

## The Cosmic Editor

After three weeks on a Hollywood set, playing the lead in his first feature film had lost all its allure. Arun was even more tired than he had been as a software developer at NorthWest Technologies in Portland, Oregon. He looked bad, dark Indian smudges of fatigue under his eyes. When he pulled all-nighters at work, he looked like someone had punched him in the face. He looked like that now.

He had a short scene this afternoon, but to Nalini, no scene was trivial. He knew all about the tough time she'd had, black in Britain, British in the U.S., a woman in sexist India, fiercely independent of Bollywood's black money and Hollywood's filthy lucre. Director Nalini Roy, born Iyengar, was still a high-caste Brahmin on the set, full of contempt for everyone beneath her. And everyone on the cast and crew was beneath her. After three weeks, Arun wanted common courtesy as badly as he wanted a good night's sleep.

Just before filming began, a stranger slipped onto the set—a tall, skinny, black-skinned man with a mop of curly black hair. He nodded to Nalini and she nodded to him.

After the ninth take, Nalini jumped from her perch next to the camera and snapped, "Cut." She strode towards Arun until she was in Indian instead of American personal space. She scolded, "That was terrible. Do it again."

Arun said politely, "What would you like me to do differently?"

Small, black, angry, Nalini loomed over him. "Just do it better."

"Please, help me out here. Better how?"

Nalini's bloodshot eyes began to glitter. Her small shoulders spread out like a hood. She seemed to grow huge. When she spoke, her voice was as resonant as it had been on the RADA stage years ago. "I don't know why I cast you," she said, projecting to the actors and crew

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assembled before her. “You’re not an actor. You’re an engineer. Go back to that bloody software company of yours and be an engineer.”

Her words went through him like venom. Through a haze, he heard her say, “Take ten. And be back here on time! We aren’t finished yet.”

Arun brushed past the actors and the crew to stumble to his dressing room. He sat down heavily and held his head, trying to get rid of the echo of Nalini’s voice. He was hearing the voice that had threaded through his childhood, the voice of his father, a modest, intelligent, talented man from Bangalore, deprecate himself by saying, “Oh, I’m just an Indian engineer.”

As an undergrad at Carnegie Mellon, officially enrolled in the computer science department, Arun used to have a recurrent nightmare. He dreamed that he stood on the steps of the drama building, not the modern structure where he studied acting, but an ancient, heavy, fortress-like building with the two masks, comedy and tragedy, on the frieze above the door. The door wouldn’t open. He knocked, bruising his knuckles on the heavy wood, but the door remained firmly closed. He always heard the same voice, amplified and theatrical. “Go away!” it said. “You don’t belong here. You’re really just an engineer.”

Someone knocked softly on the door, then entered without asking. It was the stranger from the back of the set. His skin was the blackest Arun had ever seen on a South Asian, without yellow or purple highlights to relieve the darkness. His eyes had no distinction between iris and pupil, but their blackness had a silvery light.

He was dressed in ordinary t-shirt, jeans, and sneakers, but he wore a gold earring in one ear, an ornate stud so heavy it dragged at his lobe, and a heavy gold ring set with a ruby that shimmered even in the bad fluorescent light of the dressing room. He said, “I spoke to Nalini. She was too hard on you.”

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Around his neck, on a leather thong, was a Shiva amulet. “Who are you?” Arun asked.

“Mahesh Rao. Nalini’s editor.”

Arun’s commercial instinct roused and woke. NWT made editing software; this man was a customer. “Pleased to meet you.”

“I heard about you. The actor who worked on FilmEditor. I had to see you. To see if you were any good.”

“You use FilmEditor? You like the new release?”

“That’s good too. Come see me when you’re done here. I’m in the editing suite at Miramax. Ask anyone where I am. They all know.”

When he finished for the day, Arun wanted a beer and an early night. But he found his way to Mahesh’s editing studio.

An editing room wasn’t much to look at. Dark. Windowless. “Don’t trip over the bloody cable,” Mahesh warned. “I had to string two drives together and the cables are all over the floor.” He sat before an enormous monitor that provided the only light in the room. FilmEditor 4.0 was up and running. Music played. Bhangra. The room had the itchy scent of marigolds and the sweet, pungent odor of Indian incense. A pujah smell.

Arun sat. He leaned back in the chair, feeling the fatigue. Nice ergonomic chair. An editor needed it; they sat as much as developers did.

“Tough day?” Mahesh asked.

“They’re all tough lately.”

“You want some chai?”

“Sure.”

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Arun expected the bottled stuff, but Mahesh produced a thermos and poured a cup of the real thing, redolent of cinnamon and ginger, milky and sweet. Arun cradled the cup in his hands and let its warmth seep into his bones. “This is good,” he said. “This is just how my mother makes it.”

“What’s your family like? Old-fashioned or modern?”

“Not modern enough.”

“What do they think of the acting?”

“Don’t get me started.”

Mahesh turned his head and his gold earring glinted in the dim light. “Why not?”

It came out in a rush, as though he’d wanted to tell it for a long time. He was good at writing code and he made a good living by it. But acting was different. Acting was a sacred thing. The first time he went on stage, he knew he’d found what he was born to do.

Not in an Indian family, he hadn’t. Not as the son of two anxious immigrants who still saw the famine and plague of village India behind the fat of the land in southern California. Not as the scion of an engineering dynasty in Bangalore—Arun’s great-grandfather helped to establish the BMS College of Engineering, the oldest engineering school in Karnataka—who thought that actors were no better than whores and thieves. His parents never told their friends that he acted. It was shameful, as though he’d contracted an STD or had a child out of wedlock.

“Did you? Shame them?”

Arun snorted. “Good son like me? What do you think?”

“Too damn good for your own good,” Mahesh said.

“What about your family?”

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Mahesh's eyes glowed with that silvery light. "We've been performers for a long time," he said. "Are you hungry?"

Arun was suddenly so hungry that his eyes watered. "Yes."

"I have samosas. Potato or lentil. What do you like?"

"Both," Arun said. Mahesh pulled out a foil packet and unwrapped it. Arun took one. The pastry was as hot and crisp as if it had just come from the karhai. After years in high tech, Arun thought he was used to marvels. But he was unprepared for the taste of home: the home in exile in California and beyond it, the home he didn't know in India.

"Good?"

"Wonderful," he said, taking a third and a fourth samosa from the foil packet, which didn't seem to empty.

Mahesh watched Arun eat, then asked, "Now I know all about what your parents want. Your dharma. What do you want?"

The question hurt worse than in the dressing room this afternoon, worse than in the sleepless hours of the night, worse than at in the quiet moments in my office at NWT when Arun knew he wasn't happy. "Don't ask me."

"Why not?"

"Because then I'll have to decide."

"If you don't, who else will?"

"Everyone else." Arun saw a glow, a fiery glow, at the top of Mahesh's head. He blinked. He was so tired he was hallucinating. It had happened before. At the end of his last project at NWT, after weeks of eighteen-hour days, he didn't know whether he was awake or dreaming.

Mahesh asked, "Want a beer?"

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“You have one?”

He reached into the bag and pulled out a bottle of Arun’s favorite Oregon beer, a microbrew that wasn’t distributed in southern California. “Where did you find this?”

“Do you need a bottle opener?”

Arun laughed—he was feeling a little shaky—and said, “What else do you have in there? A wedding banquet? An Oscar?”

Mahesh turned to Arun—in the dark, the whites of his eyes were the most visible thing about him—and asked, “Is that what you’d like?” A sly look. But not really joking. As though he could bestow it.

The smell of marigolds and incense was suddenly very strong. Arun said, “When I figure it out, I’ll let you know.”

“Yaar, it’s a tough life, either way. So you’d better want it with your whole heart.”

Arun heard an odd sound. A drumbeat. Not the bhangra beat, more like a heartbeat. Mahesh wasn’t laying down the soundtracks yet. He was too damn tired.

“I’m exhausted,” he said to Mahesh. “I’d better get some sleep.” Without thinking, he touched the skin under his eyes. “Makeup complains. It’s hard to conceal.”

Mahesh reached down. “Try this.” Two capsules filled with brown powder.

“What is it?” Heroin. Soma. All kinds of drugs floated around the movie business.

“Herbs. All natural. They’ll help you sleep.”

Arun took them and sniffed them. “They stink!”

“Herbs do. They come from the earth. They’re safe, and they work.”

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What the hell, Arun thought as he undressed for bed. He took them. He slept better than he had since filming began. The next morning, when he looked in the mirror, the smudges were gone.

A week later, Mahesh called to invite Arun back to the studio. He said that he and his sister Mimi had a surprise.

“I’m not ready to get married,” Arun said.

“No, no,” Mahesh said, laughing. “She’s an animator. Animation software. She has something she wants to show you.”

He smelled the cumin, coconut, and fresh coriander in the hallway, well before he entered the room. Now the crowded room held a table, and the table held his favorite dishes. Coconut shrimp, the shrimp tiny and succulent, the coconut pungent as though it had just fallen from the palm. Rice fragrant with lemon. Dal made with roasted eggplant. Chapatis that smelled fresh from an old-fashioned stone griddle. A dozen bottles of beer nestled in a bowl of ice.

Mimi said, “I can’t believe that Mahesh kept you for hours last time and didn’t give you more than samosas and chai. Please, eat.” Her voice was low, resonant, arousing. She looked just like her brother, tall and slender and dark, except that her hair tumbled to her shoulders. She wore a gold stud in her earlobe, the double of her brother’s.

He ate with great pleasure. When he finished he was drowsy and satisfied.

Mahesh dimmed the lights as Mimi sat at the computer and beckoned Arun to join her. He could barely see her in the dark. She smelled of cinnamon, cumin and pepper—garam

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masala. If he licked her skin, he thought, it would burn his tongue. Mahesh joined them. They flanked him, Mimi to his left and Mahesh to his right.

She opened the software. Arun moved close to her. “What is it?” he asked.

“Animation tool.” The screen filled with a luminous, pulsing, rotating globe, in beautiful shades of green and blue. She said, “It will take a while to get the file up and running.” She stroked the server. “Big files.”

The screen went black, the velvety black of a starless night. Slowly, slowly, an image emerged from the darkness. The topknot. The dark face with the aquiline nose. The torso clad in a sacred thread and a cobra. The four arms. The dancer’s legs and bare feet. Light glinted on his gold bracelets and anklets. Around his head bloomed a great halo of flame. He moved, as supple as a snake, and music began to play. Bhangra. Softly as first, then louder and louder, until the beat of the dhol resonated in Arun’s head, his chest, his belly, his groin. Shiva began to dance. Was he smiling? Did he have Mahesh’s smile? Lord Shiva danced to a bhangra beat. Mimi put her hand on Arun’s arm and he started at her touch. Another figure entered from the rightmost corner of the screen. Himself. Dancing, gracefully and easily as he never did in real life. Was he awake? Was he dreaming? Awake or dreaming, was it an illusion? Arun watched as he danced with the Cosmic Dancer.

He whispered, “How did you do that?”

Mimi’s breath was warm on his ear. “Magic,” she said.

Mahesh chuckled low in his throat. “Software,” he added.

Arun dreamed.

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Of someone whose skin was black like theirs. He had broad shoulders, but wide hips; his left breast was flat and muscular like a man's, but his right breast was round and full like a woman's. He wore heavy earrings that dragged at his lobes, ornate gold necklaces, armbands that gleamed when he moved, and anklets adorned with bells. His only clothing was a loincloth. Instead of a sacred thread, he wore a living cobra, which nestled against him like a kitten. From the front, his hair was pulled into a topknot; from behind, it was a mass of tangles to his waist.

In each of his four hands he held an emblem. One was a computer, tinier than the tiniest palmtop, with a glittering screen. The second was a miniature video camera that made a purring sound. The third was a length of fiber optic cable that writhed like a living thing. The fourth was a blank CD as blinding as an exploding sun.

Arun asked him, "Why are you here?" He spoke in Kannada, his parents' native tongue; dreaming, he was fluent.

Shiva spoke. In Kannada, he replied, "Come with me."

They sat in the editing studio before the screen Arun knew better than his own face. Lord Shiva touched the mouse, and the film began to play. Arun's life. Shiva clicked on the toolbar, dropping down the menus, cutting, pasting, adding transitions, putting in dissolves. "What are you doing?" Arun asked him.

"Creating the drama," Shiva said.

The scenes flashed by too fast. Was he looking at his own future? Or at the movies he would make? He couldn't tell.

Shiva let go the mouse. The screen went blank. He said, "I've done all I can. The rest is up to you."

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Arun stared at the screen and picked up the mouse. His hand shook so badly he dropped it.

Shiva stood. His loincloth fell away. His phallus was huge and erect against his belly. He pressed Arun's hand against it, and it felt as hard as sun-warmed stone. To Arun's surprise and shame, savage and exquisite pleasure shot through his body. Shiva said, "There is no pleasure without pain. No joy without sorrow. The power to create is also the power to destroy."

The scene faded to black. Arun woke. His room was full of light and the smell of incense and marigolds.