

Samsara

Written by

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Based on a short story by Scott Alexander

**EXT. PORCH - DAY**

A knock. JACK opens his front door to see a golden-robed ACOLYTE standing outside with a clipboard.

JACK  
Not interested.

ACOLYTE  
Please!

The acolyte shoves a wad of hundred-dollar bills into Jack's hand.

ACOLYTE  
If this will buy a few moments of  
your time.

Jack stands with the bills in hand, flabbergasted.

JACK  
What - huh - how? Do you do this for  
everybody?

ACOLYTE  
There is no everybody. You're the  
last one. The last unenlightened  
person in the world.

CUT TO:

**EXT. GOLDEN LOTUS - DAY**

BACK TO:

**EXT. FRONT PORCH - DAY**

Jack and the acolyte face each other.

JACK  
Great, can I get a medal?

ACOLYTE  
This is very serious. Do you know  
about the Bodhisattva's Vow?  
Before we achieve nirvana, we are  
trapped in samsara - the state of  
unending suffering.  
When beginning their journey to  
enlightenment, every monk takes this  
oath: 'However innumerable sentient  
beings are, I vow to save them all.'  
This means that while even one  
person still cannot escape  
suffering, nobody who is already  
enlightened can abandon them for the  
(MORE)

ACOLYTE (CONT'D)  
eternal cosmic bliss of  
Mahaparanirvana.

JACK  
Maha... okay, and?

ACOLYTE  
So everyone in the world today is  
waiting on you to relinquish  
selfhood. Enlightening you is the  
only thing holding us all back from  
eternal cosmic bliss.

JACK  
I'm sorry.

ACOLYTE  
You are forgiven.

The acolyte holds out the clipboard.

ACOLYTE  
His holiness the Dalai Lama himself  
invites you to a retreat at our  
monastery in Hawaii, where -

JACK  
Nope. Uh-uh. Not interested. Hate to  
break it to you, but some of us like  
having a self.

He begins to close the door. The Acolyte beeps the keys to  
a Ferrari down the street, then tosses the keys to Jack.

ACOLYTE  
You must! Sir, this planet is heavy  
with suffering. For the first time,  
we can all escape together!

JACK  
Well, tell everyone they can all go  
off to Mahabharata without me, I'm  
okay right here.

ACOLYTE  
Enlightened beings cannot break  
solemn vows! It depends on you, sir.  
Eight BILLION people depend on you,  
sir.

JACK  
Look, it's not my fault that you  
swore an oath. If you let that kind  
of reasoning fly, anybody could make  
me responsible for anything. Tough  
(MORE)

JACK (CONT'D)  
luck. Sorry you won't make it to  
Maracaibo, but I don't want to be  
enlightened and you can't make me.

Jack slams the door in the acolyte's face.

#### **INT. BEDROOM - MORNING**

Jack, sleeping in his bed, hears a sound and startles.  
There's a parrot right in his face.

PARROT  
Here and now!

Jack grabs a pair of jeans from the floor and shoos the  
parrot back out the open window. He slams the window,  
starts back towards the bed, then does a double take and  
runs back to stare out the window.

Overnight, the street has been completely transformed. The  
street is paved with stones with sutras written on them.  
The townhouses across the street are covered with flowers  
and greenery. All over, slogans and banners pronounce  
Buddhist precepts and provide meditation instructions. A  
thin, transparent canopy hangs overhead, decorated with  
mandalas.

Jack whirls around and faces away. He doesn't dare look.  
He pulls the blinds shut.

#### **INT. LIVING ROOM - AFTERNOON**

While playing a video game, Jack hears monks chanting on  
the street. He runs around barricading all the windows.

While he's doing so, the video game loses its internet  
connection.

#### **INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT**

Jack opens up MealZeal on his phone to order food. No  
service. He checks the computer. Internet's completely  
down.

He checks his pantry. Kind of sparse in there. Empty pizza  
box in the fridge. They're planning to starve him out.

#### **EXT. STREET - DAWN**

Jack, wielding a golf club, slowly opens the front door  
and peers out. Nobody's there. He shields his eyes to  
avoid looking at the slogans. Loudspeakers play lectures  
about Buddhism - it's sort of like looking across the DMZ.

Jack hurries down the street, hoodie up, eyes down, hands  
over his ears, trying to avoid notice. He goes to the only

store open - the corner bodega - and enters through the side door.

**INT. BODEGA - MORNING**

The bodega now stocks incense, floor pillows, and other meditation supplies.

Outside the front window, there's more of the same greenery as on Jack's street, tranquil and beautiful, although without the same slogans and banners everywhere.

CANDAVIRA (O.S.)  
Is the mind not like a still pool  
disturbed by the ripple -

Jack whirls around to see golden-robed CANDAVIRA at the cashier.

JACK  
Oh, for fuck's sake, Chris, you too?  
They weren't kidding. Okay, look, do  
you have any food in here at all?

Candavira hands him a small tray with rice and soup.

CANDAVIRA  
Just enough for a single day.  
Possessions are -

JACK  
Nope. Nope. You guys think you can  
get to me, you can teach me  
enlightenment against my will? I  
won't do your practices, I won't  
listen to your sermons, I won't let  
a single mantra in.

CANDAVIRA  
There is nothing to teach, my  
friend. Enlightenment stems from  
self-knowledge. Can you prevent  
yourself from becoming aware of your  
own mind?

JACK  
I'm gonna develop a super-efficient  
science of samsara. I'll spend every  
waking minute consumed with hate and  
envy and desire. I'll un-enlighten  
myself faster than you can enlighten  
me!

Jack flips the bird and leaves.

**INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY**

**INT. BODEGA - EVENING**

Jack's shopping for a cushion at the store. BELLE taps Jack on the shoulder. He drops everything, wheels around, and then stares. She looks like a supermodel and is dressed like a vixen.

BELLE

Are you the unenlightened person?

Jack nods. Belle pushes him up against a wall.

BELLE

Look... I have not had decent sex in a YEAR.  
Everyone is just like 'abandon carnal desires of the flesh' and 'real pleasure comes from within'.  
And even when I can rope some guy into doing it, somehow it manages to be ... tranquil! So, uh, are you, are you free tonight?"

**INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT**

Jack and Belle stumble through the bedroom door, ripping their clothes off. They make out furiously against the wall, and then fall onto the bed. Jack pulls Belle onto him.

BELLE

You feel so good... It's like a snake, coiled at the bottom of the spine, waiting to get out. Oh! It's like the snake is made of energy, and the energy is escaping, moving upward...

As she speaks, the room subtly starts to look psychedelic. A divine snake surrounded by a mandala materializes from her aura, and grows upwards towards the ceiling.

JACK

Wait a second. That's from tantric sex!

The snake freezes like a child with her hand caught in the cookie jar, and disappears in a puff of metaphysical smoke.

**EXT. FRONT PORCH - NIGHT**

With a incredulous look, Belle stands up from where she's been thrown out of the house, holding her clothes in front of her.

JACK

Tell the head lama I'm reaching  
depths of Samsara he can't even  
imagine. Every day I spend the  
morning thinking of everyone I hate,  
and the afternoon thinking of  
everything I want to have. At night  
I think of all the women I plan to  
screw.  
You guys think you can get to me  
with these kinds of cheap tricks?  
(smirks)  
Try harder.

He slams the door i  
n her face.

He feels in his pockets for the car keys. They're not  
there.

JACK

Shit!

He races back to the front door, but Belle's long gone. A  
parrot screeches in his face.

#### **INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY**

A knock.

Jack, laying on the floor edging to a homemade porn  
compilation on his TV, ignores it. It's become an art form  
of its own, set to speedcore and designed for maximum  
stimulation; the images go by nearly faster than you can  
process.

He's a lot older now. Everything's a lot older now. He's  
settled down into a routine, made a science of samsara.  
Brooding over past heartbreaks. Reminding himself of every  
time he's been cheated, suckered, or made fun of. Pumping  
himself up in the mirror. Living wholly in desire,  
suffering, and egotism. There's another knock on the door.  
Jack notices it this time, and purposefully ignores it.

#### **INT. GARAGE - NIGHT**

He goes to the garage and carefully polishes his Ferrari,  
then sits admiring it.

#### **EXT. FRONT PORCH - DAY**

Jack pulls open the door ready to head out. He's forgotten  
all about yesterday's knocks on the door, so is startled  
to see the kid standing in front of him, South Asian,  
maybe 16 or 17, scrawny, almost pitiful, a black plastic  
poncho poorly disguising his face and golden robes from  
passersby.

MAITRAYANIPUTRA

Is it true - you are the  
unenlightened man?

JACK

(Deadpan)

Uh, sorry. Wrong house.

He starts to brush past Maitrayaniputra. Maitrayaniputra  
grabs Jack.

MAITRAYANIPUTRA

Wait! I want to learn from you.

Then, realizing what he's done, reels back and falls to  
kneel at Jack's feet.

JACK

You want to what?

MAITRAYANIPUTRA

Master, until now I have lived an  
unexamined life. Going to temple  
every day, meditating, taking the  
drugs, doing the dances. But I  
longed for something more.  
Legends speak of a long-forgotten  
state known as samsara, and of a  
mystery called the Self. That those  
who master these mysteries gain  
strange powers.  
Using the technique of Greed, they  
can attain such perfect willpower  
that they can work eighty hour weeks  
for abusive bosses without quitting.  
Using the technique of Lust, they  
can reach such perfect focus that  
all their thoughts for months  
revolve around the same person.  
I heard rumors that in a far-off  
place called California there was an  
ancient sage who had achieved  
samsara long ago. Please, Master,  
will you take me as your disciple?

Jack processes this briefly, then regains his senses.

JACK

No. You're another one of their  
tricks. Go away.

He goes back into the house.

MAITRAYANIPUTRA

Master! I will wait kneeling on your  
doorstep without food or water until  
you agree to take me as a disciple!



Jack shrugs and closes the door.

**EXT. FRONT PORCH - THE NEXT DAY**

Jack, tired, late morning, is about to step outside for his daily trip to the bodega. It's misting lightly. He nearly trips over Maitrayaniputra, still kneeling in front of the door.

MAITRAYANIPUTRA

O great master, I beg you!

Jack brushes Maitrayaniputra aside again and starts down the street.

**EXT. STREET - DAY**

The kid runs aside him, tugging at his sleeve. A parrot divebombs them, shrieking "Attention, boys!". Jack winces.

JACK

Okay. If you want to make yourself useful, you can help guide me to the corner store while I have my eyes closed and my hands over my ears. And fight off the parrots.

MAITRAYANIPUTRA

Yes, master!

In slow motion, they make their way down the street, Maitrayaniputra leading Jack, fending off parrots.

**EXT. FRONT PORCH - DAY**

It's raining heavily now. Jack, soaked, unlocks the door, and begins to enter inside. Maitrayaniputra waits patiently behind him, also soaked, shivering slightly.

JACK

You might as well come inside and sleep on the couch. And have a little of this rice. Just quit it with this "Master" stuff.

MAITRAYANIPUTRA

Yessir!

JACK

...Better.

**INT. LIVING ROOM - THE NEXT DAY**

Maitrayaniputra's dressed in a fur coat, one of Jack's jerseys, gym shorts. Jack makes a slow circle around him, inspecting him, and tries fitting a cap backwards on him. The ensemble needs some work.

JACK  
Alright. We gotta work on desires.  
Who's the most physically attractive  
woman you've ever met?

MAITRAYANIPUTRA  
I've never thought about women I  
meet that way before.

CUT TO:

JACK  
The material object you want most.  
Not like "world peace" or some  
hippie bullshit. Real physical  
things. Bling? Guns? A giant mansion  
in Beverley Hills?

MAITRAYANIPUTRA  
Celestial jewels?

CUT TO:

JACK  
(Deflated)  
Who pisses you off? Or even just  
kind of annoys you?

MAITRAYANIPUTRA  
Myself, when I stray from the path  
of maximum virtue!

JACK  
Okay, this is gonna take some work.  
Go to the spare room and think about  
the sound of one hand clapping. Once  
you figure it out, come tell me.  
Until then, leave me alone. Got it,  
uh...what was your name again?

MAITRAYANIPUTRA  
Maitrayaniputra.

JACK  
Not anymore. From now on, your name  
is Brad.

**EXT. FRONT PORCH - DAY**

Jack opens the door, and a crowd of wannabe disciples  
throw themselves at Jack's feet. He facepalms.

**INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY**

The new recruits are lined up, standing at attention. Jack  
marches down the row, doing his best drill sergeant  
impression.

JACK  
You maggots wanna suffer?

RECRUITS:  
Sir, yes, Sir!

INT. ???

INT. ???

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

Jack pores over Ayn Rand and taking notes.

INT. ???

INT. ???

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

Close-up of a printer whirling out MSPaint-quality knockoffs of dollar bills.

Jack walks through the living room, handing them out, a whole stack to Brad, just a couple to Sherri, overall unevenly.

JACK  
This is money. It is an important ritual object. From now on, whenever someone wants something from you, you must refuse unless they offer you money. If they don't offer you enough money, you should yell at them and call them cheap. If they offer you too much money, you should laugh at them behind their backs and tell everyone they're an easy mark.

KYLE  
But Master, why do we need all these rituals? Aren't all these intermediaries and traditions only distracting us from the true work of self-transformation?

JACK  
(handing Kyle a wad of bills)  
I will give you \$10 to shut up and stop bothering me about this. Now do you understand?

Kyle nods eagerly, but uncomprehendingly.

INT. ???

**INT. BEDROOM - EVENING**

Brad storms in, as Jack is meditating.

BRAD

There is no sound of one hand  
clapping. You were just trying to  
get rid of me. I wasted almost a  
year of my life trying to figure it  
out, and there was nothing there. It  
was all a fraud and you're a fraud  
and this whole  
(destroying furniture)  
piece - of - shit - ashram is a  
fraud. Fuck you.

Jack looks at him, tears welling in his eyes.

JACK

My son, today you have achieved  
samsara.

Brad stops as if stuck by a train. He tries to speak, then  
tries again, then falls silent. Understanding flows into  
his eyes.

BRAD

You bastard, you magnificent  
bastard. You really did it.

Brad scoops Jack up in a giant hug. Jack hugs him back.

**EXT. STREET - EVENING**

Holding Brad's fist up in the air, Jack marches Brad out  
to the street, where the disciples are eating their  
evening meal.

JACK

Everybody! Brad is unenlightened  
now! That means he's better than  
you! He's going to lord it over you,  
and you should all feel jealous of  
him!

Some cheer, some look bewildered. Jack surveys them with  
pride.

**INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT**

Everyone parties in slo-mo, Jack and Brad really getting  
into it, everyone else trying their best to imitate.

**INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY**

Close ups of Polaroid photos of the first acolytes, with their name and the date that they were enlightened. We're flashing forward through time.

Jack's old now, bald. A new batch of recruits are getting oriented. Jack's mellowed out, now wears a simple suit and tie. His initiation style is now more gentle, meeting seekers where they are at.

JACK

You are already unenlightened. There is nothing to attain. There is no samsara separate from nirvana.

**INT. BODEGA - DAY**

Jack gives Kyle a long hug. Kyle's the last of the first batch to go off - he's helped Jack unenlighten people for over a decade now. He's off to go proselytize in the wider world.

Kyle leaves through the front door. Jack turns to Candavira.

JACK

Nothing like watching your kids grow up, huh?

CANDAVIRA

You're a good man, Jack. How many you sent off to spread the word now?

JACK

I think maybe thirty, thirty-five.

CANDAVIRA

Count me as one more. I'm retiring from here tomorrow. Learned a lot just watching you. Found a reason to be me.

Jack smiles. Candavira hands Jack the regular rice and soup. Jack takes it and turns to leave.

CANDAVIRA

Jack, wait a minute. There's something I've been keeping from you all these years.

He reaches under the counter, and pulls out the Ferrari keys.

CANDAVIRA

You dropped them here twenty years ago.

**EXT. STREET - DAY**

Jack slowly pulls out of the garage, rolls past the convenience store.

Beyond his own street, the world is completely transformed. Stone paths winding through gardens have replaced roads. Pagodas, small houses and carefully tended trees are spaced in a wide expanse of green fields. Monks walk engaged in quiet conversation, or sit contemplatively in meditation.

He passes a golden-robed man sitting under a tree, who looks exactly like Brad. Further on, atop a hill, another monk who looks exactly like Kyle is practicing yoga.

Jack stops and gets out of the car, mystified. He hides behind a bush. It IS Kyle! He starts towards Kyle, and bumps into Sherri, jogging past. Their eyes meet.

JACK

Why?

Sherri's lips curl into a smile. Memories flash before Jack's eyes.

JACK

You might as well come in.

JACK

Look deeper inside yourself!  
Understand your desires!

JACK

There is no samsara apart from  
nirvana.

Jack turns and starts running back towards the car, keeping his eyes glued to it.

JACK (V.O.)

Think of a material good. Focus on  
your desires. Block everything else  
out.

He shuts his eyes. The Ferrari sits alone on a shallow desert lake.

Behind him, a bell rings.

The car vanishes, leaving a still lake under a pale blue sky.