

KSATRIYA: The
noble warriors of the spirit.

Reunion

Diane was working in her vintage clothing store on Canal Street when the first plane hit the World Trade Center. Shunya was walking down the Promenade in Brooklyn Heights on his way to meet his daughter when he saw the second plane crash into the South Tower. Max was still at home in Denver, packing for his trip to New York, when he got the bad news.

All were shaken and a pall was cast over their long awaited reunion in Manhattan. The three had spoken on the phone throughout the years, but they had not seen each other in more than twenty-five years—since they had returned from India. Diane had moved to New York with her daughter. Shunya wound up in San Rafael, driving a limousine in San Francisco to support his family. He had arrived in New York on September 9th looking forward to a reunion of family and friends. His daughter lived in Brooklyn.

Max had no children. He had lived in five different cities since he had returned from India and never married. He eventually settled in Colorado where he painted houses for a living; he also wrote a couple of novels in his spare time.

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Diane wondered if Max was still handsome as she climbed out of the subway at Chambers Street and walked down Broadway toward Fulton. It was a clear and crisp October evening, the waxing moon ascending the night sky, shedding light on the darker impulses of the city. More than three weeks had passed since the collapse of the Twin Towers and the city was slowly returning to normal. The traffic was brisk, making an odd melody in the minds of the

many people who thrived on the urban beat. It was hard to believe that so many had died; the stench that emanated from Ground Zero was a grim reminder.

As she neared the tragic site, Diane began to think that this might not be the best place to reunite with old friends. She was about to cover her nose with a tissue when a grander instinct seized the moment: Diane wouldn't give in to the terror, no matter how bad it stunk. She would rather vomit than submit. She was the strongest woman Max had ever known. In her youth, Diane was also the most beautiful.

Shunya, the oldest of the three, was most worn by the passage of time. He had been sickly for years. His portly belly sticking out over his thin brown belt, his thinning white hair peeking out from the edges of his new Yankee baseball cap as he waddled down Broadway to meet his friends, his appearance belied the spirit that moved him.

The nearer to Ground Zero, the greater the odor. Shunya was likewise inclined to cover his nose as he neared the putrid source, and was also moved by a greater design on life. In a wanton act of defiance, Shunya drew a deep breath and inhaled the tragedy. He had no fear of pain or death. He remained irrepressible in spite of his ailments.

Max was too wrapped up in himself to make a fine gesture. He had taken three Xanax before he found the courage to step on a plane to New York. He was inclined to mute his senses and shut out the pain while he searched for his friends in the crowd of mourners and curiosity seekers at Ground Zero, the store windows and brick walls covered with so many wilting photos of lives lost.

Shunya and Diane arrived at the corner of Broadway and Fulton Street several minutes before Max, at seven o'clock as planned. They were locked in a friendly embrace when Max showed up, holding a napkin over his nose.

"Got a cold?" Shunya cracked, opening his arm to include Max.

"I got life," Max sighed, looking over his dear friends' shoulders at the pile of devastation." And I guess I should be grateful for that much."

It was an eerie site: the smoke rising from the massive wreckage of lives and steel and concrete, the night turned incandescent white by the power of so many spotlights trained on the heartbreak and the dirty business at hand—all kinds of people gawking at the power of divine passion gone amuck. This was not the best place to hold a reunion.

“I guess I’ve seen enough,” Diane finally said, her eyes filling with tears.

“Too much,” Shunya somberly added.

“I just can’t believe the smell,” Max said. “Doesn’t it bother you people?”

Diane said, “I want it to bother me.”

Max took two more steps before he discarded the napkin and was reminded of the spirit that joined them.

1.

It was another time, another place. Another life it seemed, when heroes were born in their own minds, when people dared to be different, when difference was a virtue.

It was 1969. The battle of ages and ideas had already been joined, some left, some right; Max Rild opted for the transcendental. He was young and impetuous, only twenty-four years old, and he wanted to find God.

In India, Max thought, the land of his dreams.

The sky was electric, so vast and bright and blue that it was nearly hypnotic. The earth was parched and desolate, a seemingly endless expanse of shifting sand, jagged rock and cracked, red clay. A long and wispy white cloud straddled the eastern horizon. A cool, steady breeze heralded the change of seasons. It was a beautiful October afternoon on the Persian Desert, but not so easy on the mind.

Max had been traveling over land for eight days: from Athens, to Istanbul, to Tehran. By the time he had left the holy city of Mashad, Max’s logic had become lost in his weariness. The old Mercedes bus screamed at every downshift, plunging ever more deeply into the vortex of timeliness and listlessness. The filthy canvas window shades snapped in the breeze as Max watched his mind unravel in the void.

There were camels and horses toiling in the early morning sun, then vultures picking at skeletons on the hollow plains. There were men at work on the narrow two-lane road, filling cracks in the sand-swept asphalt, then no one in sight. There were rows of white-washed houses curling out of the city, then isolated earthen domes emerging from the desert floor.

There was a book to read, to pass time, then no concept of time and no interest in words.

There were thoughts, projections of the future and reflections on the moment, then memories of a distant past—incongruous images of people and things that didn't really matter to him.

Such was the power of the desert; it sucked Max's mind like a vacuum until the bus stopped for morning prayer. Max watched in awe as his fellow passengers spread their ritual prayer rugs over the sand, faced Mecca, and paid homage to their desert Maker. It was at this singular moment, as the prayer rose up to the heavens, when Max's mind stopped.

His body expanded to include the entire scene in front of him: the people, the prayer, the sand and the sky; for one fleeting moment, observer and observed merged and Max's self identity was erased. He had, inadvertently, entered a stream of consciousness that few dared to imagine, and fewer still would ever experience. By luck, by accident, by fate, by the sheer force of will that drove him across the world, Max had already found what he was looking for.

But he was still so young and driven, so greedy for life that he could not appreciate the experience of a lifetime. Back on the bus, Max wondered if the experience wasn't fostered by exhaustion. Returning to his thoughts, he spent the remainder of the journey looking for the truth that had already escaped him.

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Herat was a dusty old town with sand-blown streets, weather-beaten houses, horses tied to hitching posts, and a lot of surly looking men wearing dirty white pajamas and vests and frayed western sport jackets. Many were armed with shotguns. Others had six-guns strapped to their legs.

Max was enamored by the Muslim machismo, but he was not inclined to spend the night—he was too caught up in the momentum of his journey. As the dusk receded into darkness, he prowled the small village square—from bus to bus, from wooden stall to stall—in search of an overnight ride to Kandahar and a decent meal.

Max settled on a plate of stale rice and beans and the inevitability of taking an early morning bus. He was fighting off a spoonful of flies when a small canvas-covered army truck stopped in front of his table. He didn't see the tall brunette climb out the back of the truck, but she noticed him. Not so tall, but dark and handsome, Max tended to attract the attention of

women.

“You goin’ to Kandahar?” she called out to him in a Texas drawl.

“If you are,” Max said, smiling on his apparent good fortune.

The woman returned his smile and placed her hands on her curvaceous hips. She wasn’t very pretty, but she was sexy: long legs, heavy breasts pressing against a tight, white t-shirt, and a round butt wrapped in a pair of faded blue jeans.

“If you can handle it,” she challenged.

Max thought he could handle anything and figured that he might get lucky with her in bed somewhere in Kandahar. He shouldered his small bicycle pack, paid the driver, a middle-aged Afghani army officer, and followed the woman to the back of the truck. Once inside, Max saw his folly and met the danger. The woman’s German boyfriend was sitting across the aisle from two young soldiers.

“I’m Mary Beth,” the boisterous brunette finally said. “An’ this is my old man, Hans. An’ these two dumb fuckers are Mohammed.” She sat between Max and Hans.

The soldiers smiled, not comprehending the abuse.

Hans was tall, slender and stoic. He welcomed Max with a strong handshake and deferred to his girlfriend's crass behavior throughout the trip. She cursed and rambled and raged at everyone and everything that came to her vulgar mind. Worst of all, she continued to tempt and taunt the soldiers with her sexuality.

Their eyes never left her chest, their guns never left their sides. Mary Beth may have won their attention, but they had the power to gang rape all three of them, put a bullet in their heads and drop them in a few unmarked graves in the sand: who would know?

“Don’t you think the boys have seen enough?” Max finally snapped, fearing the worst.

“You kiddin’? They ain’t seen nothin’ yet,” Mary Beth snapped back, locking her hands behind her head to reveal the fullness of her breasts.

“And it’s okay with you?” Max said to Hans.

Hans said. “She is okay if she can be free to do what she wants.”

Free and dumb, Max thought, leaning back against the side of the truck, wishing he had stayed behind in Herat, wondering what kind of devil possessed these people.

He was staring out the back of the truck into a luminous cloud of sand, when it turned off

the road and came to a sudden and frightful stop in the night.

Mary Beth fell silent. Hans froze. Max felt like running out of the truck, out of his mind, out of his body into another life. All waited in a terrifying silence until the driver ordered them out.

All were greatly relieved to find a shack posing as a restaurant on the side of the road.

“Here we eat,” the officer said, escorting them to a large wobbly table near the front door.

The proprietor welcomed them, while his two teenage sons served tea and biscuits under the stars. Max had never seen so many stars.

“It’s almost unreal,” Max said.

“Reality’s what you make of it,” Mary Beth said before turning her attention to the teenagers and titillating them.

“And she is always making the most of it,” Hans added. The flickering light from a kerosene lamp at the center of the table cast shadows against the walls of the shack as he spoke.

“We meet in Athens. I have no money and no woman. I want to see the world and Mary Beth tells me she can pay if I go with her to India. She is born again to follow the true path of Christ to India and to search for the lost tribe of Israel in Kashmir.”

Max was surprised by the serious nature of their quest, but not unaware of the significance. Among other things, Max had read the Aquarian Gospel wherein Christ's life is marked by two holy pilgrimages to India—before his crucifixion, to take teachings from various masters who prepared him for the rigors of the cross, and following his resurrection, when he returned to India to minister to the lost tribe of Israel in Kashmir.

Now staring at Mary Beth, Max was trying to fathom her crude and dangerous behavior in light of her sacred goal when he noticed the poster nailed to the shack wall above her head.

“You know?” the officer began, tapping Max's shoulder.

“What?”

The officer pointed to the poster displaying a large dagger drawn into the bloody heart of a Star of David. Across the top, it read in English: **DEATH TO JEWS!**

The officer glared at Max before continuing. “You like Jew?” he bitterly challenged.

Max was further stung by his contempt. While he fumbled for an answer, the officer translated the question to the proprietor and his sons.

Hans looked to Mary Beth. She looked to Max with concern. Religion was a far more deadly issue than sex in this part of the world.

“I like everyone,” Max finally replied.

Though diplomatic, the response was insufficient and the tension mounted. Max squirmed in his chair while the officer translated his reply to his Muslim countrymen.

“You are Jew?” the officer pressed, his hand gripping the butt of his gun.

All eyes looked to Max.

I was a woman in love with love. I spent a lot of time at the movies drooling over the dream of having the perfect man. I suppose I was like any other teenage girl, full of womanly impulses, thinking womanly thoughts, thinking I was a woman.

And my mother paid dearly for my disillusionment. Like so many women, my life began when “I met this guy,” when I became territorial by the virtue of my hormones and my mother became the enemy cat: we used the same toilet and I didn’t like it.

When I began to bleed, she smacked me across the face—“For good luck,” she said—I didn’t like it, didn’t believe it. I wanted to hit her back for being so much like me, because she bled before me.

I wanted to be first. I wanted to know more, be more, become more, and my mother stood in the way, always pointing out my limitations: telling me how pretty I was, then counting the ways my beauty could hurt me, would hurt me.

My father didn’t say much about anything. I didn’t think very much about him until I left my husband, and I finally realized that my father was the first man I ever met. I was conjuring up an image of him in my mind—he was a handsome man—wondering how my relationship to him affected my perception of men when stronger men seized my mind and gambled with my life.

Diane

2.

The sun set over the Khyber Pass with grace and majesty. The sky turned pink. The jagged peaks turned to gold. It was an odd and fleeting moment of beauty in view of a long and savage history of a “no man's land” and every megalomaniac’s historical desire to conquer this vital link to unknown ravages and riches going east and west. Men like Genghis Khan and Alexander the Great, who succeeded against all odds and armies. Lesser empires ruled by lesser men, like the British Raj, were routinely and ceremoniously disemboweled at the mouth of the Pass that roared like a lion and writhed like a serpent between Afghanistan and Pakistan,

between the rule of law and the impulsive nature of unruly men, between being and becoming, between warriors and wanderers—and women in peril.

There was a trace of light on the ridge and a veil of darkness creeping over the valley as the wretched old bus came to a stop. Diane Adream followed the other passengers off the bus, thinking it was a brief respite from the long and arduous journey that had begun in Kabul earlier in the morning.

She thought wrong: it was a hold-up. Kalib and his bandits encircled the passengers and had already robbed the bus driver before Diane realized what was going on.

“It is a bandit tax,” Kalib said, approaching her. “All must pay something and no one will be hurt.”

Diane's shock stymied her fear. Her humor belied her tension. “You take checks?”

Kalib laughed and told her not to worry. “From women and the poor, we take nothing. Such is the law of our village. We take only from the men what they can afford, a watch, a radio, a few Afghani. We never take everything, only something.”

Diane was momentarily relieved, if not charmed. “You mean like Robin Hood? You know Robin Hood?”

Kalib shrugged. “He was a great hero, Memsaab, but a very bad businessman. We are not so much like him because we keep everything for ourselves. That is why we are so rich.”

Diane found it hard to believe. The bandits' weaponry may have been costly, but their appearance gave a poor impression: dirty cotton pants and rubber thongs, short black hair and thick black mustaches. The gang looked more like a hungry band of Mexican banditos than rich Princes of the Pass—except Kalib. He was the tallest and proudest of the lot. He had two ammunition belts crisscrossing his stout chest and two pearl-handled 45's strapped to his waist. And he was wearing a pair of new blue jeans.

“If you say so. If I ever see you again, you can take me to your palace,” Diane said, turning to board the bus.

Kalib reached for her elbow and spun her around. “I am sorry to tell you this Memsaab, but this bus does not leave.”

“You mean you're taking the bus?”

Kalib smiled. “No, but tonight this bus will stay here. There is no driving in the Pass after

four o'clock. It is too dark and dangerous.”

Diane turned to the bus driver who confirmed Kalib's story. “No go,” he said. “No night. Tomorrow go.”

Diane was stunned and finally frightened. She was about to protest when she recalled the early morning delay. The bus, having broken down at the bottom of the Pass, was destined for an abrupt halt at the pinnacle of its journey. It was after four and night was a moment away. She was the only white woman on the bus.

Though dressed conservatively in an ankle-length peasant skirt and a loose cotton blouse buttoned to her neck, Diane was the only woman on the bus not fully concealed by a burka—and the sole focus of her fellow travelers' attention. Forty guys stared at her as she took a measure of them: all curious, some lustful, none helpful. Two swarthy Pakistanis had already copped an “inadvertent” feel as she boarded the bus in Kabul. At the very least, she knew they would be trouble.

Diane was imagining the worst and trembling inside when another, smaller gang showed up at the bus and bid five hundred dollars for Diane's pleasure. Kalib turned them away at the point of a gun before making his own offer to Diane. Her long chestnut hair blowing in the breeze, her deep blue eyes filling with tears, Diane was trembling when Kalib spoke to her fear.

“It is not so safe for you to stay here in the night. But if you come with me to my village, you will not have a problem. I give you my word, Memsaab.”

Diane found it hard to believe in any man, but she was desperate. Whether out of instinct, stupidity or despair, she chose the lesser of two or more evils and followed Kalib down into the valley to his small village.

* * *

Perched on the edge of a treacherous cliff, the entire village consisted of several wooden shacks, a few dung huts and one old stone house. Sitting alone on the floor in a dark corner of a cold stone room, Diane sipped a cup of hot tea and fought to maintain her composure. She was quietly terrified and began to regret her decision.

While she sulked in the dark, the bandits commanded the light at the center of the room.

They ate goat and drank whiskey under the dim glare of a kerosene lamp. Kalib invited Diane to join them at the table, but she refused. The food was too greasy. The smell was nauseating. The men were intimidating. Now sick with remorse, Diane wished that she were back in Kabul with her husband, David. He was a junkie, and she enabled him to go to Afghanistan, where drugs were plentiful and life was cheap, so that she might reach India and find herself.

She had been thirteen years old, at home alone in The Bronx on a rainy Saturday afternoon, when she saw an old movie on television she would never forget: *The Razor's Edge*, a love story with an odd twist. Being beautiful, Diane strongly identified with Isabelle, the ravishing debutante, and she could not understand how Larry chose to marry Sophie, the unattractive and long-suffering alcoholic.

Diane finally read the Somerset Maugham book in college and began to understand that there was much more to true love than romance: there was the journey to the East and the quest for self-knowledge.

Marrying David upon graduating college was a terrible mistake. Diane had had a promising career as a metal sculptor when she fell in love with his habit of Sabotaging himself. And she had become lost in the process of continuing to Sabotage herself—until David tried to sell her sex for ten vials of morphine in Kabul.

“All you have to do is take off your clothes and let the guy watch you and play with himself,” David said.

Diane said goodbye. She waited until David was asleep before she left Kabul with half their money and David’s surname, Adream. The only beautiful thing he ever gave me, she thought, still clinging to the darkness while Kalib and his men engaged in a rowdy game of midnight poker, hardly aware of the great beauty in hiding—she hoped.

Diane was an unusual beauty with long, thick wavy hair, big blue eyes, high cheek bones, a strong aquiline nose and bee-stung lips: it was this odd combination of features that made Diane an uncommonly beautiful and desirable woman. She had good reason to fear for her safety.

Time passed very slowly until a heated argument broke out at the table between Kalib and two of his men, and Diane was asked to settle it.

“They say I am a cheat,” Kalib told Diane, standing over her in the dark.

“And you're not, right?”

Kalib clenched his fists. “It is not me who deals the cards,” he snapped. “It is the will of Allah.”

Diane cowered beneath his anger and said that she believed him.

But Kalib wanted more. He reached for her hand and said, “If you believe me then you will show these non-believers that the will of Allah is with me tonight.”

Kalib helped Diane to her feet and led her across the room to the table.

“Sit here in my seat and we will show them!” he declared.

Diane sat and stared at the combined show of riches on the table—rubies, diamonds, gold, and assorted currencies surpassing fifty thousand dollars—all piled in front of the players staring back at her.

Diane was astonished. “It's real, isn't it? You really are rich?”

Kalib shrugged. “All gifts are the grace of Allah.”

“I don't understand. Where did you get all this money? And these stones?”

Diane picked up a stunning ruby earring and studied it in the lamp light. The stone was unusually red and embedded in a white gold fleur de lis.

Kalib laughed and pointed across the table at his men. “From them I get everything. And now you will play for me and win more from them.”

Diane lodged a weak protest before Kalib ordered one of his men to deal a hand of seven card stud. Two minutes later Diane Adream had a pair of nines showing and nothing in the hole. She was facing a pair of jacks, a pair of kings, a probable rape, and possible death. While Kalib's men peered at their seventh and final “down” card, Diane looked up into Kalib's coal-black eyes and shuddered.

“You do not look at this last card. It is a card of faith!” Kalib declared. “It is the will of Allah.”

Diane gripped the edge of the table in an effort to steady her nerve. “How much do I bet?”

“Everything,” Kalib demanded. “You bet everything.”

Diane burst into a cold sweat as she pushed more than ten thousand dollars in cash and jewels into the center of the table. She was on the verge of tears when she posed her last two

fateful questions to Kalib: “What happens if I lose?”

Kalib twirled the edge of his mustache and responded evenly. “Allah can be merciful, but my men will want vengeance.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that you will dance for them.”

Naked, she thought.

I liked being an altar boy.

I liked people, and I liked money, and I liked basketball. But I didn't like losing.

I loved my mother. I was only sixteen when she died. And I imagine that I must have been in a lot of pain, but I didn't really feel it so much. I didn't want to feel it because I just wanted to be like all the other kids.

But I wasn't.

I liked my father, and I knew he liked me, but we didn't talk about our feelings that much—if at all. We weren't affectionate. I guess the affection died with my mother.

I was lonely a lot inside, but I never showed it outside. I just couldn't because it didn't fit into what was expected of me.

Then again, a whole lot of shattered expectations turned me into a life of crime in the name of adventure.

I didn't like myself so much.

Shunya

3.

The mighty old behemoth hurled through the night, spewing smoke and steam in its terrific wake. The plains of Northern India shook beneath its immense weight. No matter how hard he tried, Shunya couldn't sleep, his mind racing the train to Mota Hari, a small town south of Nepal, where his good friend, Delhi Dave had fallen on hard times. Among other things, Delhi Dave had been caught smuggling German auto parts across the Nepalese border into India and was sentenced to three years in a Mota Hari jail.

Shunya had been his partner in crime. He had put up the money for the auto parts and was responsible for bribing the proper Indian customs officials—who took the bribe and welched on the deal. They busted Delhi Dave crossing the border the following morning.

In retrospect, Shunya realized that he had been better off selling hash, a much smaller

commodity that did not compete with legitimate business and warrant such harsh punishment. In reality, Shunya couldn't wait to complete his mission of mercy and clear his conscience: get off at Patna, take a ferry across the Ganges River, catch the next train to Mota Hari, and purchase Dave's freedom.

Anxious, Shunya turned to a fellow passenger—a fat Brahmin businessman, wrapped in a starched white dhoti, wearing an expensive Swiss watch—and asked for the time.

“Huh, ji,” Shunya began in Hindi. “Kit-na bahji?”

The Brahmin answered in perfect English. “It is near two o'clock in the a.m. We will arrive in Patna in eighteen minutes only. It is scheduled.”

Shunya stroked his long red beard and sighed. He found it so hard to believe; nothing and no one in India ever arrived on time. He began to think that the Brahmin was another mind-fuck, purposely confusing the young white Saab's sense of reality with unreal expectations. He was about to take issue with the Brahmin's intent when the man opened a papaya and offered to share it with him.

Shunya declined and smiled to himself. Having already spent more than two years in India, he still couldn't figure it out. The country defied logic and thrived on dichotomy. While Shunya took great pride in his own reason, the greater irony escaped him: Shunya thrived on India.

He loved India and was deeply concerned about the prospect of war with Pakistan. The mounting tension could be felt in Shunya's car. As the train sped through the night, tempers flared, arguments raged, lines were drawn. Following one particularly violent confrontation between a Hindu and a Muslim over a seat, the entire seating arrangement was changed to suit the political realities, the Hindu majority in front of the car, the Muslims in the back.

Shunya was undaunted. He kept his original seat and remained neutral. When asked for this point of view, he claimed Canadian citizenship and traveled in peace. He was tired of answering for the American government, whose policies were personally offensive and not popular in India. Given the nature of his mission, he was also loathe to provoke a debate. He had 25,000 rupees in his jola, enough money to buy Delhi Dave's freedom—he hoped—or tempt a heinous crime.

When the discussion in his compartment turned back to politics, Shunya wisely excused

himself from conversation and headed toward the bathroom. The car was crowded, and as he picked his way over and through the tangle of humanity—clutching the jola to his chest—he tripped over a “floating” crap game and fell into a player sitting on the floor.

Shunya said he was sorry, and the player helped him to his feet.

“It is okay, Saab. Everything is okay,” the player said.

Shunya thought so. The jola remained intact and unopened. He felt the bulge of money through the cloth. He was about to enter the bathroom when he thought he recognized the helpful player and spun around and said, “I know you. I’ve seen you before, in Delhi, the other day?”

In particular, Shunya noted the young man’s rotting red mouth, the color and tooth decay indicating a predisposition for beetle nut.

“No, no Saab. I come from Gaya today,” the young man declared. “You can ask these people, my friends. All are from Gaya.” His two friends smiled and nodded before he continued. “You will sit? You would like to play with us?”

Shunya declined and entered the bathroom, thinking it could be a dangerous game. While his spiritual quest may have altered his priorities, it had not dulled his competitive edge.

Before Shunya, he was William James Rennet, among the best point guards to come out of a New York City high school, the all-American kid with a crew-cut who married his high school sweetheart upon graduation and went to college on an athletic scholarship.

1962 was a good year. John Kennedy was President. The decade was filled with promise and propriety. Shunya imagined he would be a starter in college, as popular on campus as he was high school. He wasn't prepared to warm a bench, or father a child, and was overcome by the unsettling conjunction of these events. His wife became pregnant during his freshman year in Gainesville and he couldn't make the grades or the first team. The coach thought he was too small (five-foot-seven inches) and too “white.”

Shunya dropped out of college the following year and returned to New York, where he lived in the shadow of his former greatness. Facing an era of tumultuous change and discovery, he was on the verge of becoming an anachronism. Shunya was a good husband and a good father, but he wasn't very happy and got swept up in the tumult of the times. So he left his wife and daughter, and his country, in an effort to find himself. But the further he traveled, the greater the loss.

He was thinking about his daughter when the train pulled into Patna at 3:00 a.m. By 3:10, he was racing the crowd to catch the last ferry across the river. An hour later, he engaged the one-mile trek across the sand dunes to connect with the last train to Mota Hari, still clutching his jola and schlepping a backpack filled with Alice Bailey books. He loved reading.

Unlike the train to Patna, the train to Mota Hari ran on narrow gauge tracks. It was very old, very slow, very small, and so crowded that a number of poorer passengers opted for seats on the roof. Shunya was about to push his way into a third-class car when a conductor reached for his arm.

“This is not for you, Saab,” he said, leading Shunya away from the crowd. “Third class is for these poor people. You go first class, Saab. Only first class for you.”

Shunya was flattered. He also figured the conductor was looking for a little baksheesh. But the conductor refused to accept his money.

“No, no, Saab. Please. Not for money. This I do for good karma.”

The spiritual ass kiss worked like a charm. It was one truly remarkable and flattering thing for Shunya, to have his spiritual potential recognized by a great guru—even better to be distinguished from the crowd by a menial conductor.

* * *

Alone in a first class compartment, Shunya stretched out with an Alice Bailey book, *A Treatise on Cosmic Fire*, thinking so much of himself that he lost the edge. He fell asleep on page twenty-two, and was searching for God in a dream, when he was awakened by a knife at his throat.