

LIGHTS OUT



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Characters

FRIEDA

The cook. She is a stout, middle-aged woman, wearing an untidy sari, pleasant-faced but generally expressionless.

BHASKAR

The man of the house. He is in his late thirties, unassuming to look at, a middle-income-level government officer.

LEELA

Bhaskar's wife. She is about the same age as Bhaskar, a little on the plump side, somewhat overdressed at all times.

MOHAN

Bhaskar's friend, the same age as Bhaskar but visibly more suave and affluent. He is slim and good-looking.

NAINA

Leela's friend. She is the same age as Leela but more attractive. A likeable sort who looks as if she supports all the right causes.

SURINDER

Naina's husband. He is the same age as the other men but large and burly, a very physical type.

Note on FRIEDA'S role: She remains constantly in sight, performing her duties in a mute, undemanding way. The other characters pay no attention to her except to give her orders. When she has no specific task at hand, she can be seen moving about in the kitchen. The audience should be allowed to wonder what she thinks.

SCENE ONE

The curtain rises to reveal the drawing-dining area of a sixth-floor apartment in a building in Bombay. The decor is unremarkably upper middle class. The focal point of the space is a large window to the rear, its curtains drawn back. Through it, the audience can see the sky and the rooftop of the neighbouring building, as yet unpainted. During the first scene, the sky wanes from dusk into night.

A sofa and two armchairs are in the foreground, partially obscuring the dining table which occupies the area between the drawing room and the window. An area divides the two spaces. The kitchen and main entrance to the flat are at stage left. At stage right is the entrance to the master bedroom.

Only the foreground is lit up as FRIEDA dusts items on the room-divider-cum-bar. The sound of the front door being opened is heard. FRIEDA straightens up and moves towards the kitchen as BHASKER enters. He makes straight for the sofa, and prepares to settle down with his newspaper.

BHASKER: Frieda? (once he has settled) Frieda! (doesn't wait for a response). Where's my tea?

She appears from the kitchen, already carrying the tray, complete with tea cosy and one cup, walking slowly. LEELA appears at the door of the bedroom stage right. She looks as if she hasn't changed out of her caftan since the morning. She stands staring at BHASKER, tense with anxiety, but he is immersed in his paper and does not notice her.

LEELA: (moving towards him) Oh! Bhasker –

BHASKER: (not looking up from his paper) Hi.

LEELA: (when she is near him) Tell me!

BHASKER: (not looking up from his paper) Mm?

LEELA: (sits beside him) Did you ... do it?

FRIEDA settles the tea tray down on a low table beside the sofa. She bends, pouring the tea into the cup. Heads back to the kitchen. Her activities go unnoticed by the other two.

BHASKER: (absorbed in his paper) Mm.

LEELA: (stares at him, then buries her face in her hands) No! You didn't!

BHASKER: What?

LEELA: Again?

BHASKER: Again what?

LEELA: How could you forget? (lifts her head to stare at him)

BHASKER: (his gaze has not left the paper) Huh?

LEELA: (tearfully) I wish I could!

BHASKER: Could what?

LEELA: Forget!

A pause during which BHASKER smoothes out the pages of the paper.

LEELA: Can't you try now?

BHASKER: (finally lowering his paper) Try what?

LEELA: The police. Call the police.

BHASKER: (makes a face) Oh, for god's sake! (going back to his paper) You're still worrying about that thing?

LEELA: All the time!

BHASKER: Look, what do you want me to do?

LEELA: Call them – you said you would!

BHASKER: But there's no point!

LEELA: Have you tried?

- BHASKER: No. (*tries to concentrate on the paper*)
- LEELA: (*suddenly*) You don't care, do you!
- BHASKER: Of course I do –
- LEELA: You don't care what I feel, what I go through every day!
- BHASKER: (*putting the paper down*) Darling, I –
- LEELA: I feel frightened. All through the day, I feel tense –
- BHASKER: But there's nothing to be frightened of! They can't hurt you –
- LEELA: (*ignoring him*) At first it was only at the time it was going on. Then, as soon as it got dark. Then around teatime, when the children came home from school. Then in the middle of the day, whenever the doorbell rang. Then in the morning, when I sent the children off to school. And now from the moment I wake up ...
- BHASKER: Oh, come on! You're making too much of it!
- LEELA: I'm *not*! It's like a tight, hard ball, just ... here. (*she holds her midriff*)
- BHASKER: (*looking concerned*) Pain? You're in pain?
- LEELA: My fear, it's ... as if my insides are knotted up.
- BHASKER: Have you been to see your doctor?
- LEELA: I carry it around all day. Sometimes it's like a shawl, it wraps itself around my shoulders and I start to shiver.
- BHASKER: (*putting his arm around her*) Now, now, now.
- LEELA: (*wheedlingly*) Can't you call the police? Just for me?
- BHASKER: (*drawing away*) No.
- LEELA: But why not?
- BHASKER: We've discussed this before –
- LEELA: I know, I know. You've told me they're not interested in cases like this, they don't bother about minor little offences ... but ... but ... I'm frightened! Can't you see that? Isn't that enough?
- BHASKER: Go tell the police that you're frightened about noises in the next building! They'll laugh in your face!
- LEELA: I never let the children out any more.
- BHASKER: They'll get their homework done!
- LEELA: When you were away on tour, I couldn't sleep at night! And with all the windows shut, with all the curtains drawn, with cotton in my ears, the sound still came through! Even in the children's room, on the other side of the house, I could hear it!
- BHASKER: But it's not that loud. You're imagining it –
- LEELA: (*holding her arms tight around her*) And I'm frightened, I'm frightened!
- BHASKER: (*reaching for her again*) Calm down now, calm down. It's really not worth all this.
- LEELA: (*changing tack*) You know what Sushila said?
- BHASKER: No idea. (*pointedly losing interest. Looks around for his paper*)
- LEELA: That we're part of ... of what happens outside. That by watching it, we're making ourselves responsible.
- BHASKER: (*finds his paper*) Rubbish!
- LEELA: That's what I said at first! But then ...
- BHASKER: (*starts reading*) Sushila's a fool.

- LEELA: We don't even really watch it, do we? I mean, *I* don't. (pause) But ... you do! You watch it!
- BHASKER: (*absently, not looking at her*) Yes. I mean, I have. Once or twice.
- LEELA: And it *is* ... terrible?
- BHASKER: Yes. Terrible.
- LEELA: (*touching her ears pathetically*) I don't even have to watch! The sounds are bad enough! (pause) And ... you're *sure* we can't call the police? Just now, just once?
- BHASKER: (*in exasperation, putting down his paper again*) Leela, if we called now, what would we say?
- LEELA: (*encouraged*) We could tell them *everything*! That there's a building under construction next door and that every night, in the compound ...
- BHASKER: Wait! First they'd ask us, "What is the complaint?" And we'd have to say –
- LEELA: That we're frightened! That we're badly disturbed!
- BHASKER: No, that's not enough, don't you see? If the police had to worry about things like that they'd be psychiatrists, not policemen.
- LEELA: We could tell them that we can see a crime being committed!
- BHASKER: But it's not going on right now.
- LEELA: We could say it happened last night!
- BHASKER: But then they'd ask us, "Why didn't you call last night?"
- LEELA: We could tell them that ... that we've just got our telephone connection ...
- BHASKER: And they'd say, "Madam, your colony has had telephones since 1968!" And anyway, what about the neighbours?
- LEELA: What about them?
- BHASKER: Why haven't they complained?
- LEELA: Maybe they have?
- BHASKER: Huh! In that case, the police have obviously ignored their complaints! So why should *we* waste a phone call?
- LEELA: But what's the harm in trying?
- BHASKER: I don't want to stick my neck out, that's all.
- LEELA: Maybe we can organize something, all together –
- BHASKER: (*annoyed*) Uff! Who has the time for all this!
- LEELA: But everyone is talking about it ...
- BHASKER: Everyone who?
- LEELA: Kummu, Picky, Tara, Mrs Menon, Nini ...
- BHASKER: And what are they doing about it?
- LEELA: Well ... they're ...
- BHASKER: Right! Wringing their hands and nagging their husbands!
- LEELA: No one wants to do it alone.
- BHASKER: Huh! So why should we!
- LEELA: Because ... because I'm frightened! I can't bear it any more!
- BHASKER: Darling, what are you frightened of? Who would dare to hurt you?
- LEELA: But I can hear them ...

BHASKER: *(as if to a child)* But *sounds* can't hurt you ...

LEELA: Oh, but they do, those dirty, ugly sounds ...

BHASKER: So shut your ears, see? Like this – *(places his hands over her ears)* There! Is that better?

LEELA: *(struggling in his half embrace)* But their sounds come inside, inside my nice clean house, and I can't push them out! *(stops struggling)* If only they didn't make such a racket, I wouldn't mind so much! *(pause, during which BHASKER rocks her gently)* Why do they have to do it here? Why can't they go somewhere else?

BHASKER: *(taking a deep breath)* Leela, the thing to do is not let them disturb you like this. Pretend they're not there ...

LEELA: But *how?* I can't *help* hearing them! They're so – so *loud!* And *rude!* How can I make myself deaf just for them!

BHASKER: *(lets go of her)* But see, *I'm* not deaf and *I'm* not disturbed by them!

LEELA: I don't understand how you do it –

BHASKER: I don't know, really. Just don't let them, I suppose. It's what they want, you see, they want to upset you, they want to frighten you, and – don't you see? – when you get frightened you're just playing into their hands, doing what they want ...

LEELA: But how can I just stop! I don't want to feel this way! Who would?

BHASKER: Some people might. Who knows?

LEELA: Well, *I* don't! *I* feel awful, I feel sick. I can barely eat, I feel so sick.

BHASKER: You must learn to relax. The most important thing is not to give in to them.

LEELA: I can't relax. Not so long as there's *that* happening every night!

BHASKER: Look, would it make a difference to you if I called the police?

LEELA: Yes! Oh yes, it would! Really it would.

BHASKER: Tell you what – I'll call them tonight, while it's going on. After all, it's not like a picture show or anything, there's no guarantee it'll be on tonight!

LEELA: I'm *sure* it will, of course! Why should it stop tonight? *(pause)* And – and they *will* come, won't they?

BHASKER: Who?

LEELA: The police. They'll surely come?

BHASKER: Who knows? After all –

LEELA: No, don't even say it, I won't stand for it if they don't!

BHASKER: You never know with the police these days. They may say it's none of our business, what goes on in the next-door compound. After all, there's the chowkidar ...

LEELA: But he's been paid off! You said so yourself!

BHASKER: We don't know that for a fact. It was just an idea.

LEELA: Maybe he's frightened too?

BHASKER: Maybe he enjoys it!

LEELA: Oh no! Not that! No one could!

BHASKER: Why? Some people do ...

LEELA: No one could enjoy such awful things!

BHASKER: Except those involved ...

LEELA: Oh, if only I could be sure the police will come!

BHASKER: What about the owners of that building? Really, it's their responsibility, that's what the police might say ...

LEELA: But the owners aren't there. The building's just been built. Surely anyone can see that? It's got all its rooms and its windows and its lights, but there's no one living there yet, so there's no one to watch what happens there. Except us.

BHASKER: And the chowkidar.

LEELA: When the police come they'll be able to see how terrible it all is, how it's invaded our lives, our homes, how we can't have guests for dinner –

BHASKER: Don't be silly! Of course we can!

LEELA: But we haven't, not for two weeks.

BHASKER: I've been away and the children have had exams ...

LEELA: No! It's this. I can't imagine letting someone else see it all.

BHASKER: *(takes a deep breath and plunges ahead)* Well, anyway. There's someone coming tonight.

LEELA: What? You – you've called someone?

BHASKER: Yes, Mohan.

LEELA: Mohan? Mohan who?

BHASKER: Mohan Ram, remember him? From Delhi?

LEELA: Who? Oh ... your Delhi friend! *(pause, then sudden panic)* But – what'll we do about ... ?

BHASKER: We'll just keep the window shut, draw the curtains and

put on some music. In fact, why not put the music on right away – *(starts to get up)*.

LEELA: *(grabs him)* No! Don't! The sound will make me tense, I can't bear any sounds any more!

BHASKER: Leela, Leela, you mustn't react like this, don't you see?

LEELA: No, I don't see!

BHASKER: That's what they want, these people!

LEELA: Oh, but why? Why should they? They don't know me! What have I done to them?

BHASKER: Baby, you must learn to ignore it now, I insist.

LEELA: But I can't! Don't you see that?

BHASKER: Do some meditation. That's always been a help to you.

LEELA: It doesn't work any more.

BHASKER: You're probably not concentrating hard enough –

LEELA: I am. I'm concentrating with all my might, but it doesn't work.

BHASKER: Why don't you see your yoga teacher again?

LEELA: If it takes so much effort to ignore something, isn't that the same thing as not ignoring it?

BHASKER: No, because in your case, by not ignoring it, you're being disturbed, and that's wrong. You mustn't let things disturb you. What did your yoga teacher tell you? That your mind must be like a – ?

LEELA: Like a cool, clear pool of water, through which my thoughts can swim unchallenged – but it doesn't work! I've tried it!

BHASKER: I'm *sure* you weren't concentrating hard enough!

LEELA: I was, really I was. I did just what my guruji told me. I sat on a cushion, there by the window and I made my mind blank. I thought of a white wall, with nothing written on it. And I thought of the cosmos, and of my breath, coming in (*she breathes in sharply*) ... and out (*she breathes out*) ... in ... and out ... in ... and out. And in my mind I said ... Om ... again and again ... Om ... Om ... until my mind became absolutely quiet, absolutely calm ... Om ... Om ... Om ... (*as she starts to fall into a calm trance-like state, BHASKER, with obvious relief, quietly goes back to his newspaper. For a few seconds all that is heard is the sound of LEELA's meditation and the occasional rustle of the paper. Suddenly the doorbell rings*) Ahhh! (*coming out of her trance with a violent start*) Who-who is it! Wh-what – what's happening! Frieda! Oh!

BHASKER: (*throws down his paper, comforts her*) There, there, now – stop!

FRIEDA appears from the kitchen walking towards the door with a milk pail, counting out change in her hand.

BHASKER: It's only the milk boy! Come for his money!

FRIEDA transacts her business at the door and returns to the kitchen, still counting change.

LEELA: (*half sobbing*) You see? You see? That's what happens, that's why I can't meditate! There's always something coming and disturbing me!

BHASKER: Shhh, shhh, now! We'll have to try it again tonight, while the thing's actually going on.

LEELA: (*fearfully*) Am I going mad?

BHASKER: Of course not! Just oversensitive, that's all.

LEELA: And who can meditate with that horrible noise outside!

BHASKER: But that's *the* time, isn't it? You've got to be able to shut out any kind of distraction, especially while it's going on. Otherwise, what's the point?

LEELA: I ... I suppose you're right. I'll just have to try harder. (*changing tack*) Your friend Mohan, will he stay for dinner?

BHASKER: Oh, just make something simple.

LEELA: There's this afternoon's leftovers – rice, dal –

BHASKER: Whatever, I mean, he's not fussy (*stretches, yawning*). Mmhh! How about ... parathas?

LEELA: (*getting up*) I'll see what Frieda says –

Lights dim.

SCENE TWO

LEELA, dressed for the evening, clutching a drink, sits on the sofa. She looks at her watch anxiously. BHASKER is fiddling with the music system at the room-divider-cum-bar. The doorbell rings, causing LEELA to jump, spilling her drink. BHASKER goes to the door, opens it.

BHASKER: Mohan! (*moves aside*) Hi, hi –

MOHAN: Hi – (*enters*).

BHASKER: Come! (*closes the door behind him*)

MOHAN: Sorry I'm late (*pauses, seeing LEELA*).

BHASKER: No problem! Come, you've met my wife, Leela?

MOHAN nods a greeting as LEELA acknowledges him too, forcing her smile.

MOHAN: Yes.

LEELA: Of course we've met!

MOHAN: And how are you?

LEELA: *(simplers)* Oh ... fine! *(indicating that he should sit)* And you?

MOHAN: Fine too, thanks. *(looking around at Bhasker)*

BHASKER: Fix you a drink?

MOHAN: Just a small one!

LEELA: Won't you sit?

MOHAN: Thanks, yes. *(doesn't sit)*

LEELA: So? When did you reach?

MOHAN: Oh, yesterday. *(distracted by BHASKER)*

BHASKER: What'll it be?

MOHAN: The usual – just a small one –

LEELA: Morning?

MOHAN: *(to LEELA)* Yes –

BHASKER: Soda?

MOHAN: *(to BHASKER)* ... Thanks, and ice ... thanks. *(BHASKER nods, fixing his own drink as well. Mohan comes around the chair and sits, smiles brightly at LEELA)* So? I'm trying to remember when we last met –

LEELA: *(strained)* Uh ... a year ago? In April?

MOHAN: And ... how're the children?

LEELA: Asleep, of course!

MOHAN: *(raises his eyebrows)* "Of course"?

BHASKER *arrives with the drinks, hands one to MOHAN.*

MOHAN: Thanks – just right –

BHASKER *moves around the sofa.*

LEELA: *(pushing a bowl of peanuts towards MOHAN)* Please! Help yourself.

MOHAN: Sure! *(helps himself)* How about you?

LEELA: We have our own –

BHASKER: Ahh, nice to see you here, Mohan ... So? Cheers!

LEELA: *(uncertainly)* Cheers ...

MOHAN: Cheers!

They sip their drinks. LEELA sits back tensely, looks at her watch. MOHAN sees her. There is a silence after which they each open their mouths to say something, causing embarrassed titters to break out. LEELA changes hers to a cough.

BHASKER *looks across to MOHAN, LEELA glances again at her watch.*

MOHAN: *(clears his throat)* Well! So, when does it begin?

LEELA: *(shrinks)* Wh-What?

BHASKER: *(expressionless)* Around dinner time.

LEELA: *(staring at him horrified)* You – you told him?

BHASKER: *(smoothly)* Darling, I had to. After all, he's bound to notice, when it starts –

LEELA: But then why did he come! *(turning to MOHAN)* Why did you come, knowing something horrible would happen?

MOHAN: Oh, but I insisted!

BHASKER: He wanted to see it.

LEELA: You wanted to see it!

MOHAN: *(unrepentant)* Sure! Why not?

LEELA: (*she's not amused*) But why! Why see such awful things, unless you must!

MOHAN: Well, I was curious.

LEELA: About such things?

MOHAN: (*more seriously*) I mean, how often can you stand and watch (*hurried glance at BHASKER*) a crime being committed right in front of you?

BHASKER: Usually, you're too close for comfort ...

MOHAN: You might get hurt ...

BHASKER: Or you arrive a few minutes too late and see only the results.

MOHAN: Or it's happening to someone you know and you have to get involved yourself ...

BHASKER: Or it's too disturbing to watch at all.

MOHAN: But this! Just far enough not to get involved, just close enough to see everything clearly. Or so Bhasker tells me.

BHASKER: Oh, yes ... You can see.

LEELA: But it's so frightening! Won't you be frightened?

MOHAN: Who, me? No! Of what?

LEELA: Of them! They're so terrible, the things that they do!

MOHAN: But they're so far away, how can they hurt me?

LEELA: Even their sounds hurt *me*!

BHASKER: My Leela is very sensitive!

MOHAN: Oh, I understand. After all, it's hardly the thing for a woman!

LEELA: (*dismayed*) You shouldn't watch either, you know! You really shouldn't!

MOHAN: But why not? What harm is there in watching?

BHASKER: (*with an ironical smile*) Someone told Leela that to watch a crime and do nothing is to be – what? – involved in it yourself?

MOHAN: Huh! Ridiculous!

BHASKER: Just what I said. They are there and you are here. What's the connection!

LEELA: Sushila said if you can stop a crime, you must – or else you're helping it happen ...

MOHAN: (*snorts derisively*) This Sushila sounds like an intellectual!

BHASKER: And she is!

LEELA: No, she's not! She's my friend ...

BHASKER: She's done her MA in political science.

MOHAN: That proves it!

LEELA: Not at all, she's very nice ...

MOHAN: These intellectuals always react like that, always confuse simple issues. After all, what's the harm in simply watching something? Even when there's an accident in the street, don't we all turn our heads to look?

LEELA: I *never* look!

BHASKER: But Leela, supposing *you* had an accident on the road and nobody looked. Then? What would happen to you? How would you get help?

MOHAN: Yes, you see? It's unnatural not to look. It's unnatural not to get involved.

LEELA: *(gesturing towards the window)* But I'd be too frightened to go to their help!

MOHAN: Who said anything about help? I'm talking about looking, that's all.

BHASKER: Besides, you're the one who wants to have this thing stopped ...

LEELA: *(firm about her stand)* I want the police to come and clear them away. I don't want to go there *myself!*

MOHAN: Just looking isn't the same thing as going to help.

LEELA: *(off balance)* Well ... but what about the screaming?

MOHAN: Is it for help?

LEELA: *(turns to BHASKER)* Isn't it for help?

MOHAN: Or is it just in general? That matters, you know. After all, it could just be some, you know, drama –

BHASKER: Who can tell! With these people outside, no one can say why they do what they do!

MOHAN: What about the kind of screaming? For instance, is it just one person?

LEELA: No ... well ... yes, I think so.

MOHAN: But you're not sure?

LEELA: That's not the point.

MOHAN: But anyway, what kind of screaming is it? High-pitched? Hysterical?

BHASKER: You'll hear it yourself in a minute. Why waste time talking about it?

MOHAN: It gives us an opportunity to compare Leela's version with the real thing.

BHASKER: But it's a different person every night, so how can you make a comparison?

MOHAN: It's a different person? You're sure of that?

BHASKER: *(shrugs)* You know how it is – all of them out there look exactly alike.

MOHAN: Then how can you tell it's a different person?

BHASKER: Well, the clothes, you know ...

MOHAN: Mmmm! Of course –

LEELA: Oh, I just don't want to hear of it!

MOHAN: Anyway, getting back to the point. Let's restrict ourselves to last night's case ... was it a high-pitched voice?

LEELA: Well ... I ...

MOHAN: Or to put it differently, was there an edge of hysteria?

LEELA: I wouldn't know what hysteria sounds like ...

BHASKER: Leela's lived a very quiet life uptil now. All of this is very new to her.

MOHAN: How shall I describe what I mean? Was there ... okay! Was it, for instance, like a singer's voice, high and sweet? Was it musical?

LEELA: *(decisively)* No! Not at all! In fact – *(stops short)*

MOHAN: Yes?

LEELA: *(hushed)* In fact, I thought it was so horrid and *gurgly* –

MOHAN: Gurgly?

LEELA: Yes, and rasping, as if ... whoever it was had a cold or something.

MOHAN: That's an important clue. Perhaps the victim is always

somewhat diseased?

BHASKER: Oh, I don't think so. I doubt it.

MOHAN: What makes you so sure?

BHASKER: They all look quite healthy. Thin, but healthy.

MOHAN: Then why the rasping, the gurgling?

BHASKER: Well, you know, after you've been screaming for a little while, I think ... I mean, perhaps ... uh ... your throat gets sore? Of course, I wouldn't really know myself.

MOHAN: Of course ... but, what you suggest is, maybe the phlegm builds up and then –

LEELA: Uff-oh! How can you talk of these things!

BHASKER: And there's a fair amount of crying, you see, so tears as well, to add to the phlegm.

LEELA: Tears? You think they're actually crying?

BHASKER: Well, yes, I think so. It sounds like it anyway.

MOHAN: So, so, rasping, gurgling, crying – we're getting a clearer picture of things now.

LEELA: And is it genuine screaming, then?

BHASKER: Well, it certainly *seems* real enough.

LEELA: (*fearfully*) And if they're really screaming for help, if it is genuine, then ... does it mean we ourselves must go to save them?

MOHAN: No, of course not. Nothing's proven yet except that the screaming is, quite possibly, genuine. Or at least it *sounds* genuine ...

LEELA: Surely, if it is, we must go?

MOHAN: W-e-l-l ... (*not too convinced himself of what he's saying*)

not *really*. After all, supposing it's genuine screaming but they don't want help?

BHASKER: (*sceptical*) What sort of situation would produce that, d'you suppose?

LEELA: (*unhappily*) I think whenever someone really screams, it must be for help. Or else, why scream?

MOHAN: Oh well! How naive! People scream for all sorts of reasons!

BHASKER: (*changing ground*) Because they're frightened of nightmares, for instance ...

LEELA: But these people aren't asleep!

MOHAN: A loud noise –

BHASKER: Or sometimes for the sheer pleasure of it!

LEELA: (*losing hope*) Pleasure? No, this isn't for pleasure –

MOHAN: How do we know?

LEELA: (*flustered*) Because ... it's so ... I mean ... the crying, the gurgling – it all sounds so frightening, it just *can't* be for pleasure.

MOHAN: Well, all right, we'll rule out pleasure for the moment. However ... (*pauses to think something through*)

LEELA: What?

MOHAN: Unless they actually call for help, is it our business to go? *That's* the question!

BHASKER: These people don't exactly say many words. It's all rather inarticulate.

MOHAN: After all, it may be something private, a domestic fight, how can we intervene?

BHASKER: It's not likely to be anything domestic. I mean ... they're all roughly the same age, I'd say. No parents, no youngsters, and hardly any conversation at all.

MOHAN: Really? None?

BHASKER: We hear nothing but the screaming.

LEELA: If it's domestic, we wouldn't have to interfere, would we?

MOHAN: Personally, I'm against becoming entangled in other people's private lives. Outsiders can never really be the judge of who is right and who is wrong.

BHASKER: But this is hardly private!

MOHAN: Well ... I don't know – I mean, I don't like to get *involved*. Unless, of course ...

LEELA: Unless what?

MOHAN: (*reluctantly*) Unless, I mean, if it's *murder* ...

LEELA: Oh, but this isn't murder!

MOHAN: You're sure?

BHASKER: No, no! I mean, the victim is twitching and moving, even at the end.

MOHAN: Well, then, unless it's murder, I don't think anyone should come between the members of a family.

BHASKER: How about torture, then?

MOHAN: Mmmm ... well, that's much more difficult ... after all, what shall we describe as torture? It's too vague a term. I've always felt.

LEELA: And I don't think it's torture, anyway.

MOHAN: How can we be sure?

LEELA: (*oddly confident*) Well, there's always a purpose behind torture, isn't there? I mean, the police or something, trying to get information from someone ... I mean, it's not just random and disgusting, is it?

BHASKER: Usually ... but then I remember reading in *Time* magazine many years ago, about a family who tortured someone just for the fun of it. Just a nice middle-class American family.

MOHAN: Imagine!

LEELA: Such awful things happen in America!

BHASKER: But Leela's right. I don't think it's torture either.

MOHAN: Why do you say that?

BHASKER: I don't know. After all, torture, even when it pleases the torturers, is usually ... somehow ... more ... what's the word?

MOHAN: Dignified?

BHASKER: No ... no ...

MOHAN: Restrained? Refined?

BHASKER: That's closer to it ... but –

MOHAN: Organized? Controlled?

BHASKER: That's it, I think, controlled! Whereas, here, one feels, there's no control or decency at all. Wild abandon is more like it.

LEELA: (*shaking her head*) It's terrible.

BHASKER: And it's too exhibitionistic, you know, to be real torture.

MOHAN: Exhibitionistic! That's a very specific sort of term ...

BHASKER: Yes ... What I mean to say is, torturers usually work in secret, isn't it?

MOHAN: Well ... not in olden times ...

BHASKER: Exactly – but *these* days you can't come right out into the open and torture somebody, can you?

MOHAN: Whereas this –

LEELA: – this is in full view of three buildings! In front of decent, ordinary people like us! Really, it's terrible that such things are permitted.

MOHAN: D'you suppose they know you can see?

LEELA: Why, of course!

MOHAN: How can you be so sure?

BHASKER: They've asked us to turn off our lights, after all.

LEELA: They wouldn't have done that unless they wanted us to watch!

MOHAN: Asked you to turn off your lights? Is someone in contact with their spokesman, then?

LEELA: (*grimacing*) No, no! Who would speak with those creatures?

BHASKER: Well, not asked, exactly, but –

LEELA: Everyone with their lights on has had their windows smashed.

MOHAN: Smashed! But that's terrible! They can be prosecuted for that!

BHASKER: Well ... at least one person had his windows smashed–

MOHAN: Only one? But still! You people must complain about this thing! It's an outrage! You must call the police!

LEELA: The police? Why, I've been begging Bhasker for *days* ...

BHASKER: Well, I just heard the story. Who knows if it's true?

LEELA: And that man's car was covered with filth!

BHASKER: They say that his wife and children were threatened ...

MOHAN: But how do you know all of this?

LEELA: We hear it, in the building.

BHASKER: You know how it is in these colonies – can't keep secrets from anyone.

MOHAN: Well, well! That changes things, doesn't it!

LEELA: (*hopefully*) Why?

MOHAN: I mean, if they're going to be aggressive, then where's the question of going to their help.

BHASKER: But Mohan, it's not the victims who break the windows.

MOHAN: And how do you know that?

BHASKER: Come on! Why should the victims want us to watch?

MOHAN: They may think they'll get help quicker that way.

BHASKER: Hmmm. I hadn't thought of that. However, it's unlikely.

MOHAN: Why?

BHASKER: The victims are generally being held down.

LEELA: (*wincing*) Oh, I hate to hear of it.

MOHAN: Held down?

BHASKER: Yes, by the others.

MOHAN: What others?

BHASKER: I mean, you know, the assailants. There are usually around four of them.

LEELA: Oh *don't!* I don't like you even talking about it!

MOHAN: (*turning to LEELA with interest*) You've really never seen it?

LEELA: Me? No! Never! How could I? It would make me ill for weeks!

BHASKER: So if the windows are broken it must be by the assailants.

MOHAN: The picture is growing clearer – so there are different victims every day.

BHASKER: Mind you, we can't be certain of that!

MOHAN: I thought, from the clothes ... ?

BHASKER: But they're not fully clothed.

MOHAN: What?

LEELA: You mean they are ...

BHASKER: Naked. They're usually naked.

LEELA: Oh, how disgusting, how terrible! To be naked in public!

MOHAN: Ah yes, I think you did mention it to me earlier. But then, where does the question of clothes arise at all?

BHASKER: They start off clothed and then begin to lose them.

MOHAN: All of them? The assailants too?

BHASKER: Well, the assailants tear the clothes off the victims and then, perhaps in the general excitement, remove their own clothes as well.

LEELA: Oh, but why, *why* are we talking about these things!

MOHAN: But Leela, we must, or else how are we to know whether or not to help the victim?

LEELA: Oh! (*shaking her head in dismay*)

MOHAN: And what are the clothes of the victim like?

BHASKER: Oh, tatters and rags, usually –

MOHAN: So you'd say that the victims are, by and large, poor people?

BHASKER: Definitely!

LEELA: Isn't it terrible? Attacking the poor?

MOHAN: But what about the assailants? Are they poor as well?

BHASKER: I mean, they're not rich. Their clothes are, you know, torn pants, T-shirts, that sort of thing.

MOHAN: Well, as long as it's the poor attacking the poor (*he trails off significantly*) ... you know how it is ... they live their lives and we live ours.

LEELA: (*hopefully*) So, we don't have to do anything?

BHASKER: (*uncertainly*) There's still the issue, you know, of why they do it like this, regularly, under the lights and all.

MOHAN: Yes, that *is* a strange feature. But – you know – something's just struck me. (*he looks suddenly animated*)

BHASKER: What?

MOHAN: Are there any strange-looking objects around, by any chance?

BHASKER: What an odd question!

LEELA: Why?

MOHAN: I mean, like any sort of, you know, carved stones, or figurines, or – or – anything?

BHASKER: (*looking puzzled*) Mmm ... not that I can remember ...

- LEELA: But why do you ask?
- MOHAN: It's just that – you know, all the descriptions, the screaming, the wild abandon, the exhibitionism, yes, even the nakedness – you know what it could be? You know what would explain everything?
- BHASKER and LEELA
(together): No, what?
- MOHAN: A religious ceremony! Sacred rites!
- BHASKER: W-e-l-l (shaking his head) I mean, surely –
- LEELA: (quite distressed) No, no! It's too awful!
- MOHAN: But, don't you see? That would explain why no one goes to the help of the victims – because, of course, if it's something religious, no one can interfere. Not even the police.
- BHASKER: (considering the point) That's true, of course. If it's religious, then there's no stopping the thing. Restriction of religious freedom and all that.
- MOHAN: Everyone would be up in arms.
- LEELA: But even when it's not a ... a nice religion?
- BHASKER: No one can say what's nice or not nice any more. Someone else's religion is someone else's business.
- LEELA: But even when it doesn't sound right?
- MOHAN: You see, Leela, I mean, it's all a question of taste. What sounds heavenly to one person might sound hellish to another!
- LEELA: But the screaming? If it's genuine?
- MOHAN: Maybe to them that's what sounds heavenly! Who can tell these days? It takes all types.
- BHASKER: (coming around) Yes, really. Who can say? This is a very good point, Mohan, very good. This does explain a lot!
- MOHAN: Especially why the police haven't been called. Or if they have, why they've done nothing about it. Can you imagine the outcry if they tried to stop some religious rite?
- LEELA: But even if it's something religious, can't it be stopped? If they're doing something really horrible?
- MOHAN: That's the whole point about being a secular nation! No one has the right to decide *this* is horrible and *that* is not!
- BHASKER: Our Constitution guarantees us the freedom to worship as we please –
- MOHAN: So long as we don't offend the sensibilities of others.
- LEELA: But this is offending *my* sensibilities!
- MOHAN: Ah, but that's because until now you've not realized the sacred nature of the spectacle!
- LEELA: But what about the victims? Surely *their* sensibilities are being offended?
- BHASKER: I'm not sure you can even call them victims any more! At most they are in *pain*. That's not the same thing as being a victim.
- LEELA: But isn't it wrong to be in pain?
- MOHAN: Not if it's in the name of religion. Look at sadhus? They sit willingly on nails or walk on smouldering coal. Look at the fast days? The flagellation with knives?
- LEELA: But that's people doing things to themselves, whereas

here ... it's four people ganging up on one victim, who, we have agreed, is genuinely screaming ...

BHASKER: What about circumcision?

LEELA: (*without conviction*) But that's different ... that's you know, I mean, *parents* have certain rights over their *children* –

BHASKER: Ear piercing? Nose piercing? All those things hurt!

MOHAN: The very fact that there are always the same number of assailants – or priests, now, I suppose! – seems to me a clear indication that we are finally on the right track. I am almost convinced of it! It was your earlier account, your use of the word “crime” that set me off on the wrong path altogether.

BHASKER: Why do you say “almost” convinced?

MOHAN: There's only one little doubt ...

LEELA: What?

MOHAN: Are you *sure* there aren't any unusual objects around?

BHASKER: Wait a minute, I see your point! You mean ... *ritual* objects – relics, statues, idols, that sort of thing?

MOHAN: Exactly! That's just what I was wondering about. It does seem odd to think of a religious ceremony without any of those elements.

BHASKER: (*confident*) No, why? The religions we are familiar with have those things, but maybe this is some completely new sort of faith? The Cult of the Body-Builders.

LEELA: (*uncertainly*) Would that explain why they're naked, then?

MOHAN: Yes, and perhaps the barbarism as well. New cults can

be quite violent at the outset – especially their initiation rites.

BHASKER: Yes! And that would explain why there's a *new vic* – uh, initiate every time.

MOHAN: How about music? D'you hear any music?

LEELA: (*despondent*) No, only the screaming.

BHASKER: It probably takes time for a religion to reach the hymns and chanting phase.

LEELA: Still, it seems a very disgusting sort of religion.

BHASKER: Oh Leela! Who are we to criticize!

MOHAN: After all, if we criticize others, they can criticize us and then where would we be?

LEELA: But we are all good people, what have we done wrong? We don't go running around, screaming and naked, in the middle of the night.

BHASKER: Leela, Leela! We mustn't judge others, we mustn't show prejudice –

LEELA: Where's the prejudice? I was just describing what happens outside our house every night. That's what we've been doing for the past half hour, all of us!

BHASKER: But until now we hadn't understood what we were describing. Now that we've guessed, we can no longer use such phrases as “running around naked in the middle of the night”. It sounds so critical and judgemental!

As BHASKER talks, a faint sound is heard from outside. It must be indistinct enough that the audience does not immediately recognize it as the sound of a woman screaming.

BHASKER: Supposing I described the holy Mass of the Catholics as “eating wafers” or an *abhishekam* as “pouring liquids over a piece of stone”? Wouldn’t people get insulted?

MOHAN: (*cutting in*) Shh! Wait a minute! What’s that I hear? (*the others fall silent*) Isn’t that them? Isn’t it time for it to begin?

LEELA: (*listening*) Yes. It is. (*rising to her feet, calling to FRIEDA*) Frieda? Bring some candles! Put out the lights! Draw the curtains! (*turning back to the other two*) Come! Dinner’s on the table. Let’s eat.

Over the last ten minutes FRIEDA has been preparing the table for dinner, slowly and methodically. By the time LEELA announces that the meal is ready, the table is set. As LEELA, BHASKER and MOHAN move towards the rear, the lights dim, the curtain falls.

SCENE THREE

The scene reopens on a darkened dining room. The dining table is in the foreground. All electric lights are off. BHASKER, LEELA and MOHAN are eating at the table, on which a couple of candles are lit. There’s a candle in the kitchen. The curtains on the window have been drawn shut but the light from outside the window is powerful enough to illuminate the space.

From outside the window can also be heard the unmistakable sounds of a woman screaming for help. The sound is truly ragged and unpleasant. Initially, it should be vigorous and determined, with distinct words – “let me go”, “help me!” and so on – but as the evening progresses it degenerates into a general screaming with a jagged, tired edge to it. The screamer grows exhausted, hiccupping to a halt, then starts again with renewed vigour, as if in response to some new assault. The screaming must be carefully paced to fit within the rhythms of the dialogue in the room, yet not appear to be controlled by it. The conversation is responsive to it, not the other way around. The intensity of the screaming must be

precisely maintained, neither too loud so as to seem right outside the window nor so soft that it can be ignored.

MOHAN: My! What a banquet you’ve produced, Leela!

LEELA: It’s Frieda’s work, really –

MOHAN: She does all the cooking?

LEELA: Well, under my supervision.

MOHAN: She’s good!

BHASKER: Oh yes. Been with us a long time.

They both glance at LEELA, who has eaten nothing and looks tense.

LEELA: (*abruptly*) You know, I don’t care what it’s about! Religious or not, I hate this sound! I hate it!

BHASKER: Really, Leela –

MOHAN: No, I see her point, Bhasker. The actual sound of it is unpleasant. Sets my teeth on edge.

BHASKER: It’ll go on now for at least another half hour –

MOHAN: So we’ll eat first and then –

LEELA: You’re still going to watch?

MOHAN: But now it’s a clear case of sociological concern! A duty!

LEELA: You know best. (*she looks around for FRIEDA*) Frieda? The children had dinner?

FRIEDA nods and leaves for the kitchen.

MOHAN: I thought you said they were asleep?

LEELA: I keep them locked inside the guest room, so that they can’t see this thing. Usually, they just fall asleep before eating their dinner.

BHASKER: Now that we know the cultural significance of the spectacle – perhaps we should let them watch?

LEELA: No! That I will absolutely not permit – whatever the secular laws of this country, I will not allow my children to be harmed by disgusting sights!

BHASKER: I don't understand how you can be so intolerant –

LEELA: I don't care what it is, religious ceremony or whatnot! All I know is that it's shocking and should be stopped!

BHASKER: And you haven't even seen it!

MOHAN: Besides, what about the harm they suffer from being cooped up in one little room all evening?

LEELA: I don't care what it is. As long as there's *that* going on, they're going to stay locked up inside.

BHASKER: You would prefer that the children become mindless vegetables than that they –

The doorbell rings suddenly making them all jump. LEELA looks terrified.

LEELA: Oh! Who could that be at this hour!

BHASKER: Are we expecting anyone?

LEELA: No, no one at all! It might be something awful! Should Frieda open the door or not?

FRIEDA walks slowly to the door.

BHASKER: Tell her to put the chain on, then see who it is – no point taking risks!

LEELA: Frieda! Put the chain on! Don't let anyone in. *(the doorbell rings again)* Ooh!

MOHAN: He's impatient, whoever it is!

LEELA: It's all so frightening!

FRIEDA, having opened the door cautiously, sees the visitor, then stands aside to let them in. Enter NAINA.

NAINA: Hello, hello, hello!

LEELA: It's Naina!

NAINA: Oh, sorry! You've started your dinner?

LEELA: Oh ... no problem. *(she's clearly ill at ease)*

BHASKER: Naina! What a ... pleasant surprise!

NAINA: Long time no see.

LEELA: Uh, won't you join us? *(appealing to FRIEDA)* Frieda!

FRIEDA peers towards the table, awaiting instructions.

BHASKER: And what brings you here at this hour?

NAINA: *(laughing)* Come on, Bhasker, it's only nine-thirty!

LEELA: Please sit, Naina ... I'll get Frieda to bring plates. But where's Surinder?

NAINA: Thanks, but don't bother, please! We've already eaten.

LEELA: Have something?

NAINA: No really, Leela! Don't bother, we thought we'd take a chance.

BHASKER: You should do that more often.

NAINA: It's been such a long time since we dropped by!

Remember, the last time was when – *(she looks around, registering the candles for the first time)* How funny! There was a power failure then, too!

LEELA: *(without thinking)* It's not a power failure! *(she stops suddenly)*

NAINA: *(laughingly)* Then why the candles? Someone's birthday?

(looks pointedly at MOHAN to whom she has not been introduced)

BHASKER: No, but have you met? This is Mohan Ram – Naina –

NAINA: Hi – don't get up!

MOHAN: Hello.

LEELA: Naina and I were school friends.

NAINA: Don't say that! It makes me feel ancient!

LEELA: We're all ancient these days.

BHASKER: So – but where is Surinder?

NAINA: He's gone to get some petrol. We didn't want to run short on the way home.

BHASKER: He'll have to go quite a distance. There isn't any place close by.

From outside, the whimpering is becoming noticeable once more.

LEELA: *(trying desperately to mask the sound)* So – so – how are things, Naina?

NAINA: Oh, fine! I wanted to bring Shashi, you know, but I thought the children might be asleep by the time we got here.

LEELA: *(quickly)* Yes, they're off to bed early these days.

NAINA: How long it's been! The flat's looking so different ...

LEELA: *(desperately)* Seen – seen any movies lately, Naina?

NAINA: *(grins)* Nothing! Not even on TV!

BHASKER: And Surinder? How's his ... the business?

NAINA: *(surprised)* Didn't he speak to you yesterday? He's quitting –

BHASKER: Oh, uh, yes ... but he ... uh, he mentioned something about – expansion plans –

An anguished cry is heard. NAINA stiffens, turns around.

BHASKER: *(raising his voice)* Maybe I'm mixing him up with someone else – oh! I know who! It's ...

NAINA: What's that?

LEELA: *(deadpan)* What?

NAINA: That ... *(turns to the window, then back to the others)* Didn't you hear it? It sounded like someone calling for help!

LEELA: I don't hear anything.

Another cry.

NAINA: No ... see? Didn't you hear it? It's coming from there, from outside ... *(she starts to get up)*

BHASKER: It's nothing really, Naina. Just a – a –

MOHAN: It's some sort of religious ceremony. The local slum dwellers putting on a programme.

NAINA: A religious ceremony? How strange – I mean, what festival is it? *(looking towards the window)* I mean, are you sure? It sounds more as if someone's calling for help ...

BHASKER: That's what it sounds like, but ...

NAINA: *(decisively)* I'll just take a look – you never know –

BHASKER: Naina, I think you should sit down.

LEELA: *(to BHASKER)* Why don't you just explain? It'll look so bad otherwise.

NAINA: It really doesn't sound religious ...

LEELA: That's what I said!

MOHAN: We all agree it sounds bizarre, not at all religious. But then I think the drums sound quite awful, too – you know, during some of these festivals when they go around beating their drums all night ...

LEELA: *(trying to whip up the topic)* Oh yes, I hate the drums too. So insensitive!

MOHAN: And imagine what it must be like when someone's ill!

NAINA: *(not wanting to shift focus)* I mean – it doesn't – I don't know, but doesn't it sound as if someone is really calling for help?

The screaming is louder now.

BHASKER: *(smoothly)* It's part of the ritual, you see.

NAINA: But – *what* ritual? Can't I just have a look? I mean, I'd like to see for myself what they're doing –

BHASKER: *(gravely)* I wouldn't, Naina, really – I mean, seriously, it's better not to look –

NAINA: *(amused by the gravity)* Why? Don't tell me it's bad luck!

BHASKER: *(still grave)* Yes, that's just what I mean: it's bad luck to watch these things.

LEELA: Bad luck?

MOHAN: *(picking up the thread)* Yes! With certain religious rites – non-believers aren't meant to watch.

NAINA: Are you serious?

LEELA: *(bewildered, to BHASKER and MOHAN)* But – but – then, what about the lights, why do they do it out in the open, why do they break our windows if they don't

want us to watch – *(stops, realizing she has said too much)*

NAINA: Windows?

BHASKER: Frankly, Naina, this is really something we don't want to talk about –

NAINA: Now I think I must look! *(gets up)*

BHASKER: *(stopping her)* Really, Naina, it's not worth seeing.

NAINA: But I must, I can't bear to hear this sound and not look. Even if it's something religious, it sounds as if it should be stopped!

LEELA: *(triumphantly)* That's just what I said!

BHASKER: Naina –

But she pushes him aside and goes to the window. She opens the curtains. There is a breathless silence in the room, the screaming from outside being the only sound. NAINA peers out of the window, shielding her eyes against the glare of the lights. Her attention is caught. She gasps, her hand to her mouth. Then a strangled sound comes out of her, midway between a retch and a cry. Both MOHAN and BHASKER have got to their feet. They go to her assistance.

NAINA: Aungh! *(she pushes herself away from the window. BHASKER catches her by the shoulders, steers her away)*
... Aungh!

MOHAN remains at the window, now looking out himself.

BHASKER: There, there – I told you it was better not to see –

NAINA: Someone's being ... *(she fights for her voice)*. They're – they're – *(she dry retches)*

BHASKER: Don't say anything out loud. Leela will get upset!

MOHAN remains at the window, mesmerized.

NAINA: Someone's being – *(she still cannot complete her statement. She dry retches again)* there's a woman being –

MOHAN: *(over his shoulder)* Dragged around by the foot.

LEELA, who has been sitting motionless, now holds her head with both hands, covering her ears.

Bhasker: *(brightly)* Do you think it can be part of the ritual, Mohan?

NAINA: What ritual? That's no ritual! That's a – a –

BHASKER: *(covering NAINA'S mouth)* No ... no, don't. Leela's hypersensitive. And I don't want her to know ...

NAINA: *(pushing his hand away)* But what can you mean, saying it's a ritual! We must *do* something about it, get it stopped, call the police!

BHASKER: Shhh ... shhhh ... No. You see – it happens every day.

NAINA: Every day!

BHASKER: Well, every night ... around this time ...

NAINA: *(she stares at him, almost hopeful)* You mean – you mean – it's some sort of *show*? It's not real, it's just some sort of – no! It must be real! They were really naked! *(turning on BHASKER)* What are you saying!

BHASKER: There's nothing we can do about it. We just have to ignore it.

LEELA: *(though her ears have been covered, she hears the last remark)* No, we don't! We can call the police!

NAINA: *(to BHASKER)* Then she knows?

BHASKER: No – she's only heard the sound. She's never seen it.

An agonized spasm of screaming enters the room and NAINA reels away, her eyes shut tight. She starts to retch again. LEELA gets up and leads her away to the bedroom.

MOHAN: *(mildly exhilarated, turns from the window to speak to BHASKER, who has come up to stand next to him)* Well, well, well!

BHASKER: What d'you think?

MOHAN: This changes things, of course!

They watch through the window as they speak.

BHASKER: The victim being a woman, you mean?

MOHAN: Yes.

BHASKER: You think, then, that it may not be a religious festival at all?

MOHAN: Oh, I wouldn't rule it out entirely, no, not at all.

BHASKER: It's hard to be certain of anything at this distance ...

MOHAN: And yet ...

BHASKER: One might say ...

MOHAN: All things considered ...

BHASKER: The four men, the woman, the nakedness, the screaming, the exhibitionism ...

MOHAN: It – could – still – be – religious.

BHASKER: Really?

MOHAN: In fact, not just any religious ritual but – you know what it reminds me of?

BHASKER: No, what?

LEELA returns, subdued.

MOHAN: An exorcism!

BHASKER: Well! I never thought of that!

MOHAN: That would explain the beating, wouldn't it?

BHASKER: Yes, especially the *kind* of beating –

MOHAN: Earlier, I saw them actually sort of pounding and kicking – in rhythm, almost –

BHASKER: See, they're kicking her –

MOHAN: Yes, around the stomach and the – uh – chest and in the face.

BHASKER: And there now – they're hitting her with their fists, aren't they?

MOHAN: Yes, that too.

BHASKER: And now ... they're holding her legs apart –

MOHAN: One man at each leg, spread wide apart –
They both watch in silence, for a few moments, as a fresh bout of screaming starts.

BHASKER: Hmmm. Well, you know, illiterate people believe that when a demon possesses a woman, it is always via the – uh – *lower orifice*.

MOHAN: Yes, of course, and that's why, earlier, they were dragging her around in that ungainly position, as if to coax the demon to come out –

BHASKER: Often, in an exorcism, the possessed person is already in great agony, has convulsions and screams loudly and recklessly, sometimes in a hoarse, unnatural voice ...

MOHAN: There we go! That explains the ugly sound of the voice!

BHASKER: Look at her struggle!

MOHAN: Like the very Devil!

BHASKER: And there's so much blood!

MOHAN: Oh yes! From being dragged about on that concrete, I suppose. Blood around the mouth as well – which explains the gurgling sound of the screaming.

BHASKER: Isn't it astounding that someone in such a condition has the energy left to scream?

MOHAN: They say that people under a demon's power, even women, have the strength of three big men ...

BHASKER: Funny how it is most often women who become possessed ...

Pause while screams intensify.

MOHAN: They are more susceptible ...

BHASKER: The weaker sex, after all ...

NAINA *returns to the room.*

LEELA: *(with finality)* It's a rape, isn't it?
Both men spin around, guiltily.

MOHAN: *(as if affronted by the word)* No!

BHASKER: Of course not!

MOHAN: Not at all!

BHASKER: What proof do we have?

NAINA: What proof do you need? Just look outside the window, and you'll see them at it!

LEELA: So. We are listening to the sounds of a woman being raped. Outside our window, under the lights.

BHASKER: Don't overreact, Leela, it's almost definitely an exorcism.

MOHAN: Don't you see, that's the only situation which explains why this is being repeated night after night. I read somewhere that there's a pattern to demonic possessions, that the fits come on at regular times, every day.

BHASKER: Though – you know – as it's a different woman every night it's rather unlikely that they'd each be possessed by the same, very punctual, demon!

NAINA: You're ... you're mad! Both of you – you're talking nonsense! Just one look outside the window and you'll know it's rape!

MOHAN: My! You must've seen a lot of rape, Naina, to recognize it at one glance!

NAINA: Three men holding down one woman, with her legs pulled apart, while the fourth thrusts his – organ – into her! What would *you* call that – a poetry reading?

BHASKER: But the beating, then? The brutality? If all that they wanted was a little sex, why would they go to the trouble of so much violence?

NAINA: Most forms of rape, especially gang rape, are accompanied by extreme physical violence!

MOHAN: But are all the rapists normally naked, like these people out there?

BHASKER: And do they usually perform under the lights, in front of an audience of decent, respectable people?

MOHAN: And do they repeat the act, night after night, at the same location?

NAINA is silent, as she tries to find a response to this.

LEELA: *(suddenly but quietly)* I don't care what it is. I want to call the police and have this horrible nuisance stopped.

BHASKER: And listen, there's one more extremely important consideration to be taken into account ... *(there is a note of triumph in his voice)*

NAINA: *(disgusted)* What? What's left?

BHASKER: She could be a whore, you know!

LEELA: Ugh!

NAINA: A whore! Do you think that's what she is?

MOHAN: Of course, she's with four men at once!

NAINA: *(uncertainly)* Is that enough to prove that she's a whore?

BHASKER: A decent woman would never be with four men at once.

NAINA: But she could have been abducted from somewhere, been brought here and ...

MOHAN: Decent women would never submit to this sort of thing.

LEELA: *(dully)* If she's a whore, does it mean you won't call the police?

BHASKER: If she's a whore, Leela, then, this isn't rape ... so on what grounds could we call the police?

NAINA: Why? A whore can't be raped? Is that the law?

MOHAN: Oh come on! After all, what is rape?

NAINA: *(uncertainly)* Rape is ... when a woman is *forced* ... to have sex –

MOHAN: *(confidently)* And what is a whore?

NAINA: (*unhappily*) A whore ...

BHASKER: (*triumphant*) A whore is a woman whose whole livelihood is sex!

LEELA: (*with distaste*) A whore is a woman without shame.

NAINA: But – does that mean that only decent women can be raped?

MOHAN: Of course!

BHASKER: After all, what does a whore have to lose?

NAINA: Why – I mean –

MOHAN: Come on! A whore is not decent, so a whore cannot be raped!

NAINA: (*stubbornly*) But then, if only decent women can be raped, what is the point of being decent?

MOHAN: Tch! She's getting all confused!

LEELA: What are you saying, Naina!

BHASKER: Listen ... (*quelling the others*) listen ... you see that out there? (*he gestures*) Now ... that ... that is the point of being a decent woman! (*dramatic pause*) You see, if she were a decent woman, we people would go to her rescue! (*pause*) She is not, and so she's being left to her fate!

NAINA: (*lamely*) Surely, I mean, even a whore has the right to choose her clients?

MOHAN: Choose her clients! A whore just takes what she gets!

BHASKER: Whatever rights a woman has, they are lost the moment she becomes a whore.

LEELA: (*dully*) How horrible it must be to be a whore.

NAINA: You mean, if she's a whore there's nothing we can do about all this?

MOHAN: What's there to do? We can either watch or not watch – that's all.

BHASKER: Why should we get involved with some filthy woman and her paramours?

LEELA: (*dully*) Why are we sitting here talking about this? Why can't we call the police?

NAINA: But listen! The woman's not just being raped, she's being brutalized as well!

MOHAN: Where is the question of rape, I don't know –

BHASKER: Look. These things go on all the time, all over the city. Who are we to interfere?

LEELA: Please. Let's send for the police and be done with it.

MOHAN: It's just that, this time, you can see it in front of you. That's all.

BHASKER: That's the only difference.

NAINA: (*no longer sure of anything*) You think these things happen all the time?

MOHAN: All around us, it's going on – whores, pimps, prostitutes, violence ...

BHASKER: It's a hard world out there, Naina, a hard world. People like us – there's just no contact at all.

LEELA: Call the police. Please. Please.

NAINA: Even all this ... four men at once ... beating ... hitting ... kicking ...

MOHAN: I mean, who knows? Who knows how these people

live?

BHASKER: They're like animals, really. Decent people like us, we can't understand their lives at all.

LEELA: Please call the police.

NAINA: Listen – but supposing she isn't a whore?

MOHAN: How would we prove it either way?

NAINA: Surely there must be some way of telling a decent woman from a whore!

BHASKER: It becomes difficult once their clothes are off and they're covered in blood and filth ...

NAINA: What sort of clothes do these women out there wear? That should tell us something ...

BHASKER: Usually just rags. Dirty bits of cloth.

LEELA: We – must – call – the – police!

NAINA: Well, that doesn't sound much like a whore, does it? I mean, I thought whores were gaudy and vulgar.

MOHAN: Depends what kind they are.

BHASKER: The poor ones are quite tattered.

MOHAN: And they must be poor or else why would they submit to this?

LEELA: Call the police. Please. Call the police.

NAINA: Leela's right. It must be terrible to be a whore.

MOHAN: Terrible, yes.

BHASKER: They live at the outer limits of human society –

MOHAN: In a jungle of shame and disgrace –

LEELA: Let's call the police. Please. Please.

NAINA: By losing their vulnerability to rape, whores lose their right to be women? Is that what you mean?

MOHAN: Right. After all, finally, the difference between men and women is that women are vulnerable to rape ...

BHASKER: And men are not.

LEELA: Call – the – police. Call – the – police.

NAINA: (*getting into the litany*) And women believe they are vulnerable to rape –

MOHAN: And men do not.

NAINA: And women are decent enough to be raped ...

MOHAN: And men are not.

LEELA: The police. Please call the police!

BHASKER: After all ... what is a woman but someone decent enough to be raped?

MOHAN: And what is a man but someone too indecent to be raped?

NAINA: But if men are too indecent to be raped does it mean that men are whores?

LEELA *screams, bringing the discussion to a halt.*

LEELA: AAAAAAAH!

NAINA: Quick! She's hysterical! (*tries to hold LEELA'S head still*)

LEELA: AAAAAAAHH!

BHASKER: Frieda, water!

NAINA: Leela, Leela!

LEELA: AAAAAAAHHHHH!

MOHAN: Come on, now, come on –

NAINA: Don't take it so hard, Leela, no one's going to hurt you.

BHASKER: I told you she's hypersensitive!

LEELA: AAAAAAAHHHHHHHHH! (*sobbing now*)

FRIEDA brings the water.

NAINA: Here, drink this.

LEELA: No! I don't want any water! I want the police! I want the police!

BHASKER: All right, Leela, all right! We'll call them right away.

LEELA: You promise?

MOHAN: This minute.

NAINA: After all, whatever the truth behind this is (*she gestures towards the window*) it's a nuisance and must be stopped.

MOHAN: Think of the effect it's having on youngsters!

BHASKER: Which police should we call?

NAINA: Dial 100, I think?

MOHAN: But that's just the general number. We should call the police of this district.

LEELA: Tell them we're being tortured by some goondas!

BHASKER: That's hardly true, now, Leela, is it? I mean, who would believe such a complaint?

LEELA: I don't care what they believe. The sounds torture me. Tell the police I can't sleep at night ... tell the police the goondas must go away and take their dirty whores somewhere else! (*she is losing control again*) I don't care what they do, or who they are or what they are – I just want them far away, out of my hearing ... out of my

life ...

NAINA: She's right. It's an assault on all of us, to have to see them and hear them like this –

LEELA: Are you going to call the police? (*the hysterical note has returned*)

BHASKER: Yes, yes! Look! I'm on the phone! I'm dialling the number ... one ... zero ... zero ... oh damn! It's got disconnected! I'll try again –

Suddenly, the doorbell rings. LEELA, being comforted by NAINA, whimpers. FRIEDA, by the door, awaits instructions.

NAINA: Oh, that must be Surinder, of course. What an age he's been!

FRIEDA opens the door. SURINDER comes in, friendly and unaware.

SURINDER: Hello, hello!

NAINA: Oh Surinder! Thank god you're here!

SURINDER: Why –

NAINA: It's Leela!

MOHAN: She's hysterical –

SURINDER: What –

BHASKER: (*a little apologetically*) We have to call the police.

SURINDER: Police?

MOHAN: Because of some goondas outside.

SURINDER: What goondas –

MOHAN: There are some goondas outside, with a whore –

BHASKER: And the sounds disturbed Leela so much that she became hysterical ...

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NAINA: Really, it's a terrible incident, the whole thing!

MOHAN: It's been going on for weeks!

SURINDER: But –

MOHAN: Take a look outside – you'll see –

SURINDER goes to the window. There is silence in the room as he watches. He grips the window grille fiercely. By the time he turns around, he is mute with rage. BHASKER goes to the bar, planning to make SURINDER a drink. SURINDER returns to the table, unable to speak. Finally, he leans on the table, digging his knuckles in.

SURINDER: *(controlling his voice with effort)* Let's go and wipe them out! *(in his passion he sweeps a glass off the table)*

FRIEDA immediately comes forward to clear away the broken glass. The others pay no attention to her or the glass. BHASKER leaves the bar, perturbed.

BHASKER: What do you mean –

MOHAN: Kill them?

NAINA: Surinder, please ...

LEELA: What, all of us?

SURINDER: There's only one way to deal with animals like this!

BHASKER: I say –

MOHAN: But we can't just kill them!

LEELA: You might get hurt!

BHASKER: I'm in service!

MOHAN: Everyone will see us, we can't take a risk like that.

SURINDER: *(silencing the others with his voice)* I'm telling you – these bastards understand only one thing: violence!

NAINA: Surinder –

BHASKER: Yes, but we can't just kill them!

SURINDER: Have you seen what they're doing to that woman?

MOHAN: But who are we to decide that they should die?

LEELA: Can't we just call the police?

SURINDER: The police won't lift a finger – what do they care if some poor woman is being raped?

BHASKER: I agree they should be stopped, but we can't just –

SURINDER: And why not? As it is, that woman's life is over. She'll commit suicide, if she lives at all!

MOHAN: I've never killed anyone in my life.

LEELA: Won't you get into trouble?

SURINDER: Listen. Either we go down there and deal with those fuckers or we sit here and let them piss in our faces!

LEELA: Shee!

NAINA: Surinder, don't get excited, now –

SURINDER: You shut up! This is no time for women's nonsense!

BHASKER: *(affronted)* What d'you mean, "piss in our faces"?

MOHAN: Why should we get involved in what these people do?

BHASKER: After all, they haven't actually done us any harm –

LEELA: We just want them to go away somewhere else –

SURINDER: Listen. Listen. What do you think those turds are doing? Just screwing one woman, is it? And they have nowhere else to go so they come and do it here, is it? After putting on the spotlights, so that all you nice people can watch? *(he pauses dramatically)* They're

screwing this whole bloody colony, dammit! They know that we're all standing here! Shitting in our pants, too scared to do anything but watch! They're making jackasses of us! (*appealing to Bhasker*) You! Don't you see that?

BHASKER: Well, I –

MOHAN: Wait a moment, Bhasker, I think I can see – uh, Surinder? – Surinder's point –

BHASKER: Oh sorry! Surinder – this is Mohan –

SURINDER: Hello, yes – but you see my point? We must act at once!

MOHAN: You really feel it'll be better than going to the police?

SURINDER: See. If we call the police, they'll come two weeks later, there'll be an enquiry, people will be questioned, a little noise will be made and then we will all go to sleep again. If we go ourselves – *bas!* The matter is over at once.

BHASKER: I don't know ...

MOHAN: Even if we do it, how shall we do it? With our bare hands?

SURINDER: No, we'll use knives.

LEELA: Knives!

SURINDER: Knives are clean and quick.

BHASKER: I don't know. I don't think this is the best way.

SURINDER: All right. So what do *you* want to do?

BHASKER: I mean, after all, they're also human beings. We have to understand their problems, their –

SURINDER: And what are you – a man? Or a mouse?

NAINA: Now, Surinder, control yourself!

MOHAN: What kind of knives do we need?

SURINDER: Any kind, so long as they are sharp.

LEELA: There's that meat cleaver –

SURINDER: Ask the servant to bring all the knives.

BHASKER: But what about everyone being able to see us?

LEELA: Frieda? Bring all the knives.

FRIEDA *can be seen responding to the order, opening drawers, bringing out cutlery.*

MOHAN: We could break the lights!

NAINA: This is insane! You can't go about killing people!

BHASKER: Supposing they resist?

SURINDER: It's quite simple. We'll have one knife each –

LEELA: What – all of us!

SURINDER: The three of us'll have one knife each. They won't be expecting anything. We'll tackle one at a time.

FRIEDA *walks in with the knives and puts them on the table.*

BHASKER: What about the chowkidar?

SURINDER: We'll give him a knife too!

MOHAN: Ah, let me see –

BHASKER: Oh no! They're too blunt!

MOHAN: Here, what are these?

BHASKER: Steak knives.

SURINDER: Are there three?

LEELA: There are six!

BHASKER: Won't there be a lot of blood?

MOHAN: We could take some towels as well.

SURINDER: These should do –

NAINA: Surinder, *please!* Now stop all this nonsense!

SURINDER: (*turns on her suddenly*) Shut up or I'll kick your teeth in! (*turning back*) We'll take these –

NAINA *subsides, embarrassed. Neither she nor the others notice that the sounds outside have ceased.*

BHASKER: Listen, knives are not the way. They're too direct.

MOHAN: What d'you mean, "direct"?

BHASKER: With knives, we'll have to overpower them, *struggle* with them, catch them by surprise – and supposing they turn on us, by chance?

LEELA: Oh! It'll be so dangerous!

SURINDER: So what *do* you suggest?

MOHAN: How about petrol? We could go and throw some petrol on them –

BHASKER: No, no! Supposing we blow up as well?

LEELA: Oh, be careful!

SURINDER: So tell us – what the hell do you want us to do?

BHASKER: Well, I was just thinking ... how about acid?

MOHAN: Is there any in the house?

BHASKER: Leela, is there any acid?

SURINDER: Acid ... well, we'd need something to put it in ... you know, like bulbs –

LEELA: Ordinary light bulbs?

BHASKER: But the acid?

LEELA: There's some in the storeroom. Frieda? You know that brown bottle?

FRIEDA *has already departed on her mission.*

BHASKER: A well-stocked house!

LEELA: I'll just get the bulbs – how many?

SURINDER: Six ... seven.

MOHAN: Is it enough, just to throw it at them?

BHASKER: Why six? There's only four of them?

SURINDER: In case we miss –

MOHAN: Maybe we should wait for them to come out of the compound? And then throw it?

BHASKER: The risk of being seen is lowered then.

SURINDER: We can take knives as well, just in case.

MOHAN: Supposing someone catches us, on the way?

BHASKER: So what? We'll just be carrying a few things.

SURINDER: Everyone carries knives these days.

FRIEDA *walks in with the bottle of acid.*

BHASKER: Here's the acid, now – oh damn! There's not very much.

MOHAN: Hell! What'll we do now?

SURINDER: We could make it a combination of acid and petrol –

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BHASKER: I still feel that petrol will be too risky. And it will make a big noise. And what if something else catches fire? We'll be blamed for it.

NAINA: Supposing you set fire to the woman as well?

MOHAN: Tell you what – we could follow them in a car and run them over!

BHASKER: No ... we'd never get all four of them together, one of them might take the number and – besides, once they leave this place, what proof will we have that they were doing anything for which they deserved to be killed?

SURINDER: Bhasker's right. It'll be too difficult.

MOHAN: And besides, it might damage the car!

NAINA *moves away from the others to sit pensively at the table.*

SURINDER: I say, how about a gun? Do you have a gun, Bhasker?

BHASKER: No!

MOHAN: Guns are too noisy and besides – who can shoot?

LEELA: Here are the bulbs –

SURINDER: Supposing we electrocute them?

BHASKER: Come on! That's much too complicated –

SURINDER: No ... see, we'll throw some water at them and then we'll bring up a couple of wires and –

MOHAN: Wait a minute! I have an idea!

BHASKER
and

SURINDER: What?

MOHAN: Your mentioning guns made me think of it –

BHASKER: Meaning?

MOHAN: Why don't we go down at once and take pictures of them just as they are, naked and all, and then publish them in the papers?

LEELA: Will that be enough to stop them?

MOHAN: Of course! Don't you see? Once everyone gets to know this is going on, we'll be able to – I don't know! – organize a public lynching, or something.

SURINDER: Well, I don't know ... I still think we should beat them up a little ...

BHASKER: Supposing we find out where they live and set fire to their huts?

LEELA: Don't even say such a thing!

BHASKER: Why? Look what they're doing to us! Threatening us, breaking our windows, terrorizing our women ...

LEELA: Think of what would happen if you got caught!

NAINA: You're all too old to be running around doing things like this!

BHASKER: *(to LEELA)* You're right. Our priorities are all wrong these days. If we got caught, the civil rights people would be up in arms, defending these gutter scum.

MOHAN: But Bhasker, what about the pictures, huh?

SURINDER: Who would print them?

MOHAN: Hey, come on! Any newspaper! Pictures like these, even the foreign press would snap them up. I'm telling you, we'd make a lot of money. After all, how often does anyone see authentic pictures of a gang rape in action?

BHASKER: You've got a point. Such pictures must be very rare ...

NAINA: Most people don't just stand around taking pictures!

They all ignore her.

SURINDER: I still think we should beat them up –

MOHAN: All right. First the pictures, then the beating up.

NAINA *shakes her head to herself and looks towards the window.*

BHASKER: Well, if we're beating them up, then I think I have just the thing – some steel rods. D'you think they'll be of any use?

SURINDER: First class!

NAINA *looks suddenly alert. She gets up and goes to the window. She looks out for a moment, then back at the group, with a curious expression on her face. She closes the curtains and returns to where the rest are still talking.*

MOHAN: But Bhasker, how good is your camera?

BHASKER: Perfect – zoom-shoom, focus-pocus!

MOHAN: And a flash? We'll need one in this light.

BHASKER: Yes, that too. Leela?

LEELA: It's in the safe, in my cupboard!

SURINDER: Good, then it's decided –

MOHAN: How are we getting there?

SURINDER: We can take my car –

NAINA: You needn't bother any more!

BHASKER: What?

MOHAN: Why –

NAINA: You're too late. The screaming's stopped. *(she half turns towards the window)* There's no one left out there.

SURINDER: What're you saying!

NAINA: They've all gone!

LEELA: *(disappointedly)* Oh! Then it must be over for tonight!

The lights cut out quickly. The cast moves aside to afford an unimpeded view of the curtain over the window. On the curtain the following brief messages are projected:

"This play is based on an eyewitness account. The incident took place in Santa Cruz, Bombay, 1982.

"The characters are fictional. The incident is a fact.

"In real life, as in the play, a group of ordinary middle-class people chose to stand and watch while a woman was being brutalized in a neighbouring compound.

"In real life, as in the play, the incident took place over a period of weeks.

"And in real life, as in the play, no one went to the aid of the victims."

Each slide stays on for about five seconds. By the time the fifth one has appeared, the cast has exited. The last slide is held on the curtain. Slowly it fills over with red, till the lettering is quite obliterated.

The theatre lights come on abruptly. There is no curtain call.

NOTE

In case a slide projector is difficult to arrange, the alternative is:

LEELA: *(disappointedly)* Oh! Then it must be over for tonight!

The theatre lights dim, and the cast starts to exit. From outside the window, the harsh bright light remains on.

The text of the slides is heard as a voice-over; read in a quiet, unemotional tone, with distinct pauses between each message.

The light from behind the window turns gradually red so that by the time the last message is heard the stage is livid.

There is a pause.

Then the theatre lights come on abruptly. There is no curtain call.

END