising of third-world bodies in *Harvest* also has a ritualistic element in so far as it is driven by a myth of resurrection – the restoration of youth and wholeness. When Jeetu's organs are transplanted to Ginni/Virgil, the transaction is not merely a medical one; symbolic 'capital' also flows from the young, the poor and the beautiful to the old, the rich and the ugly. On another level, the cannibalism motif intensifies the play's critique of a dehumanised Indian society, which is depicted in microcosm through the savage conflicts within the Prakash family.

Harvest's narrative also harnesses the figurative power of disease to convey the moral ills of a world driven by greed and self-interest to the extent that a lucrative trade in body parts has become the norm. However, the disease metaphor operates in complex ways, suggesting that the 'contaminated' realm outside the sanitised Prakash housing unit may be preferable to the sterile environment in which Om, Ma and Jaya are forced to live after their 'contract' with InterPlanta comes into effect. When Jeetu enters the unit covered with muck and grime and weeping sores, his presence precipitates a crisis in the fragile relationship between Donors and Receivers: because he embodies the threat of contamination, he disrupts the power and authority of the carefully regulated Receiver world. At this point, Jaya's rebellion against her bullying family and the demands of the system in which they have become enmeshed provides one of the few tender moments of the play, as she gently dresses Jeetu's wounds.

At the end of her chilling tale, Padmanabhan explores the nexus between sexuality and cultural difference to address the myth of the exotic, sexually available, and yet potentially dangerous Other that still circulates in Western discourse. Virgil's desire to impregnate Jaya, and his simultaneous fear that she would pollute him if their coupling were to happen anywhere but in the virtual realm, could be read as a modern instance of the ambivalence that infused imperial sexuality. Jaya refuses point blank to be party to a transaction that effectively puts Virgil in control of her sexuality, just as she has previously refused to suppress her sexual desires by playing the demure wife to Om. Her demand that Virgil meet her in the flesh before she will consider his proposition functions as a more general challenge to Western societies to put aside damaging stereotypes and obsessive fears about contamination in order to interact with other cultures on a more equal, and respectful, footing. In this sense, like much science-fiction, *Harvest's* bitter narrative is driven by a utopian impulse to suggest the impossible possibility of a world in which there are no winners or losers, only partners.

Production history

Harvest had its formal premiere in Greek on 20 January 1999 at Karolous Koun Theatre, Athens, directed by Mimis Kouyiouintzis. The play has also had amateur stagings in India, including a Delhi production by Yatrik at the Sriram Centre in July 1999, directed by Joy Michaels.

Select bibliography

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Characters

Donors

OM Twenty years old, he has been laid off from his job as a clerk and is the breadwinner of his small family. He is of medium height, nervy and thin. He would be reasonably good-looking if not for his anxious expression.

JAYA Om's wife. Thin and haggard, she looks older than her nineteen years. Her bright cotton sari has faded with repeated washing, to a meek pink. Like the others, she is barefoot at the outset. She wears glass bangles, a tiny nose-ring, ear-studs, a slender chain around her neck. No make-up aside from the kohl around her eyes and the red bindi on her forehead (the colour indicates that she is married).

MA Om's mother. She is sixty years old, stooped, scrawny and crabby, wears a widow's threadbare white on white sari. Her hair is a straggly white.

JEETU Om's younger brother, seventeen and handsome. The same height as Om, he is wiry and conscious of his body. He works as a male prostitute and has a dashing, easy-going, likeable personality.

BIDYUT-BAI An elderly neighbour, very similar in appearance to Ma, but timid and self-effacing.

Also urchins and the crowd outside the door. The crowd is audible rather than visible.

Guards and Agents

The GUARDS are a group of three commando-like characters who bear the same relationship to each other whenever they appear. GUARD 1 is the leader of the team, a man in his mid-forties, of military bearing. GUARD 2 is a young and attractive woman, unsmiling and efficient. GUARD 3 is a male

clone of GUARD 2. Only GUARD 1 interacts with the DONORS.

The AGENTS are space-age delivery-persons and their uniforms are fantastical verging on ludicrous, like the costumes of waiters in exotic restaurants. Their roles are interchangeable with the GUARDS, though it must be clear that they do not belong to the same agency.

Receivers

GINNI We see only her face and hear her voice. She is the blonde and white-skinned epitome of an American-style youth goddess. Her voice is sweet and sexy.

VIRGIL He is never seen. He has an American cigarette-commercial accent – rich and smoky, attractive and rugged.

Setting

For the sake of coherence, this play is set in Bombay, the DONORS are Indian and the RECEIVERS, North American. Ideally, however, the DONORS and RECEIVERS should take on the racial identities, names, costumes and accents most suited to the location of the production. It matters only that there be a highly recognisable distinction between the two groups, reflected in speech, clothing and appearance. The GUARDS and AGENTS are intermediate between the extremes, but resemble DONORS more than RECEIVERS.

The year is 2010. There are significant technical advances, but the clothes and habits of ordinary people in the 'Donor' World are no different to those of Third World citizens today. Except for the obviously exotic gadgets described in the action, household objects look reasonably familiar.

Act I, Scene 1

The sound of inner-city traffic: grimy, despairing, poison-fumed. It wells up before the curtains open, then cuts out to a background rumble as . . . the lights reveal a single-room accommodation in a tenement building. It is bare but neat. In the foreground, stage left, is a board-bed across the tops of three steel trunks. MA sits on the bed. Near her is the front door. JAYA stands by the window stage right. To the rear is the kitchen area.

MA Ho – you! Come here –

JAYA What is it?

MA It's no use staring out the window!

JAYA I'll stare if I wish.

MA Wasting time! Why – you could be pressing my legs instead.

JAYA He said he'd be back in time for lunch –

MA And you think your staring will bring him home faster?

JAYA No, but –

MA Or help him get a job?

JAYA I don't want him to get it!

MA Eh?

JAYA I said I'm hoping he *doesn't* get the job –

MA Oh – I forgot! Missie Madam *doesn't* want her husband to earn a living wage – like she should! Like any reasonable, respectable wife would –

JAYA You don't understand –

MA My son's wife doesn't appreciate him, that's what I understand –

JAYA Like every husband's mother before you.

MA And how would you know what a mother knows?

JAYA I have your example don't I? Oh, there! I think I see him –

MA Well – job or not, he's not got wings, *that* I can tell you. He'll *still* have to climb four floors getting up here. But – what does he look like? Is his face shining? Are his footsteps sweet?

JAYA It's a bit far to see such details –

MA Pah! As if you can see them when he's right in front of you. Now I can see them even without looking at him. Just the sound of his feet. His little feet! Like flowers they were!

JAYA Oh – please! The way you go on!

MA Jealous!

JAYA You'd like to think that –

MA And rude too. Why, you're hardly human! You must have grown up in a jungle!

JAYA Leave me alone –

MA Alone, alone! Have you seen your neighbours? Ten in that room, twenty in the other! And harmonious, my dear! Harmonious as a TV show! But you? An empty room would be too crowded for you!

JAYA That's because I live with two people who pretend the other two don't exist –

MA Meaning what?

JAYA Meaning that you and Om behave as if I and Jeetu don't exist.

MA Don't talk to me about Jeetu –

JAYA See what I mean? You pretend he's not here – so I'm the one who cooks for him, I'm the one who worries about him –

MA You worry far too much about that one, if you ask me –

JAYA Your younger son!

MA Nah. The gods left a jackal in my belly by mistake when they made him – maybe that's why you like him – he's just like you, rude, insolent, ungrateful –

JAYA I? *Like* him!

MA Think I don't see the way you wet yourself when he walks in the door. Yes! Your brother-in-law – ohhh, the shame of it! You'll suffer in your next life. See if you don't! You'll be made into a cockroach and I'll have to smash you – (*lifts her bare foot and stamps hard*) just like this one. (*Shows JAYA the underside of the foot.*) See? Do you see your fate?

JAYA (*paying no attention, her ear cocked to the door*) There! That's Om. (*Goes quickly to the door, steps out.*)

MA (*Makes a face behind her back.*) Yah, yah! Go on – running out to meet him, like some idiot schoolgirl! Think I'm taken in by it? Because I'm not! I see everything! Even inside your head!

(*The door opens – OM walks in.*)

MA Ah, my son! My own boy! What news?

(*OM, carrying a bulky parcel, looks dazed. JAYA comes in behind him and shuts the door.*)

MA No hope? Nothing at all?

(*JAYA stares at OM.*)

MA They are fools, that's all! Don't recognise a diamond when they see one! It's their loss. Still . . . it would have been nice. A

change. A god-send. How'll we manage now?

JAYA What is it? What happened?

OM I got it. (*Puts the package down.*)

(JAYA stifles a sob.)

MA What? Say that again?

OM I got it. I got the job.

MA Oh! Say it again! Say the blessed words again! Never stop saying it! 'I – have – got – the – job!' Ah my soul, my heartbeat! Come, kiss me! Let me hold you, fondle your ears! Why am I surprised? You deserve every success.

OM Yes. It was quite easy, in the end.

MA (*to JAYA*) Bring him a glass of milk! Bring him two glasses! Come here, my darling boy! My only delight! Let your old mother hug you to her belly!

OM There were six thousand men –

MA Six thousand! Waiting in the sun!

OM No. Inside a building like a big machine. They had – like iron bars – snaking around and around. And everywhere there were guards –

MA Police, you mean?

OM You'll see them for yourself any minute – they're coming –

JAYA Right now?

OM They have to check. To set it all up.

MA Set what all up?

JAYA You mean it's not certain yet?

OM They're just checking the building.

MA For what –

JAYA Better train your mother to tie her tongue down!

MA Hear that? How your wife speaks of your mother?

OM Ma – when the men come, you *must keep quiet*.

MA As if I ever get a chance to speak!

JAYA She can pretend she doesn't understand!

OM Yes, Ma. It's the best way. Behave as if you don't understand, when they ask.

MA But why? Have you done something wrong?

OM There's no time to explain! You'll know for yourself any minute now –

JAYA For how long is the job?

OM They didn't say –

MA And what will they pay you?

OM A lot.

MA Huh! That's how paupers talk – 'a lot'. Listen to the rich. They're on first name

terms with all the leading numbers – hundreds, thousands, hundred-thousand –

OM We'll have more money than you and I have names for! Who'd believe there's so much money in the world?

MA Ho!

JAYA Can we be sure?

MA You met with the top men? They spoke to you themselves?

OM No . . .

MA Pooh! Then you've got nothing!

OM We were standing all together in that line. And the line went on and on – not just on one floor, but slanting up, forever. All in iron bars and grills. It was like being in a cage shaped like a tunnel. All around, up, down, sideways, there were men –

JAYA Doing what?

OM Slowly moving. All the time. I couldn't understand it . . . Somewhere there must be a place to stop, to write a form? Answer questions? But no. Just – forward, forward, forward. One person fainted but the others pushed him along. And at the corners, a sort of pipe was kept . . .

MA For what?

JAYA To make water, what else!

MA Even while moving?

OM You had to be quick. Other men would squeeze past behind the fellow who was doing his business. Sometimes there was no place and he'd have to move on before he finished. Still dripping.

MA Shee!

OM What could we do? Foo! The stench! It was terrible!

JAYA And then?

OM The stench! The heat!

MA But what happened?

OM I don't know for how long we moved. Then there was a door. Inside it was dark, like being in heaven! So cool, so fresh! I too fainted then, with pleasure, I don't know. (*Reliving his movements*) I wake up to find now the ground is moving under me –

MA What? How's that?

OM I don't know. But the floor is moving. Then there's a sign: 'REMOVE CLOTHING' –

MA Naked!

OM So we do that. Still moving. Then each man gets a bag. To put the clothes inside.

JAYA But why?

OM Then – a sort of – rain burst. I wonder if I am dreaming! The water is hot, scented. Then cold. Then hot air. Then again the

water. It stings a little, this second water. Smells like some medicine. Then air again. Then we pass through another place . . . I don't know what is happening. Ahead of me a man screams and cries, but we are in separate little cages now, can't move. At one place, something comes to cover the eyes. There's no time to think, just do. Put your arm here, get one prick, put your arm there, get another prick – *piisshhh!* – *piisshhh!* Sit here, stand here, take your head this side, look at a light that side. On and on. Finally at the end there's another tunnel, with pretty pictures and some music. And the sign comes: 'RESUME CLOTHING'. I just do what I have to do. All the time, the ground keeps moving. Then at the end, the ground stops, we are back on our feet, there are steps. It must be the other side of the building. And as we come down, guards are standing there, waiting for us. And to me they say, 'You, come – ' And that was it!

MA I can't believe this –

JAYA Are they mad?

OM Some other men were also with me, all looking like me, I suppose. Blank. They told us we had been selected. They wrote down our names, addresses . . . and . . . this-that. All details. Then they gave us these packets, told us not to open them and said we must go home, the guards would come with us for final instructions.

MA But what is the work? The pay-package? The hours?

OM I'll be in the house . . .

MA What?! All the time?

JAYA You don't really know what it's going to be like, do you?

MA What kind of job pays a man to sit at home?

OM Oh – there was some pamphlet they gave us to read, right in the beginning. Just to tell us to be relaxed and to do whatever we were told. In that it said that once we were selected, each man would get special instructions. That we would be monitored carefully. Not just us but our . . . lives. To remain employed, we have to keep ourselves exactly as they tell us.

JAYA But *who* will tell us – how'll we afford it?

(There is an excited tapping on the door. A CHILD bursts in.)

CHILD Auntie! Auntie! They're coming to your house! Police!

(From the corridor, approaching footsteps. JAYA shoos the CHILD from the door as she stands by it. The footsteps come to a halt.)

OM Let them in –

GUARD 1 InterPlanta Services wishes to confirm that this is the residence of Om Prakash?

OM Yes –

(Enter GUARD 2 and GUARD 3. They are both carrying equipment which they set down and immediately begin to ready for installation. GUARD 3 produces collapsible cartons that he begins to set up. GUARD 2 starts to install a power generating device after which she will set up the CONTACT MODULE.)

MA Who are these people? What are they doing?

GUARD 1 *(to OM)* We can start.

OM What do I have to do?

GUARD 1 Just listen. Congratulations!

InterPlanta Services is proud and honoured to welcome Mr Om Prakash to its program! *(To OM)* Sir, you have received the Starter Kit? Yes. There it is. Sir: you are directed to open the kit and make it operational after our departure. Instructions are provided within. Any questions? *(OM shakes his head. GUARD 1 nods and ticks.)* All right.

(In the background, GUARD 3 has got two cartons set up. He wears large plastic mitts over his existing skin-tight gloves and starts dumping all the items on the kitchen counter into the cartons.)

JAYA *(to GUARD 3)* Hey! What're you doing? *(Turns to OM.)* See – see what's happening! *(Back to GUARD 3, who goes ahead.)* Who said you can touch my things? *(Tugs at his arm.)* Stop that!

GUARD 1 *(to OM)* Sir: we will set up the Contact Module. It will start functioning in approximately two hours.

OM I – I'm sorry, but I must –

GUARD 1 Sir: *pay no attention!* About the Contact Module, all details will be found in the Starter Kit –

(Meanwhile, downstage, the GUARDS dismantle the kitchen.)

JAYA Who told you to do that! You can't! It's my house! No! Oh! Stop it, you monster,

you beast! Don't you understand what I'm saying? Are you a machine? Answer me! Oh! (*Abruptly she turns away, realising it is useless.*)

(GUARD 3 continues with his job unperturbed in the course of the other events at stage front. After removing everything but the counter top and shelf, he cleans and swabs the entire area, then sprays it with attention to corners. After that he reaches into his kit and brings out a cooking device and bottles full of multi-coloured pellets. GUARD 2 continues her installation without interruption.)

GUARD 1 (*regardless of the commotion behind him*) At the time of first contact, you and your Receiver will exchange personal information. Your physical data has been sent for matching and we are confident that you will both be well satisfied. Any questions?

OM Uhh – uhh – but what about . . . I mean, when will I actually have to –

GUARD 1 Sir: any questions to the information received so far?

OM No . . . I mean –

GUARD 1 Right. When we have confirmed that the Contact Module is functioning, you will not be responsible for anything but the maintenance of your personal resources. Any questions?

OM But what about –

GUARD 1 Sir! Any questions?

OM No.

GUARD 1 Right. All implements of personal fuel preparation will be supplied exclusively by InterPlanta Services. Henceforward, you and your domestic unit will consume only those fuels which will be made available to you by InterPlanta. We will provide more than enough for the unit described in your data sheet, but will forbid you from sharing, selling or by any means whatsoever, commercially exploiting this facility. Any questions?

OM No.

GUARD 1 Good. Now if I can just interview the members of your domestic unit –

JAYA I have a question!

GUARD 1 (*doesn't acknowledge her*) – beginning with the oldest member –

JAYA Your – your man has thrown my stove into his bag and broken it! Who is going to replace that?

OM Not now, Jaya! Just be patient –

JAYA Be patient! While my house is broken up!

GUARD 1 (*approaching MA and addressing her*) Madam: full name?

OM (*interceding*) She doesn't understand your speech. Her name's Indumati. Missiz.

GUARD 1 (*continuing to address MA*) Missiz Indumati . . . Relationship with Donor?

OM Mother.

GUARD 1 Have you understand all that has been said so far?

OM Yes.

GUARD 1 (*His hand wavers. He looks up at OM. A flicker of normal communication.*) You will explain to her?

OM Yes –

GUARD 1 Right. Good. Now – (*he turns*) next relative? (*He sees JAYA*) Missiz – (*he consults the sheet*) Kumar – come this way, please.

JAYA Yes –

GUARD 1 Full name?

JAYA Jaya. Mrs Jaya . . . J. Kumar.

(*MA stares at JAYA.*)

GUARD 1 Missiz . . . Jaya J. Kumar. Relationship with Donor?

JAYA (*in a barely audible voice*) Sister.

(*MA registers a shock.*)

GUARD 1 Madam: please repeat response.

JAYA Sister. He's my – I mean, I'm his – sister.

GUARD 1 Right. Husband?

JAYA At work.

GUARD 1 Full name?

JAYA Jeetu – Jeeten. Jeeten Kumar.

GUARD 1 Right. InterPlanta recommends that those members absent at this briefing make themselves available at the nearest registration centre not later than twenty-four hours from the time of our departure, failing which such member will lose all rights to the facilities provided by us. Any questions? (*He does not wait for confirmation.*) Good. (*Turns to the other two GUARDS.*) Briefing complete, initiate departure procedure.

(*Behind him, GUARD 2 and GUARD 3 have both completed their tasks and are awaiting orders. Hanging from the ceiling is a white, faceted globe.*)

GUARD 1 Officer Contact Module Installation, activity report: installation complete?

GUARD 2 Yessir.

GUARD 1 Contact Module in operational mode?

GUARD 2 Yessir.

(GUARD 2 moves swiftly over to the CONTACT MODULE and points a remote at it. There are musical notes and clicks. A screen-saver pattern appears. The CONTACT MODULE moves, is raised and lowered a couple of times, then switched off again. GUARD 2 steps back.)

GUARD 1 Officer Fuel Supplies and Installation, activity report: delivery of six months' fuel supplies for family of four complete?

GUARD 3 Yessir.

GUARD 1 Good. Proceed with departure.

(GUARD 2 and GUARD 3 station themselves by the door.)

GUARD 1 (approaching OM) Mr Om Prakash, thank you for your cooperation. I and my colleagues deeply appreciate the contribution you are about to make towards creating a healthier, happier and longer lived world!

(GUARD 1 exits and the other two follow suit. JAYA shuts the door once the GUARDS have left.)

MA What sort of job makes a wife into a sister?

OM Don't get confused, Ma. What they write in their reports doesn't change our lives.

MA But what is she, really?

JAYA How shall I cook now? They've taken all our things! Every last grain!

MA Who is Jeetu, now? Is he a son? Or a son-in-law?

OM Nothing's changed! The words are different, that's all.

MA But these aren't words! They're people!

JAYA Are you listening to me, brother?

What are we to do for food?

MA How can my daughter be married to my son? What will people think?

JAYA Tell me, brother!

OM It's in this package. Whatever we need to know.

JAYA Even about food?

OM Even about food.

(Lights snap out.)

Act I, Scene 2

The same room. OM and MA are sitting upstage centre. A mat is spread on the floor and they are eating the coloured pellets of their new food.

JAYA is leaning her head and shoulders against the side of the bed. The package is opened. Its contents are strewn about. There are brightly coloured instruction leaflets, elaborately devised containers for pills and powders and a number of small gadgets similar in size and shape to a slide-viewing device but of obscure purpose.

MA Tell me again: all you have to do is sit at home and stay healthy?

OM Not sit necessarily –

MA And they'll pay you?

OM Yes.

MA Even if you do nothing but pick your nose all day?

OM They'll pay me.

MA And what about off-days?

OM Well. Every day is off, in one sense –

JAYA Why don't you tell her the truth?

MA Isn't this the truth?

OM Jaya –

JAYA Tell her. Tell your mother what you've really done –

MA Shoo! Don't speak to your husband in that voice –

OM The walls are thin. Everyone can hear. When you talk like this –

JAYA Everyone knows already! D'you think you're the only one with this job? D'you think everyone doesn't know what it means . . . when the guards come from the agency? All that remains to be known is which part of you's been given away!

MA What's this, what's this? Who's giving away parts of whom?

OM She's just trying to make trouble –

JAYA Huh!

MA Who cares about her? Wife or sister, Mother comes first! So tell me – these people, your employers, who exactly are they?

OM It's – it's well, actually it's just one person.

MA Just one person! With so much money to give away!

JAYA It's a foreigner. That's why it's so much –

MA What?

OM The money comes from abroad –

MA Really! But . . . doesn't that mean you'll have to go there? Abroad?

OM Ma – no-one goes abroad these days . . .
 JAYA Not whole people, anyway!
 OM I'm warning you now, Jaya –
 MA What's that? What d'you mean?
 JAYA Not his whole body. Just parts of it –
 MA What's your wife saying?
 OM (to JAYA) Why're you doing this? Why're you making trouble?
 JAYA You said it wouldn't affect us – but see what it's done already!
 OM So *tell* me – what? In exchange for your old kitchen you have a new modern one –
 JAYA You call this food? This goat-shit? (*She indicates the pellets they have been eating.*)
 MA It's better than what you make –
 JAYA And calling me your sister – what's that? If I'm your sister, what does that make you? Sister, huh! My forehead burns, when I say that word, 'sister'!
 MA Shoo! Are you a street woman? To speak in such a voice?
 OM You think I did it lightly. But at the cost of calling you my sister . . . we'll be *rich*! Very rich! Insanely rich! But you'd rather live in this one small room, I suppose! Think it's such a fine thing – living day in, day out, like monkeys in a hot-case – lulled to sleep by our neighbours' rhythmic farting! Dancing to the tune of the melodious traffic! And starving. Yes, you'd prefer this to being called my sister on a stupid slip of paper no-one we know will ever see!
 MA Why fight over what is finished? Tell me about this rich foreigner, your employer! Who is he? Why does he love you so much? That's what I don't understand – where did he meet you?
 JAYA Ohh – just tell her, tell her!
 OM We've never met, Ma . . .
 MA What!
 OM He's rich – and old. That's all I know about him. Probably suffering from some illness –
 MA Then why's he paying you so much!
 JAYA Oh Ma! Don't you see it? Isn't it obvious?
 MA (to JAYA) You're so smart that you can hear God himself thinking but I, I need to hear with my ears. (*Turns to OM.*) Tell me, my son –
 OM Oh, you won't understand, Ma –
 JAYA I'll tell you! He's sold the rights to his organs! His skin. His eyes. His arse. Sold them! Oh God, oh God! What's the meaning of this nightmare! (*To OM*) How can I hold

your hand, touch your face, knowing that at any moment it might be snatched away from me and flung across the globe! If you were dead I could shave my head and break my bangles – but this? To be a widow by slow degrees? To mourn you piece by piece? Should I shave half my head? Break my bangles one at a time?

MA (*turns to OM.*) How is it possible?

OM (to JAYA) If you weren't so busy feeling sorry for yourself, you'd have read what they say about respecting the donor –

JAYA Of course! They bathe him in praise while gutting him like a chicken!

MA But why must they come to us?

OM See? (*Holds up a pamphlet.*) Look? In this paper it says that one third of all donors are left absolutely intact!

MA Don't they have enough of their own people?

JAYA And where does that leave you? Two thirds a man? Half a wit?

OM (to MA) They don't have people to spare.

JAYA And we do, of course. We grow on trees, in the bushes!

MA Well. So long as they don't hurt you . . .

(*At this moment, a loud tone sounds. All three react, looking immediately at the globe.*)

MA Hhh! What's that sound? I must wash my hands! (*She gets up.*)

(*The CONTACT MODULE comes to life. It displays a young woman's face, beautiful in a youthful, glamorous First World manner.*)

MA (*She sees the globe head-on.*) Ahhh! Who is this angel?

(*There is the sound of an international phone call about to commence.*)

GINNI . . . Hello? Hello?

OM Yes!

GINNI I see you! Oh, my Gad! I see you! Is that really you? Awwm? Praycash?

OM Yes, it's me, Om!

GINNI Well – hi! That's really great! This is Virginia – Ginni – speaking! Can you see me? How's your reception?

OM Quite good – quite perfect, I should say! Fantastic!

GINNI Wow! Yeah . . . well it's pretty wonderful for me too, you know! I mean, I can't *tell* you . . . how much this means to me –

MA (to JAYA) What's it saying? I can't understand when they speak so fast –

OM No, Madam! It's our pleasure! Our duty, I mean! Anything we can do to help –

JAYA (to MA) She's saying that she's happy –

GINNI It's the most wonderful day of my life! I feel I've got hope, at last! And all because of you –

OM Oh, so kind of you Madam –

GINNI Is it – I mean, can you see me clearly, Auwmm?

OM Perfectly clear.

GINNI Okay – I'm just switching screens here – there we go – I can see . . . oh my gad, it's magical, it's wonderful! I'm really talking to India – this is really happening! And that lady in the pink sarong – is that your mother?

JAYA No! *I'm* his sister!

OM My wife –

GINNI Excuse me?

JAYA (to OM) Sister. I'm your sister.

GINNI You said just now –

OM I mean, she is my sister, you see –

GINNI Auwmm – it says here on your form, you're not married.

OM I'm not. She's my sister.

GINNI You're sure you're not kidding me or anything?

OM Sure, sure, of course I'm sure!

GINNI Because it's important for us to trust one another. I mean, one little slip like that one – and I dunno. I mean, it's hard for me to tell, from so far away –

OM No, no! I'm telling the truth! I swear on my God!

GINNI Okay. I mean, 'coz I've gotta know, you know. If you're married –

JAYA Why?

GINNI What's that?

JAYA Why does it matter?

GINNI Uhh – I'll get back to you on that, okay? Just now . . . lemme see . . . there's two more people in your household, am I right, Auwmm? There's (as if checking a list) . . . your mother and your brother-in-law. Right?

JAYA That is right.

GINNI Just a moment – uhh – Zhaya? (The CONTACT MODULE swivels towards JAYA, who nods.) Is that your name? Yeah – okay, now honey: I can't handle two people at a time, okay? I mean, it's just this dumb camera, you know, can't look at two people at a time, okay? So – I'm talking to Auwmm,

well I can't talk to you as well, okay? I mean, no offence –

JAYA Okay.

OM My mother is also here –

GINNI Yes. Okay. I'm turning the scanner around (the CONTACT MODULE turns) . . . I'm panning across the room . . . Jeezus! It's not very much, is it? I mean – oh! Okay! I see her. Hi! Mrs Praycash? Hi! This is Ginni! Can you hear me?

MA (shielding her eyes against the light) What?

GINNI I said, this is Virginia! I'm – uh, well just look up, if you can –

OM Ma – just take your hand down –

GINNI Look towards the Contact Module! You know the thing hanging in the room?

MA (to JAYA) What's happening?

JAYA Ma – just look at that light –

OM The light! The light!

MA (straightens up to snap at OM.) Stop shouting!

GINNI Ahhright! I see you! Mrs Praycash, glad to meet you!

MA I can't understand a word of what that thing is saying! Is it a man or a woman?

GINNI What do I look like to you, Mrs Praycash?

MA Ehh?

JAYA Ma – she wants to know, what she looks like –

OM She can't understand, you see –

JAYA (to MA) Ma – look up at that light and say what you see –

MA (looks up.) I see an angel.

GINNI (laughing) Ha! I look good to you?

MA Good, bad, I don't know. All I know is I've got to go to the toilet. (She turns around.)

GINNI (embarrassed laugh) Heh! Mm. But – wait! I'm not through yet!

OM (as MA begins to move away) Don't go yet, Ma – she's not finished –

MA Since when did I need anyone's permission to go to the toilet?

GINNI I'm sorry, Mrs Praycash, this won't take a minute –

MA Nothing doing. I'll piss myself if I don't go right away. (She reaches the door.)

GINNI Hey! I didn't let you go!

OM She has some problem, you see –

MA Wait till you're my age! (Opens the door.) Why they can't keep a bathroom on each floor I don't know. (Exit MA.)

OM The toilet is two floors down, you see –

GINNI Hmmm. Your mother's some character, Auwmm. I don't know if I can

handle it. I mean – walking out on me like that!

OM She takes a long time to get there. Old people, you know!

GINNI Wait a minute – did you say two floors down? What about in your house? There's no toilet in your house?

JAYA (*bitter laugh*) Huh!

OM No-one has a toilet in the house. Forty families share one. And my mother walks so slowly –

GINNI Forty families! My Gad. Well I'm sorry, Auwm. But that's shocking. Shocking! I can't accept that!

OM (*embarrassed laugh*) Well – I –

GINNI No! It's wrong! It's disgusting! And I – well, I'm going to change that. I can't accept that. I mean, it's unsanitary!

OM Of course, of course!

GINNI We'll just have to install one in your house.

JAYA What? In this room?

GINNI Is that you again, Zhaya?

OM (*to JAYA*) Shh!

JAYA I'm sorry – but we *can't*! There's no place for a toilet!

GINNI Excuse me, but you'll have to find the space. It's inexcusable not to have your own toilet! Forty families! It's a wonder you're all not dead of the plague years ago!

JAYA There's only this one room!

GINNI Look – there's enough place for a married couple and two others – you! You're married, right, Zhaya?

JAYA Yes, but –

GINNI Then there's place for a toilet. I'm sorry, Zhaya, but there's no way around this one. What d'you do for baths?

JAYA I – we –

GINNI You – you *do* bathe, don't you? I mean, at least once a day?

(JAYA, *overcome by the humiliation, bends her head and sobs.*)

GINNI Hey – wait! No, please! Don't cry! I didn't mean to upset you – oh Jeez – stop, please! Look – it's not your fault, okay?

OM It's all right, she'll be all right. (*He goes over to JAYA and thumps her on the back.*) She's fine!

GINNI Look, Zhaya – I'll make it up to you, okay? I'll send you something, okay? Just tell me what you like and it's yours, okay? Jewellery, perfume, you name it –

OM (*to JAYA*) Come on, now, come on! It'll be all right – that's enough now –

GINNI I tell you what, I'll send you some chocolate, okay? I'll send you my favourite candy and – tell you what? I'll sign off now. Okay? It's been a big day for all of us, we're all tired, aren't we? Auwm? Could you look here for a moment?

OM (*straightening up*) Me?

GINNI Okay – look, I'll get back to you, okay? And I'm sorry about Zhaya. Really.

OM No, no –

GINNI Yeah. Well – the first contact is always a little . . . ah, intense, you know? And I meant that about . . . the toilet, okay? It'll be with you in about an hour.

OM An hour!

GINNI Oops! Time's up – Byeeee.

(*The tone sounds again. The light fades from the CONTACT MODULE. OM sits down, suddenly, next to JAYA who is wiping her eyes.*)

OM My god! That was something! (*Puts his arm around JAYA.*) A lady!

JAYA Not old, not sick, nothing –

OM Oh, she must be sick – or else why spend all this money?

JAYA It's too late to ask questions now!

OM But what can be her problem?

JAYA Maybe there's no problem. Maybe she just likes to suck the life out of young men, like a vampire!

OM Sometimes you talk rubbish –

JAYA At least I only talk.

OM (*holds her a little tighter.*) I did it, all of it, for us –

JAYA (*moving to loosen his hold*) Careful. I'm your sister, remember?

OM (*jerks his arm away.*) Oh! Sorry.

JAYA Me too.

(*Lights fade out.*)

Act I, Scene 3

Moonlit night, on the roof of the tenement building. City skyline in the backdrop. Clotheslines, watertanks, TV antennas and water pipes snaking in all directions. There is a sense of shadowy figures, movements in the background, murmured conversations. JAYA appears, holding a small torch to her face.

JAYA Jeetu? Are you there? Jeetu – it's me, Jaya!

(*Two shadows move away. One shadow materialises in front of JAYA.*)

JEETU Who told you to come? This is not the right time –

JAYA I had to. Jeetu – you don't know what's happened –

JEETU Huh! I know everything –

JAYA So – so you've heard?

JEETU Which part? That my brother's sold himself to the foreigners? Or that you're my wife? The second one is hardly . . . news!

JAYA But you must come – they're asking for you!

JEETU They? Who –

JAYA The guards. They came again in the evening. To install the toilet –

JEETU In the room?!

JAYA And a bath-shower as well, imagine! We have our own water supply now, as much as we want – and there's no place to sneeze any more.

JEETU Or . . . to do anything else, no doubt?

JAYA That . . . there never was.

JEETU Didn't bother us, though, did it?

JAYA And now there won't be any reason for Ma to go downstairs! We'll never be alone in the room again, never!

JEETU So what? If we can shit in public, we can just as well screw in public too – especially since you're now officially my wife!

JAYA Don't joke about it –

JEETU Why not? I joke about everything else –

JAYA My throat bulges with the lies trapped within it.

JEETU Here – let me kiss it –

JAYA Get away! That's all finished now!

JEETU As you wish.

JAYA So easy! Won't you protest a little at least?

JEETU Make up your mind!

JAYA You are all I have, now that my husband has become my brother . . .

JEETU According to you he was never much else.

JAYA Still. He would come to me now and then –

JEETU Maybe incest is more his style.

JAYA No! He's too afraid! Before it was his mother. Now it's this . . . *job*.

JEETU Ahh – forget him! You waste your time thinking of my brother.

JAYA But what about me?

JEETU Why? Now that you have a new . . . (*mockingly*) husband! (*Reaches for her shoulder.*)

JAYA (*slipping out of reach*) Oh you! You're a free-lancer –

JEETU (*laughing*) No! My lance costs money! (*Squats down on a low ledge and starts to roll himself a joint.*) Had you forgotten?

JAYA And anyway – I'm looking for a plough, not a lance –

JEETU Oops – sorry! Wrong number! I can't afford any . . . crops!

JAYA As if I don't know that! And in any case . . . I feel guilty. I feel soiled –

JEETU My, my! Such delicacy! Don't worry – I'll tell the world that I forced my attentions on you – routinely, in phase with my mother's bowel movements.

JAYA Oh stop! You always make such a joke of everything.

JEETU That's all that life is, one long joke. The only trick is in learning when to laugh.

JAYA Easy for you to laugh! What do you care of my needs, my desires?

JEETU I thought I was the *only* one who cared about your desires.

JAYA You care – you care – but not enough! A woman wants more than just . . . satisfaction.

JEETU Ah – get off my case! You women are gluttons for satisfaction – that's the bare fact of it! You cry when you don't get it – and when you do, you cry that it's not often enough!

JAYA I cry because – because you satisfy one hunger while awakening the other!

JEETU That other hunger is insatiable. A man has to protect himself against that hunger or he will find himself sucked dry by new little mouths, screaming 'Papa! Papa!' Little mouths with big, big appetites – oh no! I'm afraid of that other hunger! Mortally afraid!

JAYA I suppose that's why so many of your 'clients' are men!

JEETU Not really. It's just that there are more men with money to spare on services such as mine –

JAYA You should be ashamed of yourself! A man – behaving like a vagrant bull!

JEETU Why? I'm not fussy – cows, pigs, horses, I'll service all – for a price.

JAYA You don't need to sell yourself anymore. There'll be enough money in the house now!

JEETU But not for me –

JAYA Yes – for all of us. For the whole building –

JEETU No. I don't mind being bought – but I won't be *owned*!

(There is a space of silence.)

JAYA *(fidgeting)* Well – I suppose I should go –

JEETU Yes – run home before the agency comes to fetch you!

JAYA Jeetu –

JEETU *(looking lazily up at her)* . . . unless you had something else in mind.

JAYA No . . . no . . . *(She can't face him.)* I mean . . . I – didn't bring any food.

JEETU Ah . . . so we're asking for credit, are we?

JAYA There's no food in the house any more! Only those goat-shit pills and some strange powders. And – and – it's all measured out, you see! I couldn't take a portion without having to explain –

JEETU Never mind. As a long-time client, you are permitted certain liberties. Come here. *(He is seated on a step, leaning back. She doesn't move.)* I said, come here –

JAYA Jeetu – there are other people around!

JEETU Turn the other way. *(She turns her back to him.)* Your left foot up on this step. *(He pats the narrow ledge on which he sits. She rests the heel of her left foot there. He puts his arm up her sari unobtrusively, barely shifting his position, looking steadily up at her. She looks straight ahead.)* Now tell me about this food. I'm told that it's quite tasty?

JAYA *(her voice is thick and strangled)* Yes! It looks like plastic beads but . . . it's *quite* tasty!

JEETU And filling too, they say –

JAYA *(gasping slightly)* Filling, yes. It . . . is. But it's not . . . natural – it's not real food. *(She holds the loose end of her sari around her mouth.)*

JEETU But it must be, don't you think? And healthy? I mean, isn't that the point? To keep us . . . healthy?

JAYA Yes . . . yes, of course . . . but *(she's finding it difficult to concentrate on what she says)* . . . but . . . who knows if it's . . . good for us! . . . *(Gasps.)*

JEETU Everything's good that tastes good and feels right –

JAYA *(she breathes in gasps.)* No . . . no . . . that's not true . . . it's false food – uhh! – like it's a false marriage – Uhh! – false – false. *(Her voice wobbles.)* False. *(Breathes out, shudderingly.)* False . . . life. *(A pause.)*

JEETU *(wiping his fingers on the hem of her sari)* False for my brother, yes. But not you –

JAYA No! All of us. If we get sick, he might get sick too. So we all have to eat this excuse for food and live like virgin brides –

JEETU Good! Now there's no reason at all for me to come home!

JAYA No! You have to, Jeetu –

JEETU Are you mad? When they find out what I do for a living they won't be pleased!

JAYA They've asked for you twice now – they'll cancel your permit if they can't confirm your presence –

JEETU Too bad! My brother will have to find some dummy to take my place –

JAYA Please, Jeetu! Please . . . think of me –

JEETU I can't afford to think of you.

Thinking of you causes too many problems. I'll have to go away –

JAYA What'll I do? You can't leave me –

JEETU I can if I must. Don't worry – your guards will probably have a cure for the disease of dissatisfaction as well – just ask them.

JAYA But why? When there's enough money for all of us?

JEETU Because no employer pays his staff to do as they please. At least when I sell my body, I decide which part of me goes into where and whom! But it's the money in the end, isn't it? My poor brother. Thought he was so pure. But he's like everyone else after all! Only as pure as the price of his rice.

(Lights dim out.)

Act II, Scene 1

Two months later. The same room, but transformed into a sleek residence with gleaming surfaces, chrome, steel and glass. The furniture is largely of the convertible kind (bed-cum-sofa, etc), in keeping with the restricted space. In addition, there are the gadgets – TV set, computer terminal, mini-gym, an air-conditioner, the works. To the rear and right, there are two cubicles containing the bathroom and toilet. The changes are functional rather than cosmetic. In the middle of the space is a low, Japanese-style dining table.

JAYA is sitting by herself, lost in thought, a glossy magazine lies open on her lap. She looks better dressed than before, but not significantly

altered by the change in her circumstances. MA is wearing a quilted dressing gown and is watching TV, upstage right. OM is wearing a fluorescent Harlequin track-suit and sits at the computer terminal. All sport new footwear.

JAYA in Hawaiian sandals, MA in cuddly-toy bedroom slippers, OM in inflatable track shoes with blinking rear lights.

Suddenly OM leaps up.

OM Look at the time! Ma!

MA Don't call me – it's your wife's turn to do the food.

JAYA It's your turn remember? I did it the last time because your program was on.

MA Just hush! It's about to end –

OM *(Rushing over to dining area, he starts to set it up.)* Come on, come on! Ginni will be with us –

MA Better get Bidyut-bai out first –

OM Out? Out of where?

MA Out of the toilet. Didn't you see her going in? She's been there all morning.

OM Why! Who let her use it –

MA She can't stay away from it, she says. Gets cramps, poor thing, from waiting for the one downstairs –

OM I don't care about her cramps! I want to know how she got into the habit of using our toilet at all!

MA Who knows what happens when my back is turned?

JAYA Huh! The Empress of the Bath-house herself! *(To OM)* If your mother had her way, half this building would be bathing up here. But how would you know? You never bother to talk to us any more!

MA We have so much! Can't we share a little at least? As it is, my former friends tell me I've put on airs –

OM Ma, I've told you. When we have our own place, that'll be another thing – but now, when we're still struggling –

(At this moment there is the sound of the flush. BIDYUT-BAI comes out of the cubicle, trying to look inconspicuous.)

BIDYUT-BAI Oh . . . I hope I'm not intruding –

OM I'm sorry, Auntie – but who invited you to use our toilet?

BIDYUT-BAI No, no! Please! I was just passing this way –

OM But you used our toilet, didn't you?

BIDYUT-BAI Toilet? What toilet? Is there a toilet in this room? My! That must be a wonder! May I see it?

OM Oh just go on, go on!

MA How can she go on when the door's been barricaded?

OM She's your friend, you can let her out yourself.

MA But I'm watching my program –

JAYA Your eyes'll be stuck to that screen from staring at it twenty-four hours of the day!

MA But why can't our busy body open it? Worn out from the tension of doing nothing, I suppose?

BIDYUT-BAI Is anyone going to let me out?

JAYA Oh! For god's sake! *(Gets up.)* I might as well apply for a job as a doorkeeper!

MA And you'd make a bad one –

(The warning tone sounds.)

OM Oh my God – Ginni's call-sound!

JAYA *(struggling to open the door)* Tell her it's because your mother can't control her generosity –

MA See how your sister insults me! Her own mother!

OM Hurry up! Hurry up!

JAYA *(Throws the door open – BIDYUT-BAI wriggles past her and out.)* All right, all right. *(Slams the door shut. OM is almost done setting the table up.)* Anyway it only takes a few minutes –

OM *(sitting down, as JAYA brings a few things from the 'kitchen' area)* You know how she hates it when we're late to eat!

JAYA Tell your mother to come along –

MA Shh! Shh!

JAYA *(sitting down)* One of these days, when this dream comes to an end, it'll be because you were too busy watching your damned TV –

OM It isn't going to end –

(The warning tone sounds a third time and the CONTACT MODULE lights up.)

OM Ahh –

(MA scrambles to her feet and scurries over.)

GINNI Hello-oo! Guess who-oo!

OM *(affecting a nasal twang)* Hello, Ginni! Hi! Howdy!

GINNI Hey – whatcha doing – eating again?

OM No! We're just having lunch – why don't you join us?

GINNI Lunch! Hey, that's too late – for lunch!

MA No, no, Ginni! *(To OM)* Tell her it is only ten minutes –

GINNI I'm sorry Auwm – but I insist: you must eat at regular hours – okay? We've had this problem before!

OM Yes – yes – you see we just had some visitor – heh-heh – these people, you know! Don't understand what it means to keep to a strict schedule –

GINNI Ah-ah! No excuses, now! That's another bad habit you have, Auwm. You don't confront your boobos. Now – you've gotta learn to control it, okay? You can't help it, I know, it's a part of your culture – it's what your people do when they want to Avoid Conflict and it's even got a name: it's called 'face saving'. But we can't go through the whole of our lives Avoiding Conflict, now can we, Auwm? You do see that?

OM Yes – yes – of course, Ginni! It is perfectly clear –

GINNI Good! That's what I like about you, Auwm! You learn real fast.

OM Thank you, Ginni.

GINNI And now – let's look at how your family's doing – Mrs Praycash? I can see the food's suiting you, huh? You're putting on weight!

MA What's that? What's that?

GINNI And Zhaya – how're you doin'? I don't see a smile on your face!

JAYA (*instantly pasting a smile on*) Oh – no, no! I'm fine!

GINNI It's a scientific fact that people who smile longer live longer –

JAYA I'm smiling!

GINNI But not enough, Zhaya. You see, it's important to smile all through the day. After all, if you're not smiling, it means you're not happy. And if you're not happy, you might affect your brother's mood – and then where would we be?

JAYA I understand, Ginni.

GINNI If I've said it once, I've said it a hundred times: The Most Important Thing is to keep *Auwm* smiling. Coz if Auwm's smiling, it means his body's smiling and if his body's smiling, it means his organs are smiling. And that's the kind of organs that'll survive a transplant best, smiling organs – I mean, God forbid that it should ever come to that, right? But after all, we can't let ourselves forget what this program is about! I mean, if I'm going to need a transplant – then by Gad, let's make it the best damn transplant that we can manage! Are you with me?

JAYA Yes, Ginni, of course, Ginni.

(*From the door, there is now a knocking sound. JAYA looks around.*)

GINNI (*Reacting at once, the CONTACT MODULE swivels.*) What's that? What're you looking at?

OM Oh nothing – just – it's nothing!

GINNI Now – Zhaya – I saw you look –

JAYA Really, Ginni – it's . . . it's . . . the wind –

(*The knocking sounds again.*)

MA (*loud whisper*) There's someone at the door –

GINNI What's that you said, Mrs Praycash? Someone at the door?

JAYA Oh – for God's sake! She treats us like children –

GINNI What? Zhaya – Look! All of you – I've told you once, I've told you a zillion times! I hate it when y'all speak at once!

JAYA (*now faking a sneeze*) Chhoo! Sorry, Ginni, sorry –

GINNI That was a sneeze! Don't deny it – you have a cold, Zhaya, don't you? Come on, confess!

JAYA No, Ginni!

GINNI Don't lie to me, Zhaya – I know a sneeze when I hear one –

JAYA It was the – the *pepper* –

GINNI I'll have to ask Auwm – tell me the truth, Auwm – does your sister have a cold? Does she?

OM Cold? Oh – no, no, no! No cold, Ginni – it was only the –

JAYA Pepper. It's this foreign pepper. I'm not really used to it.

GINNI Then – why haven't you reacted before this?

(*The knocking sounds again, more like a thump.*)

MA (*looking around*) That Bidyut-bai is really shameless –

GINNI What? What was that?

JAYA Nothing. She was just –

GINNI You're keeping something from me! I just know it – you're all keeping something from me!

JAYA Oh god, Ginni – we are not! Really!

GINNI Yes you *are*, Zhaya! I can see it in your lying scheming little face! You think you're such an cutie-pie, Zhaya – but you don't fool me! Not for one instant! Now *tell me* –

OM (*raising his voice and leaning into the viewing field of the CONTACT MODULE*) No

- Ginni – please! You trust me – see, look at me – are you looking? Would I tell you a lie?
- GINNI We-e-e-ell. I don't know! What was all that about? Why did Zhaya sneeze? You know how terrified I am of colds, Auwm! Ever since we eradicated colds from here, where I live, it's like – like having the plague!
- OM Ginni – it's not a cold. I promise you that.
- GINNI If you get a cold, Auwm, I can't take your transplant! You'll be quarantined! This whole program will go to waste!
- OM Ginni – believe me. I will never risk your health.
- GINNI Though – I guess – they screen everything that comes in. Even if you did have a cold, they'd never let your organs through –
- OM I live only for your benefit. You know that –
- GINNI All right, I believe you. I'll make myself believe you. I mean it's been hard to read your faces, you know? You people don't use facial expressions, not like us, anyhow. But what *was* that your mother said just now? It sounded like . . . like . . .
- JAYA She was praying, taking the name of God –
- GINNI Oh. Yeah. Well, I don't know – sometimes I just get the feeling –
- OM Please, Ginni – trust me. I would not do anything to harm our – our relationship. We have known each other only for two months, but from the first day itself, I have felt that you are just like my sister! Yes! I would not keep anything from you –
- GINNI Is that right? You wouldn't keep anything from your sister – is that right, Zhaya? You're his sister, so you should know – does he keep anything from you?
- OM I mean –
- JAYA No, he doesn't. He would never tell a lie. He is pure like fresh cotton.
- GINNI Pure like fresh cotton! Haha! That's quaint! That's really quaint! You know what? Even if I didn't need transplants and if I wasn't so sick and all – I'd get the kick of my life from these conversations! It's like – I dunno. Human goldfish bowls, you know? I mean, I just look in on you folks every now and then and it just like – blows my mind. Better than TV. Better than CyberNet. Coz this is Real Life – and don't think I don't appreciate it! You get to be my age and you really appreciate human companionship –
- JAYA You look very young –
- GINNI What I meant, people in my country, at my age, they just don't have any worthwhile friends, you know? Nothing to hold on to – nothing precious. Nothing like . . . this. I get to give you things you'd never get in your lifetime and you get to give me, well . . . maybe my life. You know? That's a special bond. Don't think I don't appreciate it.
- OM We know you do, Ginni –
- GINNI And now I'm feeling tired, real tired. You just don't know how tired I get sometimes –
- JAYA Is it your illness?
- GINNI I guess you could say so, Zhaya, in a manner of speaking, yes. It's my illness. But now I've gotta go. Okay? (*The tone sounds.*) Byeeee –
- OM Good-bye, Ginni –
- (*Knocking sounds again.*)
- OM (*ignoring the knocking*) See you soo-oon –
- (*The CONTACT MODULE goes dead. JAYA leaps up to go to the door.*)
- JAYA We've got to do something about the door! We can't have people knocking whenever they like!
- MA Oh? Now you're going to have special times for knocking as well?
- (*JAYA gets to the door and opens it.*)
- JAYA Ohhh – no!
- (*MA and OM look up in alarm, as JEETU staggers in through the door. His condition is terrible, his clothes in tatters, his hair wild, covered in solid muck and grime.*)
- JAYA My God – he's come back. (*She bolts the door.*)
- MA Who is it?
- JEETU Only . . . your beloved son, Jeetu. Yes, I can see how delighted you are to see me. Oh – wait! Sorry! I'm your son-in-law, now, right?
- OM It's not possible –
- JEETU Don't bother breaking coconuts at my feet! Yes – your arms are wide open with welcome! Thank you for inviting me to share the comforts of your modest home with me, your younger brother! (*Sits down.*) And yes, I'd love to sit in this comfortable sofa – Ahhh!

JAYA What's the matter – are you in pain?
 JEETU Is it possible to know such ease? It feels so good that it hurts! You know – it's a strange thing with the pavements: no matter how long you sleep on them, they never grow soft.

JAYA You've been on the pavements!
 JEETU Come, come sit by me, my darling wife! Or have you reverted to being my sister-in-law again? Come –

(JAYA moves downstage.)

JEETU Well! No words to express your delight? Strange . . . at one time, she used to fight for my attention –

OM Jeetu – you owe us an explanation –

JEETU I owe no-one anything –

OM Where have you been?

JEETU Careful – you might go deaf to hear the things I'd tell you –

OM But . . . are you here to stay?

JAYA What else? You can't turn him out!

MA Maybe we don't have a choice.

JEETU Ah my loving mother speaks at last! And what does she say? What music does she pour into my parched ears?

OM Stop it! Things have changed around here –

JEETU Really? I'd never have noticed –

OM And the fact is – your permit to live with us was surrendered!

(There is a silence as JEETU processes this idea.)

OM Yes. I'm sorry – you had your chance. You chose to leave. We had to make our excuses to the guards. To explain why the fourth member of the family wasn't here. Now it's too late to take you back in – and in any case, you're undoubtedly a health hazard –

JEETU A 'health hazard' did you say? Heh! That's rich! Me – a health 'hazard'! My brother – I'm not a health hazard, I'm a walking, talking, health CATASTROPHE! Oh, yes! I'm so unhealthy that even my germs have germs . . . yes. My lice are dying on my skull – see? (He offers his head for examination.) They're just lying in little black heaps –

JAYA Stop! Stop it! Why make things worse for yourself?

JEETU Ah those honeyed words of love! How they soothe my running sores!

JAYA What do you expect? You're the one

who left. And now you come back looking like Death's first cousin – is that our fault?

OM We'll have no choice –

JEETU (turning towards MA) And you, my mother? I hear your love for me has been bought for the price of a flush toilet?

MA When you reach my age you'll know that a peaceful shit is more precious than money in the bank!

JEETU Thank goodness I won't live long enough to be rich –

JAYA What d'you mean –

JEETU I'm ill. I'm going to die soon –

OM Oh God –

JAYA Don't be foolish –

OM This is serious, very serious –

MA Of what?

JEETU An overdose –

JAYA Some drug?

JEETU Called freedom. (He sinks to the floor.) I've spent my hoard of years – splurged them all, for a few weeks of freedom on the streets. (Lies flat.) Freedom to lie in the filth of the open road and to drink from the open sewer! Yes. Freedom to eat the choicest servings from the garbage dump – shared only with crows, flies and pigs! Ah, such freedom as you newly-rich people never know! (He is slightly delirious.) But expensive. For all that it looks so cheap, each mouthful of garbage costs a handful of years off your life. And I gorged myself! So I'm . . . gone. Flat broke. Burnt out . . . (He turns weakly on his side and starts to throw up.)

OM Quick – stop him –

JAYA A towel – cloth, anything! (She uses the loose end of her sari to wipe his face. OM fetches disposable towels.)

OM What a mess! You'll have to incinerate your sari –

MA And the carpet?

(JAYA places JEETU's head on her lap.)

OM We have to disinfect the whole room –

MA But the lice – the lice can get into everything – then we're finished –

OM Oh! It would have been better if –

JAYA (stroking JEETU's dishevelled hair) Don't say it.

MA What?

OM How can we keep him! What will we tell the guards –

JAYA We're not going to turn him out.

MA There's no place for him now!

JAYA We've managed before –

OM Ginni won't like it – she'll forbid it –
 JEETU Who?
 MA She'll chuck him out!
 OM She'll be so angry, so angry –
 JAYA (*to JEETU*) Shhhh, don't talk –
 OM Just think of the risk! We've gone so far
 – given up so much and to lose it! All
 because of –
 JAYA Your brother. Whatever's written on
 paper, that's what he really is –
 OM But –
 MA What'll we do for food? There won't be
 enough for him –
 JEETU Uhhhh . . . if I could just have a little
 water –
 (*JAYA wets one of the disposable towels,
 soaks it in water and dribbles water into his
 mouth.*)
 JAYA Don't sit up yet.
 OM It's starting to stink! Ginni'll be furious,
 furious –
 JAYA Look, we'll wrap him up in a sheet
 and keep him to one side till he's better.
 Then when he can sit up and talk, we'll
 just tell Ginni that he's come back. My
 husband's come back from his – his
 business trip –
 JEETU Who's this . . . Ginni . . .
 JAYA Shhh . . . shhh – don't talk –
 MA See how she treats him – her brother-in-
 law!
 OM How long can we keep him wrapped
 up? And what if Ginni finds out?
 JAYA There's no point getting frantic –
 OM And who'll believe that this . . . this . . .
wreck was away on business?
 MA Look how she holds him – her darling!
 JAYA We'll have to fix him up, of course.
 Shave his hair, give him some clothes –
 OM But the diseases – the diseases –
 JAYA Clean water and strong food will cure
 him of whatever he has.
 (*Lights dim.*)

Act II, Scene 2

*The same scene, a couple of hours later.
 JEETU's wasted and scab-scarred body lies in
 the centre. He has been shaved and grows
 cleaner, as JAYA washes him and attends to the
 wounds puckering his skin. He groans
 occasionally. MA is sitting to one side. OM is
 pacing. He and JAYA have both changed their
 clothes. OM is trying to master the emotions
 tearing at his face.*

OM Any minute now – any minute – she's
 going to call!
 JAYA Just try and relax –
 MA I don't understand how we plan to hide
 him –
 JAYA Look at these sores!
 OM How can you touch him with your bare
 hands? He must be oozing with disease –
 MA And he! Her brother-in-law!
 JAYA How can I leave him to rot?
 OM Wear rubber gloves, for pity's sake!
 JAYA We abandoned him to the streets. The
 least we can do is to risk our own skin
 when we touch him –
 OM It's like Ginni says – the curse of the
 Donor World is sentimentality –
 MA Ginni will throw him out – just you see!
 OM Here I am, willing to give my whole
 body to improve our lives – and what're
 you doing? Endangering the whole project
 by feeling up your brother-in-law –
 JAYA Who switched roles with his brother?
 Who turned this family inside out?
 OM All I'm saying is – leave him till we can
 disinfect him at least! Show him to the
 guards – they'll know what to do.
 JAYA What faith you have in them! They
 don't care about any of us, not as people,
 not as human beings –
 OM What're you saying? You don't talk
 enough to Ginni. If you did, you wouldn't
 feel this way –
 MA Oh she's jealous of our Ginni-angel!
 Look at her face. Pinched with envy!
 OM She really cares for us –
 JAYA Oh yes, she *cares* – just as much as
 she cares about the chicken she eats for
 dinner.
 OM (*contemptuously*) How little you
 understand of Westerners! They are not
 small, petty people.
 MA Oh she's just jealous, jealous! Can't bear
 to think of you being inside that foreign
 angel. After all, who wouldn't want to be
 inside such a divine being? Why – it would
 be indecent to object –
 OM Now, now, Ma –
 MA Who knows? Maybe she'll even want
 you for a husband some day – why not? If
 my son's kidneys are good enough for her
 why not his –
 OM Ma!
 MA Why not his children, I was going to say!
 Now that's what I want to know! What a
 miracle – grandchildren! And with an angel
 for a daughter-in-law!

JAYA Huh! An angel who shares her bed with her dinner – now that *would* be a miracle!

OM Would she spend so much money on me, then? If I am just – a – a chicken to her? Answer me that! Do you know how much she's spent on us?

JAYA Never mind chicken – have you seen how their beef cattle live? Air-conditioned! Individual potties! Music from loudspeakers – why, they even have their own psychiatrists! All to ensure that their meat, when it finally gets to Ginni's table, will be the freshest, purest, sanest, *happiest* –

OM I'll slap you if you're not careful!

JAYA Mind that you wear your rubber gloves –

(*There's knocking at the door.*)

MA Hear that?

OM Who is it – who?

MA The right-hand neighbours. Wanting to borrow a bucket of water.

OM Well, they're not getting it –

MA Yesterday they offered me money –

OM Tell them to ask the municipality to increase their supply.

MA I told them –

OM Then why don't they shut up?

MA They told me I'd forgotten what it was like before we got this external connection – they started to scream and cry –

OM Ahh! These people! No wonder foreigners think so little of us! We have no pride, no shame!

(*Knocking increases in volume.*)

JAYA (*to MA*) How can you be sure that it's the neighbours?

OM Who else can it be?

MA Listen carefully. There's a code, you see –

JAYA Supposing it's the guards?

OM Why should they come?

(*Sustained knocking.*)

JAYA What kind of code –

MA Three knocks means it's the next-door-right-side. Two knocks means it's the next-door-left-side –

OM There's no reason for the guards to come!

JAYA What does loud thumping with no pattern mean?

(*Thumping on the door.*)

OM (*looking suddenly grey*) You're right – it could be the guards!

MA No, no! It's the neighbours I tell you!

(*Violent thumping.*)

JAYA It's been two months, you know! Time to collect their fattened broiler!

MA Shouldn't you just open the door and find out?

OM I – I – What about – what about Jeetu? What'll we do about hiding him?

JAYA If they've come for you, they won't have eyes for anyone else –

(*Knocking, knocking, knocking.*)

OM But – Ginni looked fine at lunch-time – she looked perfectly normal –

JAYA She told us it could happen suddenly, a breakdown –

OM But she would tell us herself! Not just send the guards –

(*Rhythmic thumping.*)

JAYA Maybe she doesn't have the strength?

OM My god, you're right! It's not happened so far, this knocking!

JAYA Why not just open the door and find out?

OM I always hoped, you see, that it would never actually come to this –

JAYA A vain hope. Answer the door –

OM A dutiful wife would open it for me.

JAYA You forget – I'm your sister –

MA That knocking's getting on my nerves now!

(*Knocking, knocking, knocking.*)

OM My legs! My legs refuse to move!

JAYA Such a hero, my man.

(*Hammering, thumping, knocking.*)

OM At least she could have let us enjoy the illusion for a little longer –

JAYA It's in God's will, when your time is up –

MA What'll they think – this delay?

OM Another month – another week, another day, even –

JAYA But in the end it would always come to this – the bill collector at the door –

OM Do it for me – please! I order you – you're still my wife!

(*Knock, thump, knock, thump. A pleasing rhythm.*)

MA I'll be driven mad!
 OM Would you prefer to see your son dead?
 JAYA Maybe they just want one of your
 finger-nails – your hair – something
 unimportant –
 OM How could I have done this to myself?
 What sort of fool am I?

(Knocknocknock.)

MA If you don't open the door, I will –
 OM And if you move even one muscle, I'll
 kill you with my bare hands –
 JAYA Your mother!
 OM Whoever opens that door is my
 murderer, my assassin –
 JAYA I'm sorry, I cannot live with this –

*(Thumpthumpthump. JEETU gingerly rolls
 over onto his belly and lies still, as if ready to
 sleep.)*

OM No!! I beg of you – please! Please! Leave
 that cursed door alone!

(Knockthumpknockthump.)

JAYA *(exasperated)* They'll break the door
 down in a moment!
 OM *(sinks to the floor)* I'll hide in the fridge.
 I'll just crawl along here, all the way to the
 fridge and I'll sit there, yes –
 MA *(to OM)* Why are you on the floor?
 OM I'm hiding.

(JAYA opens the door.)

JAYA *(off stage)* Yes? What d'you want?

(There is an indistinct mumble.)

JAYA *(re-enters)* Ma – it's for you –
 MA *(getting to her feet)* What? Already?
 JAYA There must be some mistake –
 MA *(going to the door)* It's very prompt, I
 must say.
 JAYA You ordered something?
 MA Yes. *(Moves out of sight, off stage.)* Yes?
 Yes! That's right! But where is it? You
 haven't brought it? It hasn't come? You'll
 bring it tomorrow? When? Ah . . . Okay. No
 – no, I'll be at home – and – sign here? No
 . . . payment? Oh. Okay. Right. I'll be
 waiting. *(She re-enters and shuts the door
 behind her.)*

JAYA Ma? What was all that?
 MA Oh . . . Just something I've ordered –
 JAYA Ordered!
 MA Something I saw on TV –
 JAYA But . . . how did you place the order?
 MA That thing, the remote – you press some

buttons and you can buy things, do things –
 and they bring it right to the door! But
 Madam wouldn't know, would she! Too
 high and mighty to watch TV!
 JAYA *(as she locks the door again)* But what
 have you ordered? How much will it cost?
 MA You'll see, when it comes!

(Lights dim.)

Act II, Scene 3

OM is lying in a foetal position on the floor,
 stage front. JEETU is sitting at the table. His
 head is shaved and he is wearing OM's track
 suit. JAYA and MA are sitting beside OM.

JAYA He doesn't seem to hear anything I
 say.

MA He's a good boy.

JAYA But what'll we do! Ginni notices
 everything.

MA She'll understand.

JAYA Huh!

MA You're just jealous of her. You don't
 see what a good, kind, generous, loving
 person she really is. It's a reflection on
 you, but of course, you're too fancy to
 care –

JAYA Please! This is no time to be criticising
 me!

MA Who's criticising? I'm just pointing out
 some simple truths.

JAYA Come on, Om – get up! This'll never
 do –

MA Want to watch TV? There's something
 good on in twenty minutes –

JAYA It's so typical. He can't face things. He
 never could.

MA You should watch more TV. You could
 learn so much –

JAYA It's amazing that he got this job at all.

MA On *Happy Families* you can see it, the
 exact same situation. The mother has one
 son and one daughter – and the son gets an
 expensive job –

JAYA Ma – you have two sons!

MA But the daughter is jealous! She can't
 bear to see her brother succeeding, getting
 all the praise from the mother! The poor
 mother was widowed in early life and has
 to struggle – but then one day the father
 comes back.

JAYA I thought you just said he was dead?

MA No, I never! I said the mother was
 widowed – meaning, she just thought the
 husband was dead –

JAYA Oh – it's all so pointless! Any moment now, you won't have a TV to watch!

MA What!

JAYA This whole dream will come crashing down around us! The guards will come and take everything back!

MA No!

JAYA What d'you think – it's your birthright? To have all this water, these gadgets? The moment Ginni finds out what's happened to her little pet, she'll have the place emptied –

MA Shoo! Such dirty lies!

JAYA (*quieter*) And then how'll I cook without a stove?

MA I'll slap you if you talk like that! Why, my son said so himself – we'll be rich for ever and ever –

JAYA Look at your son, Ma! Look! He's been reduced to a cabbage!

MA At least a cabbage doesn't talk back!

JAYA Oh! At least before there was nothing to lose.

JEETU Why? You used to have a smile before. You've certainly lost that –

JAYA Oh shut up, shut up! Who are you to talk! You're just a waster! Drifting about the streets, not caring what happened to yourself, not caring about any of us, but when you're ready to die, where d'you come? To us of course!

MA Don't speak to your husband like that –

JAYA He's *not my husband*! He's my brother-in-law!

JEETU And your lover –

MA What's this?

JAYA Ohh! Not now! Not this!

JEETU How strange it is, to be here. Talking to all of you . . .

MA Not that I'm surprised. Nothing from this slut surprises me.

JAYA Doesn't it matter to you that you're trampling on my life? Doesn't it matter what harm you cause to others?

JEETU When you've lost everything, when you're so weak you can't even eat the cockroaches who walk into your mouth, that's when your life's desire breathes in your ear –

JAYA And? It tells you to torment your family?

MA She always was shameless –

JEETU That I should see you again. You, Jaya. Lying there, covered in shit and dirt, ready to die – *dying* to die! – hearing the

engine, roaring in my ears, ready to take me away – I thought of you.

MA I should have thrown her out from the moment she started making eyes at him – her brother-in-law!

JAYA And then? Some goddess picked you up?

JEETU Huh! Yes. Some goddess! A dog . . .

JAYA What? A dog?

JEETU Came and peed on me. Straight into my mouth, cheeky bastard! But he revived me all right. Lucky for him he ran off – or I would have sucked him dry! Life is a strange thing. When your pockets are full with it, you throw it away like rich whores buying silk bedsheets. But the moment you've emptied your purse, your throat begins to scream of its own accord, like a beggar in the streets. (*He imitates a beggar's cry.*) Help me, oh God! Please! Just another five minutes – that's all I ask – just another five minutes to drink a last cup of tea – just two minutes! Just one minute, one! One . . . *please* God, help this dying shithead one more time. (*Looks at her, reverts to his normal voice.*) That's when I thought of you. I knew you would revive me. (*Shuts his eyes.*) Just the smell of your hair – just the touch of your finger-nails –

JAYA Hush! These are not things to be said!

MA And it's too late, anyway. She's already married. To your elder brother –

OM Who's a cabbage.

JAYA Om . . .

JEETU We don't need anyone. We don't need this fancy prison. We managed before. We'll manage again –

MA What's the time? Look at the time! It's late – Ginni'll be angry at us –

(*From the corridor, the sound of booted steps.*)

MA Listen! What's that sound?

(*OM hears and reacts immediately, by attempting to crawl towards the toilet cubicle.*)

JAYA What's the worst they can do? Take away what was never ours to begin with –

(*From the door, a couple of sharp loud raps.*)

GUARD 1 InterPlanta Services! Open this door, please!

MA It's the guards!

JAYA (*looking blankly*) So they *have* come for him, after all.

JEETU (*holding out his hand*) Come. Let me kiss your hand. Then you can go and open

the door. Tell them to bugger off and take all their goodies with them.

GUARD 1 *(from outside)* InterPlanta Services – we know you're in there! Open up!

JAYA *(raising her voice)* Coming! *(She gets up.)* I might as well get it over with. *(To the door)* Wait! It takes a while to unlock the door. *(Works at the bolts.)*

GUARD 1 *(from outside)* Resistance is useless! We are authorised to break down this barrier if you do not comply with our request in ten seconds exactly. *(Starts a count down)* Ten! Nine! Eight! –

(JAYA gets the door open.)

GUARD 1 Sev– ah! *(Enters, pushing JAYA aside as GUARD 2 and GUARD 3 take up defensive positions at the door, holding a fold-up stretcher between them.)* Right – where is the Donor? Come on, quickly now. *(He plunges straight for JEETU.)* The penalty for resistance is –

JAYA But that's not –

(JEETU, who has got to his feet, starts to back away.)

MA *(suddenly, pointing to JEETU)* Go on! Take him – before he runs!

(JEETU panics and runs. GUARD 1 chases him around the room, while the other two GUARDS stand like goal-keepers at the door.)

GUARD 1 Ah! He's running, is he? I'll show him – I'll show the cowardly little shit –

JAYA But he's not the one you want!

JEETU *(as he runs)* You fools! Can't you see I'm not your man?

GUARD 1 *(dodging around the others)* Always the same story – no-one wants to pay their dues – come on! It's hopeless to run away. *(GUARD 1 catches him. JAYA screams.)*

GUARD 1 There – there. *(As JEETU struggles)* I've got you now –

JAYA Don't hurt him – don't hurt him – oh he's sick! Please!

GUARD 1 Resistance is useless. *(Starts to drag JEETU kicking and struggling.)* We'll have you knocked out in a second –

JEETU Jaya! Uhh – tell them –

JAYA You fools! You maniacs –

MA *(Reaches out, grabs JAYA's ankle.)* Let him go – slut!

JAYA He's not the one you want! My husband is there – *(She points to where OM was.)* There! *(But he is not there anymore,*

having reached the toilet cubicle and hidden himself inside it.)

GUARD 1 Ohh! That's what they all say when we come to take them! *(In a falsetto, as he subdues JEETU)* 'Not me! Not me! It's my brother you want! My uncle! My son'. Huh! Lying scum –

GUARD 1 *(to the other two GUARDS who are now holding JEETU down)* Officer, administer hypo –

(JEETU struggles wildly.)

JAYA They're hurting him! They'll kill him – oh! I can't bear to watch – I can't!

GUARD 1 Officer – I said, administer hypo –
GUARD 2 I'm trying sir – I – *(GUARD 2 holds down JEETU's shoulder with her knee and delivers a punch with the muzzle of the hypo.)*

JEETU AHHHHHHHHHHHHH!
AHHHHHHHH!

(JEETU's body arcs up in a convulsion – JAYA screams – then all is still. JEETU is limp and inert on the stretcher. The three guards get to their feet, returning as quickly as possible to their professional composure.)

GUARD 1 Officers – initiate departure.

(GUARD 2 and GUARD 3 quickly spread an opaque shield over the stretcher so that JEETU is completely hidden from sight.)

JAYA *(in a dull voice, knowing that she won't be answered)* He's dead, isn't he? They've killed him. I feel it in my bones.

GUARD 2 Donor secured for departure.

GUARD 1 Proceed with departure –

(GUARD 2 and GUARD 3 hoist the stretcher up and exit.)

GUARD 1 *(turning to JAYA)* InterPlanta Services thank you for your co-operation. Your family member is about to fulfil the solemn and noble contract into which he entered. We, on our part, offer you our sincerest assurance that we will do everything in our power to ensure that he will come to no avoidable harm and will suffer no discomforts other than what is deemed normal under the circumstances. *(He pauses.)* Any questions?

JAYA Yes! What part of him is going to be removed?

GUARD 1 I'm sorry, Madam, I am not free to discuss such details.

JAYA You're going to cut him up and you're not even going to tell us what you're going to do with him?

GUARD 1 Madam: full details will be furnished once the formalities have been completed –

JAYA And can I see him? In the hospital, the clinic, wherever?

GUARD 1 Security and health regulations prohibit any contact between Donors and their families –

JAYA Why ask if we have questions when you don't want to answer any of them?

GUARD 1 Right. (*Handing her the clipboard*) And now, if you would be so kind as to sign the despatch voucher –

JAYA (*grabs the pen*) There – there – your stupid forms, your – papers – your – questions . . .

GUARD 1 Thank you, Madam. We are grateful for your kind co-operation and assure you –

JAYA Just get out! Take your lying face away from my door! (*She makes as if to push him.*)

GUARD 1 (*moving out of her range, as he continues his spiel*) – assure you that we will do everything in our power to return your beloved one to you in as short a time as possible. (*He leans on the door handle.*) On behalf of our clients –

JAYA GET OUT! (*She pushes the door shut in his face.*)

GUARD 1 (*completing his parting message through the door*) – we at InterPlanta Services extend our heartfelt gratitude for your family's support and compassion!

(*Sound of boots marching away.*)

JAYA (*leaning against the door*) He's gone! They've taken him – and I could do nothing to prevent it!

MA Can I switch on my TV?

JAYA (*yelling at her*) Your son goes off to the slaughter house and you're just worried about your TV!

MA If you watched more TV you wouldn't dare talk to your mother-in-law that way –

JAYA (*coming back towards her*) Oh! So I've gone back to being your daughter-in-law, have I? (*She stands threateningly in front of MA, who is facing the TV with the remote raised in readiness in her hand.*)

MA I'm your mother-in-law, that's your brother-in-law on the floor there, your husband's gone to work at the spare parts

factory. And you? You're just a slut who happens to be standing between me and my TV!

(*Lights dim.*)

Act II, Scene 4

Night. The only difference between daytime and night-time is the spotlight illumination. MA is snoring in her corner downstage and left. JAYA is standing near the gym equipment. OM lies in his corner, on a sleeping pallet near the TV, apparently asleep. JAYA goes to OM.

JAYA (*shaking him*) Om! Om – wake up! (*He does not respond.*) Om – come on – I know you're not asleep – wake up!

OM Why? What's the point?

JAYA We've got to talk. To decide what to do –

OM About what?

JAYA When they bring Jeetu back – when they realise they've got the wrong man –

OM They've not realised that. They've used him instead of me.

JAYA No! No – they *can't* – they can't be that stupid!

OM You yourself said they don't give a damn about us – why should they care about him? (*He raises himself slowly.*)

No. They've used him, take my word for it. Or else they'd have brought him back by now –

JAYA Maybe the part they've taken from him doesn't need to be so special – maybe they've just taken something small, something insignificant –

OM Then they would have come back by now.

JAYA You're right. It must be something bigger. More crucial. What d'you think it is? His stomach? His intestines?

OM Maybe they've found out he's not me and they've just done away with him!

JAYA But they can't just murder someone –

OM Why not? There are no laws to protect strays like him. He's not officially on their records – they can do whatever they like –

JAYA No! I don't want to think of it –

OM – give him drugs and sell him to those game sanctuaries –

JAYA Don't! Oh – please –

OM – where the rich have licenses to hunt

socially disadvantaged types. Yes! That's what they've done with my idiot brother. Turned him loose to run with his tongue between his teeth, the dogs snapping at his heels –

JAYA It's just your jealousy speaking, isn't it? Tell me – isn't it?

OM What's it to you?

JAYA I'm still your wife.

OM On paper, you're my sister. In reality, you're worse than nothing to me. If not for Ginni I'd throw you out onto the streets. To be hunted. What do I care? You betrayed me. Slept with my brother.

JAYA You never . . . wanted me –

OM Wanting – not wanting – what meaning do these words have? Was it my choice that I signed up for this program?

JAYA Who forced you? You went of your own accord!

OM I went because I lost my job in the company. And why did I lose it? Because I am a clerk and nobody needs clerks any more! There are no new jobs now – there's nothing *left* for people like us! Don't you know that? There's us – and the street gangs – and the rich.

JAYA You're wrong, there are choices – there must be choices –

OM Huh! I didn't choose. I stood in queue and was chosen! And if not this queue, there would've been other queues – it's all just a matter of fate, in the end –

JAYA Then why didn't you go with the guards when they came? Why did you lie down like a corpse?

OM It was my fate to lie down in a trance. And my brother's fate to face the knife –

JAYA And me? What is my fate?

OM Of no interest to me.

JAYA How easy for you to say that! As if I'm nothing but a dried-up coconut shell for you to scrape out and kick aside.

(There's a sound, indistinct.)

JAYA Listen – What's that?

(The sound of boots on the corridor, accompanied by a shuffling.)

JAYA Maybe they've come from the agency – with news of Jeetu.

(She runs to the door.)

OM Whatever they've done to him, it doesn't matter. He didn't care about his life anyway –

(JAYA flings the door open. The footsteps come to a halt. The shuffling continues. OM looks straight ahead, affecting unconcern. JAYA stands back, her hand to her mouth. JEETU enters the room, his arms half-raised in front of him, being steered by GUARD 2, impassively. GUARD 1 enters as well. JEETU is wearing silk pyjamas white on white. Across his eyes, and wrapped around his head, heavy bandages. JAYA remains where she is, staring. In the background, MA stirs in her sleep.)

GUARD 1 Donor Prakash, we have no words with which to express our deep and sincere appreciation of your generosity towards your Receiver. You will be glad to hear that the transplant has been a tremendous success and that henceforward you will receive every benefit and consideration due to you under the terms of your contract . . .

(Lights fade out as he drones on.)

Act III, Scene 1

Little has changed in the room. JEETU sits on the floor with his head between his knees, facing stage front. MA is watching TV, wearing head-phones. JAYA and OM are sitting on either side of JEETU.

JAYA Jeetu speak to me –

JEETU Don't touch me!

OM What does he care what happens to us? He's only thinking of himself –

JAYA Jeetu, you've already paid the price – now why not live with the reward?

JEETU *(He lifts his head. In the place of his eyes are enormous goggles, created to look like a pair of imitation eyes.)* This . . . is my reward?

JAYA Jeetu – if you would only listen a moment –

JEETU I won't listen! Because listening brings acceptance. *(He moves warily.)* And I will never accept. I will never live with this –

OM Selfish, that's what he is –

JAYA Jeetu, no!

JEETU I don't need your permission to step off the bus! I make my own decisions –

OM Only thinks of himself. Look at me.

JEETU Yes, my brother! Look at you? Look at you with these eyes that were meant for you? These blind eyes – *(He hits his eyes with his fists.)*

JAYA But Jeetu – if they think you're Om, then we need you! Without you, they won't maintain us –

JEETU I don't care! I'm not the one who got this job – and I'm not going to be the one to suffer the consequences.

OM He was always selfish. Always lived just for himself –

JAYA Jeetu – just wait till we can ask Ginni – she'll listen at least, maybe even help –

JEETU Ginni, huh! Ginni only helps herself –

JAYA No, Jeetu –

JEETU A rich woman who plucks a poor man's eyes out of his body – huh! That's not a woman, it's a demon!

JAYA But Jeetu, without you . . .

OM Just wait till Ginni finds out whose eyes are in her head! Just wait!

JAYA (to OM) Why tell her? If she goes on thinking Jeetu is you then maybe –

OM Fat chance! It's the guards who made the mistake! The moment she sees me here she'll know what happened – and she'll be mad! She'll be furious! She'll probably have the guards court-martialled –

JAYA You heard what they said – the transplant was a success. So maybe . . . maybe *it* is all right. Maybe Jeetu's eyes are good enough.

OM It's not so easy as you think – remember all those injections I had in the beginning? They were to prepare my body, to change it so that it could match Ginni's body perfectly. But now they've taken the wrong pair of eyes – who knows what it'll do to Ginni? And what about Jeetu's infections, all the poisons and germs he's had circulating inside him – what about them? Ginni's scared about catching your cold! What'll she catch from Jeetu?

JAYA But they *said* –

OM It takes time to know that a transplant has been a success!

JAYA How long?

OM I don't know. I'm not a doctor.

JEETU I'm not going to live long enough, either way.

JAYA Please, you can't kill yourself! I don't care what she says – I'm not going to lose you again –

JEETU You don't know what you're asking of me.

JAYA Jeetu –

OM (to JAYA) Why waste your breath?

Neither will he listen, nor will it make the slightest difference to the outcome. What will be, will be, regardless of what we try to do about it –

JAYA But *why* – when it doesn't *have* to be! Why – when all he has to do is to pretend – just for a couple of hours in a day –

JEETU Why? Because I am in a place beyond death. I am in a place worse than death.

JAYA There's no place worse than death.

JEETU Yet I know such a place, now. A bleached and pitted place. Scars and slashes against infinite blackness. No stillness, no dimensions. No here, no there –

JAYA But can you see me, Jeetu?

JEETU Yes. I see you. And through you. And through the floor. And through all the gadgets, and through my brother standing there, a blaze of fried nerves, his eyes like ping-pong balls. I see Ma looking like a red bundle hunched in front of the blue glare of her TV. And you, Jaya? You're just a bunch of bright white lines, no nose, no eyes, no skin. When you open your mouth to speak I see a gaping black hole, like the pit of hell yawning open, ready to swallow me up. Everywhere else, it's just a shaping, sparking madness. And I can't turn any of it off. I can't blink, I can't sleep, I can't dream, I can't even cry. This is what you want for me?

(*There is a silence.*)

JEETU Well? You're not saying anything.

JAYA I –

JEETU Is it selfish to want to end this?

OM I was willing to accept anything for my family –

JEETU Oh yes! And what happened when the guards came?

OM That was different. It was the shock, the lack of warning –

JEETU It was cowardice!

JAYA Jeetu – we've not asked anything of you so far –

JEETU This is no time to start!

JAYA Maybe you'll get used to it in time – maybe they'll be able to improve it –

JEETU Let me die before I'm too maddened by visions to make the effort!

OM Just wait, just wait – when Ginni comes, she'll make all the effort for all of us.

JAYA You think she'll take your side?

OM Of course she will. And she'll throw the two of you out, for fooling around. For fooling her –

(The warning tone sounds.)

JAYA Oh my God –

OM Ah! Just let me do the talking – I'll explain everything.

JEETU What's that? I – I – I *saw* something –

(The second tone sounds.)

JAYA What's the matter Jeetu?

OM You shut up, both of you! I'll explain it – and don't worry, I won't leave you two out of the picture. But if she asks me, I'll tell her –

JEETU Something's happening. The blackness is lifting . . . I can see some sort of pattern –

(The third tone sounds.)

GINNI Well – hellooo-oo! Guess whoo-ooo!

JEETU Ahh! Ahhh . . .

OM Hello! Howdy! Hi, Ginni –

GINNI Hello-ooo? Is anybody home? *(The CONTACT MODULE swivels.)* Auwm? Isn't that you, Auwm?

OM *(running around to get in front of the CONTACT MODULE)* No! No – *this* is me! I'm here! Here!

(The CONTACT MODULE flips up and out of OM's reach.)

GINNI Come in, Auwm! Can you see me? Auwm?

JEETU My God! My God – I can see!

GINNI Sure you can see Auwm! That's what we gave you eyes for!

OM *(screaming)* NO!! It's a mistake! There's been a terrible mistake!

(But JAYA intercepts him.)

JAYA Wait – don't disturb them –

JEETU *(gesturing directly in front of him)*

And that . . . and you must be . . .

OM She's wrong! She's wrong! It's –

JAYA *(holds OM back.)* Shhhhh!

GINNI Ginni! That's right, Auwm – it's me you're seeing 'coz I'm beaming my video image straight into your mind! So you can see me right in front of you, all of me, for once, not just my face . . . well? What do you think?

(JEETU moves slowly around, looking at something that no-one else in the room with him can see.)

JEETU It's – you're – beautiful. Like . . . magic.

GINNI You like me, Auwm? You like what you see?

JEETU Yes. And – and the room! What is this place?

GINNI Oh . . . it's just where I live, Auwm, it's one of the rooms in my little house –

JEETU It's a palace –

GINNI I'm glad you like it Auwm –

JEETU I can't help but like it! Who wouldn't? *(He points around him.)* Those . . . plants! That . . . light! What are those things there? It's . . . beautiful. Beautiful. I've never seen anything like this. Never.

OM But it's mine, what he's seeing – MINE!

JAYA Can't you hush?

OM It's all a mistake! She'll find out and then what'll happen? What'll happen to us?

JAYA Shhh!

JEETU And you . . . is that really . . . you?

GINNI Yup! It's me, Ginni! You look like you're seeing me for the first time, Auwm!

JEETU I am! I mean – uh . . . we could only see your face before –

GINNI Well – now. I'm glad you like me so well, 'coz you know what? Now that the transplants have started, it's time that we talked about the next phase –

JEETU 'Next phase'?

OM But he's the wrong man!

(JAYA holds OM back. JEETU is facing the CONTACT MODULE, which now rises above him and glows white as the rest of the stage lights dim.)

GINNI The next phase of the transplants.

You see, we have to progress rapidly now and I need all your support. Until we reached this platform of contact, we couldn't be sure. But now that we're sure, we've got to move really fast. Are you with me?

JEETU Yes . . .

GINNI Because you have to be willing, for what we want to do now. You have to be really willing, Auwm –

JEETU Tell me, Ginni, tell me what you want. *(He moves towards the illusion he sees.)*

GINNI Ah-ah – can't touch me Auwm! *(He reacts by jerking his hand away.)* Well . . .

you'll have to go back to the clinic and they'll prepare you –

JEETU (*behaving as if he is standing very close to someone, following her around as she moves out of his reach*) You need some more parts of me?

GINNI Well, yes – I mean, that's one way of looking at it but I – I think you should understand that time is kind of short, Auwu, and we really have to get a move on –

JEETU (*He moves his body seductively.*) Just tell me what you want of me Ginni.

GINNI The guards will come for you and they'll request you to follow them away –

JEETU Anything, Ginni, anything.

GINNI The sooner you can go the better it'll be for you –

JEETU Whatever you say, Ginni.

GINNI I mean, really, Auwu, if it's okay with you, I can tell the guards to come for you right now –

JAYA No!

JEETU That's fine with me, Ginni.

OM Ask her what she wants from you.

JEETU Anything you want is fine, Ginni.

GINNI Okay, Auwu, I'm turning this video session off for the moment and I'm going to ask you to wait for the guards.

JEETU You're – you're going?

GINNI But I'll be back, Auwu, closer than you'd ever believe . . . (*The CONTACT MODULE moves high, as its light dims.*)

JEETU (*stretching his arms up*) Don't – don't! Ahh! (*Strikes his eyes.*) AHHHH!

GINNI The guards will come, Auwu, you don't have long to wait – we'll talk again when you're in the clinic, okay?

JEETU NO!! Don't leave me in this blindness –

GINNI Remember to keep smiling Auwu –

JEETU No!

GINNI Byeeee!

(*The CONTACT MODULE snaps off.*)

JEETU Ah – no! She's gone – she's gone!

(*JAYA and OM come forward around him.*)

JAYA Jeetu – do you know what you've said?

JEETU All I know is that I'm going to her – I'm going –

OM You didn't even find out what they're going to take from you this time –

JEETU You don't understand! I was blind! And now I have the chance to see again –

JAYA But . . . it's not *real*, what you see – I – I mean, we could watch you moving like a madman, waving your arms about, pointing to things that weren't there.

(*OM begins to move away, towards the door.*)

JEETU But they're *somewhere*. And that's all that matters to me.

JAYA Yes – but – she's taken your eyes!

JEETU And left me something even better!

I can't tell you what things I saw –

JAYA Really? So much?

JEETU Yes – oh, yes! Of course, I can't see what's directly around me. But maybe they'll find a way to change that.

JAYA You should have asked her –

JEETU I'd not seen her, till just now! I thought she was an old woman! You never told me she was so – so *young*! And beautiful. Why didn't you tell me, Jaya?

JAYA You didn't seem interested – we hardly discussed Ginni at all.

JEETU Well. It would have made all the difference if I had known. I saw all of her, you know! Standing there wearing almost *nothing*! And she kept moving, like this, like that . . . wah! I could have had her, right there and then!

JAYA But she wasn't real!

JEETU She exists. That's enough for me.

She's a goddess and she exists. I would do anything for her – anything!

JAYA Yes. I can see that.

JEETU Don't hold it against me, Jaya – think of her as just another client – you were always good at that.

JAYA Your other clients were only interested in short-term contracts. Not permanent ownership!

JEETU You should be happy for me – and anyway, you've got your wish, now. I'll stay alive, and they'll go on looking after all of us.

(*There is a knocking at the door.*)

GUARD 1 (*from outside*) InterPlanta Services!

(*Before he can say 'open up', OM has thrown the door open.*)

OM Yes! Take me! Take me! I'm ready to go!

(*Several things happen at once. JEETU and JAYA turn towards the door, as GUARD 1 and GUARD 2 roughly shove OM aside, entering the room.*)

JEETU Yes –

GUARD 1 Mr Om Prakash – we have been intimidated of your willingness to participate in the second phase of our transplant service.

OM *(screaming)* No! Not him – take ME!! I'm Om Prakash! Check your records.

(GUARD 3 entering behind the other two, quickly grabs OM and holds him pinned to the wall, struggling.)

JEETU Yes – I am Om Prakash –

OM *(from his pinned position)* NOOO!!! He's lying! A lying, scheming swine!!! He's my brother, I tell you – my younger brother!

GUARD 1 All right sir, if you would just follow us – we're ready to leave.

JEETU Let's go –

(GUARD 1 stands aside and JEETU moves towards the door.)

JAYA Jeetu –

JEETU Don't call me that!

JAYA Don't go – just yet! Please! It's too soon, they've not explained anything – I – we – you'll never be the same again –

JEETU *(He grabs her quickly, gives her a brief hug and pushes her towards GUARD 2.)* You have your husband to look after – he needs you more than I. *(He turns and exits.)*

JAYA Jeetu!! JEETU!! *(GUARD 2 lets go of her and exits.)* What happened to your ideals, your freedoms? Your pride? All gone! So easily gone –

(GUARD 3 has a brief struggle disengaging himself from OM, but he too slips out, slamming the door behind him – then bolting it from the outside.)

OM AHHHHHHHHHH! You've locked us in, you bastards! You've locked us in! *(He roars and pounds on the door.)* You can't do this to us! We've not signed any consent forms! You've not taken any permissions! AHHHHHHHHHH! You've locked us in here! AAAAAHHHHHHHH! And you've taken the wrong man – you'll regret it –AAAAAHHHHHHHH!

(He subsides onto the floor. JAYA looks at the door, too shocked and defeated even to cry. She looks across at MA, who is totally absorbed by the TV program she's watching.)

JAYA Ma? Ma – *(goes to where MA sits)* listen to me! *(But MA is wearing headphones and can't hear. JAYA shakes MA by the shoulder.)* Ma! Listen to me!

MA *(holding one of her ear-phones up from her ear)* What is it?

JAYA Ma – do you realise they've taken Jeetu?

MA What?

JAYA Jeetu – they've taken him away!

MA So? *(Starts to replace the ear-phones.)* He was never here to begin with –

JAYA No! You can't be so indifferent –

MA Tch! Let me be! Why should I care what happens to Jeetu? I'm through caring about anybody. *(She replaces the ear-phones and turns back to her set.)*

JAYA *(for a second she is nonplussed.)*

That's – too much! You hear me, Ma? *(She screams)* It's just TOO MUCH! *(She snatches the TV remote from MA's hand.)* You can't do this – *(smashes it on the floor)* you've got to be involved with what's going on around you –

MA GIVE THAT BACK TO ME!

(They do not notice that OM is sitting up alertly, by the door. He is listening to something.)

JAYA *(stamping on the remote)* I won't – I won't!

MA Pig-faced buffalo! Give it back or I'll – I'll shit in the water-supply!

JAYA You wouldn't dare –

MA I'll microwave your entrails! *(She pushes JAYA away and snatches up the remote.)*

JAYA *(trying to get the remote back)* I'm sick of being the only one to make decisions around here! There's nothing wrong with you – you're not sick – or busy.

(The sounds that OM has heard are now audible: boots in the corridor. OM flattens himself alongside the door as the footsteps come to a halt. A pause and the bolt is opened from outside.)

MA Let me go, you barren dog – mmmh! Mmmmh! LET ME GO!

(At this moment the door is flung open. JAYA and MA fall apart. OM almost manages to wriggle out but is pushed aside as AGENT 1 enters. Behind him are AGENTS 2 and 3, blocking the door with something big, on wheels.)

AGENT 1 Madam Indumati? Who is Madam Indumati?

JAYA Om – Om what do you think you're doing?

MA Me! I'm Madam Indumati!

(OM struggles to get past the wheeled object.)

JAYA (to AGENT 1) What is this? Who are you?

AGENT 1 VideoCouch Enterprises, Ma'm – please –

MA (to the AGENT) Have you brought it?

AGENT 1 Yes, Ma'm.

(AGENT 2 and AGENT 3 push a long gleaming case into the room. OM tries to go out of the door, but JAYA gets there before him. She closes the door and stands in front of it, daring OM to push her aside. He considers the possibility, but ultimately withdraws. Meanwhile AGENT 2 and AGENT 3 set up the VideoCouch. It is reminiscent of Tutankhamen's sarcophagus, encrusted with electronic dials and circuitry in the place of jewels. The AGENTS manoeuvre it into the centre of the room, move the dining platform aside, and install the device in its place.)

AGENT 1 (to MA) Please, Ma'm, sign here – JAYA Ma – who are these people? What's going on?

MA (to the AGENT) How about this insti – instig – ?

AGENT 1 Installation. Just sign this form, Ma'm, to confirm receipt of the unit.

MA (taking the form and the pen) How do I know you won't just run away after I've signed this?

AGENT 1 As you wish, Ma'm. (To the other two AGENTS) Proceed with installation.

(The other two AGENTS open the case, revealing an equally ornate interior, filled with tubes, switches, circuitry. Inside are a number of containers. AGENTS 2 and 3 set about attaching the containers to various parts of the case while AGENT 1 explains to MA.)

AGENT 1 This is the SuperDeluxe VideoCouch model XL 5000! We are certain it will provide you, our valued customer, with every satisfaction! This is the nourishment panel – the hydration filter –

JAYA (goes to AGENT 1) Stop this at once! Explain to me what's going on!

AGENT 1 Ma'm –

MA (to JAYA) Can't you shut up? It's my VideoCouch! It's what I ordered the other day!

JAYA But –

AGENT 1 Ma'm –

MA (to the AGENT) Proceed!

AGENT 1 Uhh – This is the SuperDeluxe VideoCouch model XL 5000! We are certain it will provide you, our valued customer, with every satisfaction! This is the organic-input interface – the hydration filter – the pangrometer! Here you see the Lexus Phantasticon which is programmed to receive seven hundred and fifty video channels from all over the world! There are ten modes, seventeen frequencies, three sub-strate couplers, extra-sensory feedback impulses and cross-net capturing facilities! All media access – satellite, bio-tenna, visitelly and radiogonad. Manual control panel, neuro-stimulator and full-body processing capacities – all other queries will be answered on-line from within the VideoCouch self-training program. (He ends abruptly.) Any questions, Ma'm?

MA Hanh?

AGENT 1 Ma'm – if you sign the delivery voucher we can complete installation –

MA But I haven't understood a word you've said.

JAYA Ma – You MUST explain what this is about.

MA (to the AGENT) If I sign this . . . no-one can take it from me, can they?

AGENT 1 No, Ma'm.

MA And your people won't go till I've got into it? (She signs the voucher and hands it back, not glancing at the many pages of forms.)

AGENT 1 No, Ma'm – thank you, Ma'm – If you'll just come this way, Ma'm –

(The other two AGENTS have attached a power-line to the unit and at this moment activate the system. It twinkles with small LCDs. It looks like a tiny space-module.

AGENT 2 delinks the power connection and the lights continue to twinkle. She detaches the cable from the couch.)

COUCH (A fruity voice issues from within the VideoCouch.) Welcome to Video Paradiso! You will not regret your choice! Please ask our authorised representative to settle you into your customised, contour-gel, fully automated video-chamber! (Appropriate music plays.)

(As the COUCH begins speaking, MA is helped into it by the AGENTS. She lies down and the AGENTS huddle around her, connecting her up to various pouches and tubes. They do this

very quickly and she gasps and grunts once or twice. There is a breathing mask on her face. Soon they are ready to close the lid.)

COUCH Thank you for being co-operative! Your fully automatic Video Paradiso unit is now ready for operation! Just relax and let your guide show you the way to an experience of ultimate bliss.

(The AGENTS shut the lid, seal the edges and lock them. They work extremely fast. The muted sound of the COUCH's voice continues but becomes a constant unintelligible background hum.)

JAYA But – how will she breathe?

AGENT 1 Ma'm – it's a total-comfort unit
Ma'm –

JAYA Won't she have to – to –

AGENT 1 We have a full recycling and bio-feed-in processor! Your relative will have no further need of the outside world from now 'til – *(he coughs)* 'til she chooses to delink.

JAYA Does she – how will she –

AGENT 1 *(smoothly)* Everything is now in the customer's operation, Ma'm – the unit is fully self-sufficient.

JAYA Won't I have to switch it on or off? No food? No water?

AGENT 1 Total self-sufficiency, Ma'm! There is nothing to be done!

(The other two AGENTS are ready to leave.)

AGENT 1 Ma'm – installation is complete.

JAYA No – wait – who's paying for this thing?

AGENT 1 Debited from the customer's InterPlanta account Ma'm – *(he brings out his card)* but in case you have any queries Ma'm, please get in touch with our local representative. *(He hands her the card, turns and leaves the room.)*

JAYA No – you've not explained anything – what happens if there's a malfunction?

(But there is no-one to answer her. JAYA looks around for OM. She sees that he has just about finished tying a bundle together. She goes to him.)

JAYA Om?

OM I'm going. Back to InterPlanta. Don't try and stop me.

JAYA Ohh . . . let it be now. They've taken Jeetu and there's nothing we can do about it.

OM No! They'll see their mistake if I go there myself. It's my only chance. What's left for me here? *(He picks up the bundle.)* I'll go to them. They took me once, they'll take me again. *(Dusts off his clothes, smartens up.)* I'm sure they will.

JAYA You . . . you're leaving me?

OM Not alone. Ma's still there. *(He gestures in the direction of the couch.)* And you've got the house to look after –

JAYA But what'll I do – what'll I tell the guards?

OM Lock the door from the inside and don't open it 'til I get back.

JAYA Om . . . *(She reaches towards him.)*

OM Please! Just let me go –

(OM exits. JAYA doesn't try to stop him.

Lights fade as she slowly does up all the bolts, then comes back to the centre of the room, finally folding herself down beside the couch, looking dazed and lost.)

Act III, Scene 2

Five days later. The room is unchanged.

It is night. JAYA has fallen asleep at the table-cum-sarcophagus. She is looking worn out. There are occasional hums of sound from the VideoCouch. With jarring suddenness the warning tone sounds. JAYA startles awake. The CONTACT MODULE is ablaze. It no longer has any images. It hovers over JAYA.

VOICE *(a rich, gravelly male voice)* Zhaya . . .

JAYA Ahhh!

VOICE Don't be frightened, Zhaya –

JAYA Who are you! What d'you want?

VOICE Calm down, honey, be easy – shh, shhh.

JAYA Go away! Leave me alone!

VOICE *(Abruptly the CONTACT MODULE moves up and away from her.)* Okay, Zhaya – if that's what you really want –

(The CONTACT MODULE moves a comfortable distance away from her. It dims down till it looks like a Japanese paper-lantern. The rest of the stage is in darkness. JAYA raises her head. She looks around warily. There is a pregnant silence.)

JAYA Have you gone?

VOICE No.

JAYA *(Waits to hear more before speaking.)*
Hello?

VOICE I'm here, Zhaya, if you're ready to speak to me –

JAYA Who are you?
 VOICE Let's just say . . . I'm a friend.
 JAYA But I don't know you!
 VOICE Still – I'm a friend.
 JAYA How can you be – if we've never met?
 VOICE I've seen you. Heard your voice –
 JAYA You mean, you're a friend of Ginni's?
 VOICE A friend? Yeah. Sort of.
 JAYA Huh! This is madness. Talking to a
 lighted ball.
 VOICE Why don't I tell you my name?
 JAYA It's not natural, any of it –
 VOICE Virgil. That's my name, Zhaya and I
 can show you myself too, if you want –
 JAYA I don't want to see you. I don't want to
 start thinking of you as a real person, when
 all the time you're just a voice in the air!
 VIRGIL Not just my face. All of me.
 JAYA You'll come *here*? In *person*?
 VIRGIL Sort of. A version of me –
 JAYA No! I'm not interested in *versions*. I'm
 not like Jeetu.
 VIRGIL Tell you what. I'll show you what
 I look like. Then you decide –
 JAYA No! I'll never pluck my eyes out or get
 into a box –
 VIRGIL Nothing like that. You'll see me
 here, with your own eyes –
 JAYA How? You'll send a statue with the
 guards?
 VIRGIL Just come to the Module.

*(The CONTACT MODULE moves until it's
 within her reach. She flinches back.)*

JAYA This? You'll come from this?
 VIRGIL Don't worry! It can't harm you.
 JAYA No, but –
 VIRGIL It's very simple. Just do as I say.
 Reach under the Module.
 JAYA I'm not touching that thing!
 VIRGIL Zhaya, honey, when you see what I
 look like, I guarantee, you're gonna be very
 happy!
 JAYA *(Turns away from the MODULE.)* No!
 VIRGIL Come on, Zhaya, be a good girl now.
 I promise you'll feel better once you see
 what I look like . . . *(When she refuses to
 turn)* Aaahhh, all right, then! I guess I'll just
 have to do it myself.

*(Behind JAYA's back, the CONTACT
 MODULE grows bright, sinks to floor level,
 making clicking, whirring sounds. When it
 rises again, a projection appears underneath.
 A figure is revealed, first its feet, then its bare
 legs . . . it is JEETU. There is no longer any*

*visor across his eyes, he looks completely
 healed. But his expression is unfamiliar and
 his haircut, the skimpy clothes he wears, the
 way he holds himself – all of these suggest a
 transformation that goes beyond mere well-
 being. He stands still, saying nothing, waiting
 for JAYA to turn. His skin glows slightly.
 JAYA is bathed in the unearthly radiance
 emanating from him. She fidgets, knowing
 that she must avoid turning around. Behind
 her the figure crouches down, so that his head
 is level with hers. She can no longer bear the
 suspense. She turns.)*

JAYA Hhhhhh – Jeetu!
 VIRGIL *(The voice comes from the CONTACT
 MODULE though JEETU's mouth moves.)*
 Well? What d'ya say now?
 JAYA But . . . you're not – where's that thing
 across his eyes – he can't be – no! It can't
 be – it can't be him. *(To the CONTACT
 MODULE)* What have you done? It can't be
 him!
 VIRGIL Oh! You're not happy? Don't you
 like the way I look?
 JAYA What is this *thing* in front of me! What
 have you done with JEETU!
 JEETUUUUUU! What have they done to
 you! Where have you gone?
 VIRGIL This is me, Zhaya – don't you
 recognise me? I'm your Jitto now –
 JAYA Oh!
 VIRGIL I thought you'd be happy to see me!
 JAYA How can I be happy with a ghost?
 VIRGIL I'm not a ghost –
 JAYA You *can't* be who you look like!
 VIRGIL But I am, in one sense.
 JAYA You can't be. It's all just another
 madness –
 VIRGIL Why, Zhaya? Trust your eyes –
 JAYA But *you're* not here! And *he's* dead . . .
 isn't he? The one to whom this . . . *body*
 belonged?
 VIRGIL Depends. On how you define
 death.
 JAYA There's only one way to define
 death!
 VIRGIL Not where I live. The body you
 knew is still alive. He was willing to sell,
 I was willing to buy –
 JAYA And you paid him in – in – *(She stops,
 realising her mistake.)* But . . . it *wasn't* you!
 It was . . . Ginni?
 VIRGIL What do you think, Zhaya?
 JAYA Ginni . . . was –
 VIRGIL Nothing. Nobody. A

- computer-animated wet-dream – I'll show you, just a minute. (*A faint buzz, then the voice that issues from the MODULE is in GINNI's cloying tones.*) Hello, Zhaya! Recognise me now? This is what I sound like when my voice is a few decibels higher.
- JAYA (*leaps to her feet*) But then Jeetu was paid in dreams!
- VIRGIL (*standing as well*) He sees what he wants to see. He lives what he wants to live.
- JAYA And he has no body!
- VIRGIL He has a casing.
- JAYA But no body!
- VIRGIL He is happy, Zhaya. He made his choice –
- JAYA I saw his choosing! With his mind bandaged in madness!
- VIRGIL Was it any worse than his life? When he was lying on the streets – was that better?
- JAYA When he was lying in the streets at least he knew what he was! He was – (*She stops.*) But we never told Ginni any of this –
- VIRGIL You did. I listened in to you, Zhaya. I heard every word said in the room – even when the Module was off, it recorded –
- JAYA HHhhh!
- VIRGIL I know that Jitto's not Auwm and that Auwm's your husband.
- JAYA And about Jeetu being –
- VIRGIL Diseased. Yes, but he was more available than his brother. So we took him.
- JAYA And it doesn't matter? It makes no difference?
- VIRGIL Do I look unwell?
- JAYA And you heard every, every thing?
- VIRGIL Saw, too.
- JAYA Why should I believe you?
- VIRGIL Zhaya, *you've* lied to me – but *I've* told you only the truth.
- JAYA They said you'd be old! And sick!
- VIRGIL I am old and I was sick until I got into this young body –
- JAYA They said you were a man –
- VIRGIL And I am! Always have been –
- JAYA But then you *looked* like a woman! You *spoke* like a woman –
- VIRGIL Without being one. Without ever saying I was one –
- JAYA You said you wanted Om!
- VIRGIL I didn't ask for Auwm. He came to us.
- JAYA You said you wanted a healthy body –
- VIRGIL Yes, Zhaya – yours!
- JAYA *Mine!* But it was Om who got the job!
- VIRGIL We're interested in women where I live, Zhaya. Childbearing women.
- JAYA But . . .
- VIRGIL Om was part of the job, but not all of it. We look for young couples, without children –
- JAYA Om said he wasn't married!
- VIRGIL His polygraph showed he lied. All donors lie. They think we need singles, they think we need men and only the very desperate apply. That suits us just fine, 'coz unless they're desperate, they won't do as we say. We search for skin and blood matches. Auwm matched mine.
- JAYA Yet you've taken *Jeetu's* body!
- VIRGIL Jitto is Auwm's brother. He was an even better match –
- JAYA I don't know what to believe.
- VIRGIL We look for young men's bodies to live in and young women's bodies in which to sow their children –
- JAYA What about your own?
- VIRGIL We lost the art of having children.
- JAYA How can that be?
- VIRGIL We began to live longer and longer. And healthier each generation. And more demanding – soon there was competition between one generation and the next – old against young, parent against child. We older ones had the advantage of experience. We prevailed. But our victory was bitter. We secured Paradise – at the cost of birds and flowers, bees and snakes! So we designed this programme. We support poorer sections of the world, while gaining fresh bodies for ourselves.
- JAYA And it works? You live forever?
- VIRGIL Not everyone can take it. We fixed the car, but not the driver! I'm one of the stubborn ones! This is my fourth body in fifty years.
- JAYA Fourth!
- VIRGIL Two were not successful. It hasn't been easy, Zhaya. I won't hide that from you. But so long as I can afford to keep trying – I will.
- JAYA (*She is trying to find arguments for resisting.*) But I've never been with child –
- VIRGIL I know I can fill your belly.
- JAYA (*drops her gaze*) No . . .
- VIRGIL You have longed for a child. Your arms cry out for that sweet burden. To hold it in your arms, to cuddle and crush it with kisses –

JAYA No . . . it was never meant to be! Years ago a seer told me – my stars denied it –
VIRGIL Yet I sanction it, now, I do. With Jittoo's body –
JAYA Jeetu's dead and you're a – a phantom –
VIRGIL Honey, I am real and warm and willing. This body which once belonged to Jittoo now contains a red-blooded all-American man! This body is hot with life and heavy with desire! This body aches for you and to give you what you yearn for –
JAYA A married woman must not hear such words from a stranger's mouth –
VIRGIL But this mouth is no stranger to you, Zhaya – my voice is but the latest tenant in a house that you have known –
JAYA No!
VIRGIL Can you deny the truth that is throbbing in my newly commissioned veins?
JAYA Please – ohh, it's madness you're offering me.
VIRGIL Is it madness to offer you your heart's desire?
JAYA I had stopped hoping –
VIRGIL You can start again. I am here to make it possible.
JAYA But whose child would it be? Jeetu's? Or . . . yours?
VIRGIL This is Jittoo's body!
JAYA Yes but –
VIRGIL It would belong to this body – Jittoo's body.
JAYA But would it be Jeetu's *child*? Would it look like him? Have his voice?
VIRGIL No-one can say for certain which parent a child will take after. It could look like you, after all, have your voice.
JAYA Yes – but . . . (*She extends a hand towards the apparition – there is a crackle as her hand passes through it. She recoils.*) Ohhhh!
VIRGIL Ah-ah! Can't touch!
JAYA Then – how –
(*There is a knocking at the door.*)
GUARD 1 InterPlanta Services! Request permission to make contact!
VIRGIL Don't be frightened! It's just the agency. I can tell them to wait, if you want –
JAYA Wait for what!
VIRGIL The guards will make the child possible Zhaya. It's just a formality, a device –

JAYA Device?

VIRGIL You know, an implant. Something I sent, which they're ready to deliver. And you can take your time. About three days are still within your fertile cycle –

JAYA What are you talking about?

VIRGIL Zhaya, I'd love to travel to be with you, but I can't –

JAYA You who are so powerful – you who can travel from body to body –

VIRGIL The environment you live in is too polluted for me, Zhaya –

JAYA Then you are a phantom after all! An illusion come to mock me – again! (*She tries to strike the CONTACT MODULE, but it flicks out of her reach.*)

VIRGIL I'll take you through the procedure, step by step. It's simple and it's painless –

JAYA (*still trying to hit the globe*) No! The pain tells me I'm alive! I want the pain!

VIRGIL Then you can have all the pain you want, Zhaya – just as you want. It can take the usual nine months if you want, with diet and exercise and medical personnel to monitor you –

JAYA (*She starts throwing things at the MODULE, roaring in frustration.*)
Aarrrrhhhhhhhh!

VIRGIL I'll be with you, all the way –

JAYA You're not here! Jeetu's dead and I'm alone –

VIRGIL I can set it up so that we can be together, go places, anywhere you want – right inside your room –

JAYA I don't want your make-believe travels!

VIRGIL Zhaya we can even be . . . intimate! Really. But I thought you'd like to get to know me first –

JAYA I want real hands touching me! I want to feel a real weight upon me! (*Looks around for things to throw.*)

VIRGIL And it's all possible –

JAYA No! Not without risking your skin! Never! Do you hear me, whoever you are, wherever you are? Never! Never! NEVER! There is no closeness without risk!

(*With this, she manages to get a direct hit. There is a shower of sparks and a crack of electric light. The CONTACT MODULE abruptly switches off, the whole room flickers in purple and blue light. When the light stabilises again, the figure of JEETU is gone.*)

JAYA (*looking up, towards the darkened globe*)
You! Can you hear me?

(From the door, a knocking.)

GUARD 1 *(through the door)* InterPlanta Services! Request permission to enter!

JAYA *(to the CONTACT MODULE)* Look: I've understood you now. I know you're stronger than me, you're richer than me. But if you want me, you must risk your skin for me. Even though it's really Jeetu's skin – I want you to risk it.

GUARD 1 *(hammering at the door)* Madam! Madam! We have an urgent message for you from your Receiver!

JAYA Either that or –

GUARD 1 *(Sounds of mechanical activity at the door.)* Attaching external speaker. *(There is a scraping sound, a crackle.)*

JAYA *(she grabs up a piece of broken glass)* – you won't have me at all!

GUARD 1 Speaker installed. Begin transmission . . .

VIRGIL *(his voice crackles through the door)* Zhaya – listen to me – you can't hope to win against me!

JAYA I've discovered a new definition for winning. Winning by losing. I win if you lose.

VIRGIL Zhaya, this is childish!

JAYA It's your fault. You took everything I have away from me. So I *can't* lose any more! I've got nothing left to lose –

VIRGIL But your life, Zhaya! That's still ahead of you!

JAYA Huh, my life. It's not really mine any more. You've shown me that. The only thing I have which is still my own is my death. My death and my pride –

VIRGIL Pride is nothing. Pride is a poor man's fancy dress –

JAYA And if I let you take it from me, I will be naked as well as poor! You'll never let me have what you have, you're only willing to share your electronic shadows with me, your 'virtual' touch, your plastic shadows – no! If the only clothes I can afford are these rags of pride then I'll wear them with my head held high –

VIRGIL Zhaya – don't make me tell the guards to force the door – if you want respect, then open the door yourself –

JAYA You can't see me, can you? I'm holding a piece of glass against my throat. If you force the door, you will push this glass into my throat.

VIRGIL Zhaya – please! We've got this far – I

love your spirit – I really do. In these months and weeks, I have come to admire you and care for you. Don't let me down now!

JAYA Then risk your skin.

VIRGIL You're being unreasonable –

JAYA Is it unreasonable to ask one who has cheated death, to cross the oceans?

VIRGIL Zhaya –

JAYA I'm bored of this argument! Don't you understand? This game is over! Either you have to erase me and start again or . . . you must accept a new set of rules.

VIRGIL You're not stupid, Zhaya – you know it is not possible to win against me –

JAYA Stupid or not, if I lose my life, I win this game.

VIRGIL You won't be alive to savour that victory –

JAYA But I'll die knowing that you, who live only to win, will have lost to a poor, weak and helpless woman. And I'll get more pleasure out of that first moment of death than I've had in my entire life so far!

VIRGIL Zhaya –

JAYA You still can't see me, can you?

VIRGIL No – but –

JAYA That's all right. I'll tell you what I'm doing. *(Matches her actions to her words.)* I'm collecting all the pills and medicines I can find. I'm going to take the ones for staying awake, until I run out of them. And if I don't hear the sound of your own hand on my door before that time, I'll take my life. If the guards cause me any discomfort whatsoever – I'll take my life. If you do anything other than come here in person, I'll take my life!

VIRGIL Zhaya – this is wrong, this is ridiculous –

JAYA *(unperturbed)* And in the meantime, I want you to practise saying my name correctly: It's Jaya – 'j' as in 'justice', 'j' as in 'jam' –

VIRGIL Zhaya –

JAYA I won't talk to you unless you say it right!

VIRGIL *(pause)* Zh . . . Jaya. Jaya. Jaya – listen to me –

JAYA No! You listen to me! I want to be left alone – truly alone. I don't want to hear any sounds, I don't want any disturbances. I'm going to take my pills, watch TV, have a dozen baths a day, eat for three instead of

one. For the first time in my life and maybe the last time of my life, I'm going to enjoy myself, all by myself. I suggest you take some rest. You have a long journey ahead of you and it's sure to be a hard one.

(Lights dim out as JAYA settles down comfortably in front of the television, bolstered by cushions. She looks happy and relaxed. She points the remote and turns the sound up loud. Rich, joyous music fills the room. Final curtain.)