

Working Title

FADE OUT OPENING CREDITS...

INT. PRODUCER'S OFFICE. DAY

Karan Kamal, known as KK, sits on a brown and silver throne in his brown and gold production office. Papers are strewn around his heavy desk and on the wall behind is a large, platinum-framed picture of a beaming KK with Hollywood star Goldie Hawn. The photograph was taken on her last spiritual trip to India, KK screeches into his cell, his fingers splayed excitedly. They really hit it awwwfff, he continues, and now Goldie has sent feelers (not *those* kind of feelers, haha!) about co-producing a venture involving a charismatic Mumbai gangster, a Hawaiian porn starlet, a talking cow and the Holy Ganges as scenic backdrop. Shah Rukh is interested.

Background noise continues – the camera pulls out to reveal LILA, a nervous woman in her 30s, sitting opposite KK's desk. KK clicks off his i-phone with a braying laugh, goes silent, sighs, then turns to his desk and contemplates the open script with a deep expression.

LILA (silent) : He probably hates it. That's OK, that's to be expected. He's not into indie cinema. He's more into that whole blowing up bridges thing, what the hell

was I thinking? OK, stay calm, take back the script, thank him, and leave. Dignity is everything.

A sharp SNAP. KK has cracked the spine of the script and is now leaning back, with a stoner-like expression at Lila.

KK (emphatically) : I LOVE IT. This is exactly what I've been looking for. This has...this has...today's *vibe*. Edge. Humour. It tells it like it *really, really is*.

Lila's pupils dilate in shock.

FADE TO BLACK.

January 10, 2011

No, that is not a scene from my screenplay. This exchange happened for real, a few hours ago, at seven am to be precise. I was hungover and cranky but dragged myself to KK's production 'suite' in the heart of Film City. KK quit drinking in 1998 (he claims he woke up one morning on a sidewalk in Bandra, dazed, after a night of binging on vodka-rum-whiskey-limejuice, and that was it for him). Besides, he rises early to pay obeisance to the Mother at Siddhivinayak temple. Today, he was twenty minutes late ('stuck in Mumbai traff, what can you do?'), during which time he checked the trades on his latest App, read the

opening and ending pages of my script, charged into his office, ignored me in an amiable kind of way, got on the phone to 'Goldie's guy in LA' and finally showed me out, with a 'Let's do this thing!' This, I think, was more for the benefit of KK's beaming memoirist who arrived just then, a former film journalist whose rehab stint KK has just sponsored for the third time. KK grinned equally brightly and proclaimed loudly that he has hit on the perfect title for his proposed self-help best-selling extravaganza : *How Gut Decisions Connect You To The Heart and Pulse Of The Audience – A Guide For Breaking Into 21st Century Bollywood*. Tagline : *Because if I can make it, so can you!* HarperCollins is publishing.

I've known of KK for years of course, and have always resisted the urge to make fun of him – this self-styled wunderkind producer, who drops showbiz names in every other sentence and chooses to be called only by his initials on the advice of his personal numerologist. But I've had this screenplay in my drawer for months now. And I decided it was time to get over my writer aloofness, my general disdain for the tacky machine that is Bollywood extravaganza. Come on, I'm as guilty of tackiness as anyone else, since my bills get paid courtesy of being Head Writer on Star Plus's *Mothers & Daughters*. I got this appointment with KK last week through a colleague on the soap. But I decided to actually keep it when I heard the latest rumour in Bville : KK is looking for a change of image. No more glycerine-eyed family dramas, no testosterone-filled action

lollapaloozas. He's been wanting to produce a smart, independent flick on a modest budget, a slice of life of 2000s urban Indian angst.

Enter Lila. Me, with my 10-odd years of churning out hackneyed soap plots and subbing Entertainment Tonight copy, yearning for that elusive recognition as India's answer to Charlie Kaufman and Quentin Tarantino rolled together. It takes just one film, one credit as screenwriter, and you're on the map. So they say.

If I don't sound too excited right now, it's because I can't believe my project is ON. That it's all happening so...easily.

January 17, 2011

KK and I wind up celebrating our new collaboration. Four martinis down, I pitch the idea all over again, forgetting that he's read the full script this week. In a nutshell, I think it's brilliant. *A down and out hack – with a failing heart and a penchant for alcohol - wants to leave the world with a swansong of his genuine talent. He pens a screenplay full of pain and sordidness, of the sleazy underbelly of the movie industry that's masked by the magic arc lights of cinema. His only companion – a drunk just like himself – is his girlfriend, a spectacularly failed actress. The hack creates a script of depth and meaning, which of course, never sees the light of day. And then he dies...of a failing heart? Heartbreak? Or plain cirrhosis of his abused liver?*

As of now, there isn't a working title. But KK and I both agree that it should be something in the range of *Barfly* or *Leaving Las Vegas*. Indianized, of course, with a weeping widowed mother or a disabled sister. No, not disabled. The sister could be really pretty, innocent, maybe a dancer at a bar? Our hero hates the way she is exploited; it's an angle that gives the hero a moral centre, KK says earnestly. This is a Hindi movie, after all, the hero can't be drunk just for the sake of being drunk.

I'm drunk now on more than the free-flowing booze. I'm high on the fact that KK is a kindred spirit, who, despite his gold chains, actually knows who Ingmar Bergman is. That's what you get for being judgmental, Lila. KK adds that before he decided that he needed to buy a house and feed his family and own a car and a suit and be SomeOne, he'd hitch it down to the Pune Film Institute on weekends and devour every noir film that came out of France, Korea, Iran. Those were the days, he sighs, the glint of a tear reflecting in his Rolex.

Of course, KK mentions the M word. MONEY. He can't pay me just yet, but he says this very apologetically. What I will get is my script turned into a film, my name in the opening credits. That's traction. For you writers, he says earnestly, it's about the *art*, after all. How many people get a shot at that? And with these words, he speed-dials Maria, his tortured Girl Friday-cum-secretary-cum-general slave and rattles off a list of names she needs to set up meetings with pronto. I choke on my fifth apple mojito when I hear the name Zohrab Khan, the Bruce

Willis of Bombay, the one big name who can make this really happen if he decides to star in it.

Joy. Thank you, God.

January 30, 2011

Zohrab ('Call me Zed, babe') Khan's mansion is heritage from the outside, faux shabby from within. Kitsch would be an understatement here. A cuckoo clock with a blue bird sends out electrifying squawks every thirty minutes. There is a zebra-skin covered bar in one corner of the living room which chimes out Jingle Bells every time Zed pours himself a drink, which is every thirty seconds. Or so it seems.

At first, the legendary Zed is as shy as a kitten. He leaves the talking to Rahul, his Personal Assistant, as it's called in film land. But despite my sarcastic inner voice, I like Rahul on sight. He's got wavy dark hair and intelligent eyes. He looks at me with warmth and appreciation. He whispers, Good Job. And then Zed sighs dramatically and announces that he's read the script and LOVES it. But first he wants to rant about Guns Of Revenge – the last action flick he did that was panned by the critics. He whines about the lousy marketing, bitches out the director (a young kid just back from UCLA, poor thing, naturally he's not in touch with the native audience) and trashes the cheap costume and makeup

department that made him look 50 (his real age) instead of 32 (which he believes his war-hero character was).

Mid rant, Yamini joins us. Zed's current squeeze, a dancer I recognize vaguely from MTV India's *So You Think You Can Groove?* She wears yellow shorts and a tiny bustiere and holds the ugliest little dog I've ever seen. Without a word, or even a glance at us, Yamini flops down tiredly on the electric pink sofa and snakes her naked legs over Zed's lap. Zed carries on talking as if this happens several times a day. Suki, the grotesque canine that she is, licks Zed's chin and this causes Zed – six feet four, bald and built like a tank – to lapse into absurd baby talk. Rahul grins at me covertly, I blush in return. Then I pull myself together and look away. I end up staring at Yamini again, because I suddenly realize she's wearing some sort of Hannibal Lecter contraption on her nose.

More drinks. Zed rolls a joint, shares it with Yamini. Suki starts yapping. KK, who can't stand cigarette smoke or dogs, for that matter, is so overwhelmed by the company he's in that he shrieks with orgasmic pleasure every time Zed grunts out half a word. Finally, three and a half hours into the meeting – after discussing diets, wigs, former lovers and post 9/11 conspiracy theories – Zed goes silent and intense and fixes me with an 'I'm actually a serious artiste' look.

I can't write what happened after that. I'm still in shock. In a nutshell : Zed loves the script, he just wants a bit of a rewrite. Actually, a 90 per cent rewrite. *The*

protagonist is a writer by day, but at night he trawls the streets, saving the homeless. His girlfriend is rich and is being forced by her family to marry someone else. In his despair, the sensitive writer befriends a lonely baboon at the local zoo. SUBPLOT A : An evil force is planning to blow up the building the heroine works in. SUBPLOT B : The hero's heart is failing. CLIMAX : The hero gets to know about the plot to blow up the building but his heart is giving out. His friend the baboon makes the ultimate sacrifice. The hero gets the baboon's heart in a nail-biting transplant operation. Armed with a new heart, the hero storms the building, kills the evil attackers, saves his girl and they live happily ever after.

Working title : Something like *Die Hard* – but with a Humanitarian Twist. Or, better, more like *Brave Heart* sounding. That's clever! A pun on Heart, get it? Oh, yeah, and Yamini as the girl. She deserves a role of substance after all the C-grade glam gal sidekicks she's portrayed. So feels the great Zed.

I sense only one thing through my stupor : KK jumping up and down, his face flushed with excitement. This is KILLER! This is a WINNER. What would we do without the genius input of Zohrab Khan aka Zed?

This time I'm so numb that I don't even notice Rahul's sympathetic, commiserating smile.

2 am.

January 31, 2011

On my second bottle of Sauvignon Blanc. The day's events seem far away now...and as the wine warms my blood and frees the shackles of my mind, I feel brave and belligerent. I won't back down. What good is a writer without conviction? I'm going to give KK a piece of my mind. How could he put us both through this absurdity?

Drunk dialing. Always a bad idea. But what the hell. Oops, wrong number. Try again. KK answers on the eighth ring.

'Ye-lllo! KK here.' A pause. Then I hear him again, talking to someone else.

'Tanu, stop that. STOP THAT.' Hysterical giggling follows. Then KK in his straight voice again. 'Sorry. She's...just...Babe, I SAID NO! Sorry, Laila...Lila... OK, shoot.'

It all comes tumbling out in a haze of alcohol and indignant pride. I'm an *educated* person, come on now...I can't stoop so low as to write this level of *tripe*. I want to have written a good script, not...

He cuts me off and suddenly I know why KK – despite being on the fringes of this murky town – has survived so long.

'Here's what I want, Lila. I want a film that goes from being on paper to reality. OK? Zohrab Khan can make it happen because he – unlike you and, I admit, myself – has star power. Clout. Audience pull. That's what matters in the movies made in this country.'

I go silent. KK breathes deeply.

'So now, I have three bits of real good advice for you. Free of charge. So listen up, if you want to have a career writing movies. One. Forget these notions of high art and sensibility. Remember this : *Only when you die will you cease to feel ridiculous*. Two. Knowing the above, never, ever complicate things further by drunk dialing your producer. Three. Get. On. With. The. Rewrite.'

He clicks off. I feel the beginning of another hangover from hell.

March 14, 2011

The rewrite is done. I haven't bothered to bind it this time. I fling down the stack of sheets triumphantly on KK's desk. He is pleased, pats me on the shoulder in appreciation of the Good Girl that I am. Tells me this work will pay off. I smile,

telling him I expect payment for the time I've put in rewriting. He smiles back, saying we'll discuss terms right after the meeting with Zed today. I notice for the first time that KK has teeth shaped almost like that *Twilight* guy's...that vampire character that pre-teens are all so crazy about these days.

The sharp buzz of an intercom deflates the tension between us. KK answers with a beam and an energetic Ye...llo! And then he goes silent. 'Hmmm...yes...are you sure it can't happen today? In the evening? Any time you say...Rahulji, I know you can't help it...but, come on...OK, OK. I understand.'

KK hangs up. The meeting is off. Postponed indefinitely. Suki had a stroke this morning, flopped down weakly, then got up, ran wildly around the room, had a heart attack, and dropped dead. Zed is hysterical with grief and has gone into mourning. He won't see anybody. Not even Yamini.

Our futures flutter uncertainly in the air, like the pages of this unbound – and now very mutilated – draft of the script.

April 12, 2011

Rahul is incredible. Gorgeous...principled...professional...*and* kind. He's gotten us a meeting with Zed – the first meeting Zed is having 'after the tragedy.'

It's a different Zed we sit before today. No cuckoo clock. No chiming bar. No haze of marijuana. No Yamini. Zed explains that he's taking a sabbatical from the movies. He needs to find his spiritual path in order to heal. He's off to Tibet with his ex-wife, who very kindly called to pay her condolences on dear, departed Suki.

KK and I shuffle out, dazed and confused all over again. But KK being KK, is back to playing the optimist.

'We have a script. We'll go to someone else. Forget Zohrab Khan or Zed whatever it is he calls himself...he's an old hag now anyway.'

Rahul joins us as we pull out of Zed's runway-sized drive. He mutters an apology and shakes KK's hand. He then suggests dropping me off...don't I live near Versova Beach? That's where he's headed.

On the way, it all tumbles out...about the half-hearted rewrite...how Zed has actually solved my dilemma. I have my original script...I'll just wait for a better opportunity. In the meantime, I'm going to add all these new twists to it, really hone the scenes...with the right star-actor and producer, I know it can work. Rahul is wonderful. He listens, never interrupts.

He comes up to my apartment. No more industry talk, he says. I want us to know each other properly. A brief bio on Rahul : A talented, but overlooked middle child. Small town, silent dreams of 'making it.' No straight-laced engineering or accountant career for him, thank you. Arrived in Mumbai at 18 with a suitcase and a few bucks (from doting Mum; Dad wasn't talking to him), put himself through a film production course by night, worked with film crews by day, temped for Zed, became his Golden Boy after smoothly handling an incident involving Yamini, the police, a furious ex-wife, a pusher in drag, and a gram of coke. Today, Rahul is all of 26, but he's already paying off installments on his very own bachelor pad, and when his proud folks visit (Dad too), he organizes tours to film sets and photo-ops with Zed. But he says it all dryly, like he knows he's meant for better and purer, and he's going to get there. A brief bio on me : A talented, but neurotic first-born. A comfortable, big-city life in Delhi, where my teenage room is twice the size of my entire current digs; a hard worker but prone to meltdowns that inevitably cause me to quit good writing gigs 'on principle.' Today, at thirty-five, I'm stretching the last of my TV savings. Also, my last relationship ended with my slacker lover choosing to marry a 'stable' girl from his hometown and feeling so good about it, that he invited me to the wedding. Worse, I would have gone, except I had nothing suitable to wear.

Bygones. It's all about the moment, the present, the reason why we – over and over again – choose a life of mercurial adventure over the dull thump of routine.

Rahul and I kiss wildly, then make love. For the first time in months, I feel truly alive. Orgasmically hopeful.

April 22, 2011

It's been 10 days, and I'm like a cat caught on a landmine, forget the hot tin roof. No phone call from Rahul. I've called him at his office at Zed's, but he's quit that job and no one knows where he could be. Leaving my cell phone free, should he ring, I use my landline number to make calls at 20-second intervals to KK. There's no film – but I want to be paid something at least for the rewrite. And I'm antsy as hell because there's never been any kind of contract between us.

KK is out, this meeting, that meeting, at the ISKCON temple, away with wife and kids, etc. Etcetera. Etceteraceteraceteracetera.

So I show up at KK's office, literally barge my way in to the shoebox reception outside his sorry cabin. He's in there...I can hear his shrill laughter. Then the door swings open and out walks KK, followed by a calmly, *slyly* smiling Rahul.

In a nutshell : I show icy, barely controlled, rage. KK says oh so politely that there is a check for my efforts with Maria. He's paying me approximately 5,000 rupees for the painstaking rewrite I did. Fair of him, no? After all, he's not the sort to

cheat anyone, least of all writers. And now excuse him, please, he and Rahul have a meeting to attend.

They walk away. I stare in blind horror. I remember the soft sunset at the beach, Rahul's patient eyes locked in mine...listening to all the ideas I had that day that came tumbling out of my passionately, just-kissed lips.

Like a beggar, I sign for my cheque. I debate ripping it up, but then I get practical. It'll pay the phone bill this month, if nothing else. Maria smiles in a gentle way and lets on that Rahul is writing KK's next script. She suspects it's a revised version of my original screenplay. But with fresh twists. And with the assurance that Samar Singh, a rising TV star with a movie future, is going to act in it. He and Rahul were college buddies, so he agreed to a meeting instantly. That's where Rahul and KK are headed right now.

I stagger out into the glaring sunshine. Drag myself home. Where I draw the curtains. Strip off my clothes. Drop onto my ripped futon. Pull up the covers around me. And descend into a deep, dreamless sleep.

September 15, 2011

Five months of summer heat, followed by humid rain and thick dust. I haven't had the energy to write an entry.

I've also been crazily busy. I got my old job back on *Mothers & Daughters* (luckily, I didn't have to grovel for it) and have just been offered a script consultancy gig on a new series, *Heartbreak Hospital* aka *Sanjivani*. Good old television, the ultimate safety net. There's also other drudgery. Website text work for an oil corporate, and a free-of-charge company flyer to type up for my landlord who let me stay on despite my rent cheque bouncing back in June. Writing is humbling, if nothing else.

Mumbai has a way of numbing you into boredom and dejection; and yet moving so fast that you can't help but be consistently splashed over by its grimy tidal wave of fragile optimism. I lost twenty pounds running and then slipped on green monsoon moss, cracking my elbow on the concrete. I dated the cameraman on *Heartbreak* – cute, and we text-flirted for a whole month, but when we finally 'did coffee' all he could talk about was his broken light meter and how the DOP was going to fire him. Another mishap : Running into Vague Priya, from school, on a visit home. She seemed alright so I Facebook-friend-request-accepted her out of a deranged sense of nostalgia. Now she posts daily updates about her cat and anecdotes about pet food. Defriend. Sometimes you just have to move on.

Anyway, on to other things.

The buzz is that my erstwhile script is actually being made, though no one knows when production will start. I'm in touch with Maria who tells me Samar Singh is

on board to star, but he doesn't want to play a writer. It's boring, he reportedly told Rahul, it's too *passive*. All writers do is sit in a room and type. Why can't he be a body builder or a boxer instead? This way he gets to show off his eight pack abs. Very important for a rising movie star.

KK of course, fully agrees. So Rahul is rewriting yet again, and now that there's talk of a British financier entering the picture, further buzz is that the setting will change too. None of this urban angst crap. This is India, and India sells abroad only when there is poverty and deadly suffering in every frame. Rewrite number 25 coming up. Good luck with that, Rahul.

Still no working title...but it'll be something on the lines of *Slumdog Millionaire*. Or if Samar gets his way, *Body Builder Billionaire*? Whatever sells.

As for Zohrab Khan, the esteemed Zed, I saw him on Spirit TV last week. He's got a beard now, and looks skinny after a nasty bout of dysentery he caught somewhere in the Himalayas. But he appears peaceful. He says it's because he's quit acting, taken up carpentry and reunited with his former wife and kids.

Yamini – after her unceremonious exit from Zed's life – has reinvented herself as a reality show star on Sky TV's 'Women Who Get Dumped By Famous Men.' People think she's naïve, the classic bimbo with a heart of gold. Her on-screen

innocence is as fake as her reconstructed nose, but I don't grudge her. She's just another woman trying to survive, I guess.

As for me, I'm doing alright. Plugging along. I'm writing, I'm working. Maybe someday I'll write another film. It's important not to get *too* cynical about things. Keep writing. Keep working. Keep the Faith. What else can you do?

Selina Sheth