

Working Title

Selina Sheth

FADE OUT OPENING CREDITS...

INT. PRODUCER'S OFFICE. DAY (Scene synopsis)

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. 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 beams, his fingers splayed excitedly. He adds that they 'really hit it awffff' 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. His I-Phone shrieks. KK clicks it off with a nervous, 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. 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 your script. Say thank you. 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 entry was 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, now 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', then told me he loved my work, 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 stint in rehab KK has sponsored thrice in the past. KK proclaimed loudly that he has 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!* Harper Collins is publishing.

I've known KK for years 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 writerly 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 B-ville : 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 ten-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 celebrated our new collaboration today. Four martinis down, I pitched the idea all over again, forgetting that he'd read the whole 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 said 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. KK told me 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 sighed, the glint of a tear reflecting in his Rolex.

Of course, KK mentioned the M word. MONEY. He can't pay me just yet, but he said 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 said earnestly, it's about the *art*, after all. How many people get a shot at that? And with these words, he speed-dialed Maria, his tortured Girl Friday-cum-secretary-cum-general slave and rattled off a list of names she needs to set up meetings with pronto. I choked 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. We arrived at noon. A cuckoo clock with a blue bird sent out electrifying squawks every thirty minutes. I saw 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 was every thirty seconds. Or so it seemed.

At first, the legendary Zed was as shy as a kitten. He left the talking to Rahul, his Personal Assistant, as it's called in film land. But despite my sarcastic inner voice, I liked Rahul on sight. He's got wavy dark hair and intelligent eyes. He looked at me with warmth and appreciation. 'Good Job,' he whispered. And then Zed sighed dramatically and announced that he'd read the script and LOVES it. But first he wanted to rant about Guns Of Revenge, the last action flick he did that was panned by the critics. He whined about the lousy marketing, bitched out the director (a young kid just back from UCLA and clearly not in touch with the native audience) and trashed the cheap costume and makeup department that made him look fifty (his real age) instead of thirty-two (which he believes his war-hero character to be).

Mid rant, Yamini joined us. Zed's current squeeze, a dancer I recognized vaguely from MTV India's So You Think You Can Groove? She was in yellow shorts and a tiny bustiere and held the ugliest little dog I've ever seen. Without a word, or even a glance at us, Yamini flopped down tiredly on the electric pink sofa and snaked her naked legs over Zed's lap. Zed carried on talking. Suki, the grotesque canine that she is, licked Zed's chin and this caused Zed – six feet four, bald and built like a tank – to lapse into absurd baby talk. Rahul grinned at me covertly, I blushed in return. Yes, I did, but I pulled myself together and looked away. I ended up staring at Yamini again, because I suddenly realized she was wearing some sort of Hannibal Lecter contraption on her nose.

More drinks. Zed rolled a joint, shared it with Yamini. Suki started yapping. KK, who can't stand cigarette smoke or dogs, for that matter, was so overwhelmed by the company he was in that he shrieked with orgasmic pleasure every time Zed grunted 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 went silent and intense and fixed 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 ninety-nine 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 felt the great Zed.

KK jumped 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?'

By then I was so numb that I didn't even notice Rahul's sympathetic, commiserating smile.

January 31, 2011

2 am

I've drained the last of the second bottle of Sauvignon Blanc. The day's events seem far away now. Earlier, the wine warmed my blood and freed the shackles of my mind, I felt brave and belligerent, I decided to Not Back Down. What good is a writer without conviction? And so I chose 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. So I tried again. KK answered on the eighth ring.

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

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

It all came 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...

KK cut me off then. I think I now understand how KK – despite being only 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 was quiet. KK took a deep breath.

'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 clicked off. I felt the beginning of another hangover from hell, and it hasn't subsided.

March 14, 2011

The rewrite is done. I didn't bother to bind it this time, I just flung down the stack of sheets triumphantly on KK's desk. He was pleased, and patted me on the shoulder in appreciation of the Good Girl that I am. He told me this work will pay off. I smiled, and told him I expected payment for the time I've put in rewriting. He stretched languidly and said we'd discuss terms right after the meeting with Zed today. I noticed 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 deflated the tension between us. KK answered with a beam and an energetic 'Ye...llo!' And then he lapsed into his usual silence. '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 then hung up. The meeting was off. Postponed indefinitely. Suki had a stroke this morning. She flopped down weakly, then got up, ran wildly around the room, had a heart attack, and dropped dead.

Zed, from latest reports, is hysterical with grief and has gone into mourning. He won't see anybody. Not even Yamini.

And so, as I write, the future flutters uncertainly in the air, like the pages of this unbound – and now very mutilated – draft of my script.

April 12, 2011

Rahul was incredible this morning. Gorgeous...principled...professional...*and* kind. He got us a meeting with Zed – and in KK's words, the first meeting Zed was having 'after the tragedy.'

It's a different Zed we sat before today. No cuckoo clock. No chiming bar. No haze of marijuana. No Yamini. Zed explained 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 shuffled out, dazed and confused all over again. But KK being KK, swung back into playing the optimist. He jumped around a bit, then we sat in the car. '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,' he thundered, pounding the wheel of his new Audi.

Rahul joined us as we pulled out of Zed's runway-sized drive. He muttered an apology and shook KK's hand. He then suggested dropping me off. Don't I live near Versova Beach? That's where he was headed too.

And so I found myself alone with Rahul in his Maruti. We drove to the sounds of Junoon, and I felt light-headed. I found myself telling Rahul everything. About the half-hearted rewrite I forced myself to do, and how Zed has actually solved my

dilemma by pulling out. I told Rahul that I have my original script, I'll just wait for a better opportunity. That in the meantime, I would add all these new twists to it, really hone the scenes, and with the right star-actor and producer, I know it can work. Rahul was wonderful. He listened without interruption.

He came up to my apartment. No more industry talk, he said, he was keen for us to know each other properly. Personally.

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 nineteen 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 twenty-six, 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 kissed wildly, then made love. For the first time in months, I felt truly alive. Orgasmically hopeful.

April 22, 2011

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

KK was out all day. Yesterday morning he was with his wife at a Vipassana Mindfulness Retreat. Then he was in a meeting, followed by another meeting. Today is Tuesday, so he was at the ISKCON temple, after which he went to pick up his son from school (he is due to give a lecture there on Fathers and Family Values next week). Maria sounded frazzled and curt each time ('KK's cell phone is switched off...sorry dear, KK is driving through a tunnel and can't take calls...KK has mild tinnitus in his left ear and can't handle cellular vibration anymore...'). Etcetera. Etceteraceteraceteracetera.

So I showed up at KK's office, and literally barged my way in to the shoebox reception outside his sorry cabin. He was inside, I could hear his shrill laughter. Then the door swung open and out strode KK, followed by a calmly, *slyly* smiling Rahul.

In a nutshell : I showed icy, barely controlled, rage. KK said oh so politely that there is a check for my efforts with Maria. He's paying me approximately five thousand rupees for the painstaking rewrite I did. Fair of him, no? Because he

has principles, he said, he's not the sort to cheat anyone, least of all writers. And then he and Rahul slided off for a meeting.

I stared in blind horror. I remembered the soft sunset at the beach, Rahul's patient eyes locked in mine, his ears primed for all the ideas I had that day that came tumbling out of my passionately, just-kissed lips.

Like a beggar, I signed for my cheque. I debated ripping it up, but then I got practical. It'll pay the phone bill this month, if nothing else. Maria smiled in a gentle way and let on that Rahul is writing KK's next script. She suspected that 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 were headed.

I merely staggered out into the glaring sunshine. Dragged myself home. Where I drew the curtains. Stripped off my clothes. Dropped onto my ripped futon. Pulled up the covers around me. And descended 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 has 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 the city moves 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 yoga. 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 twenty-seven 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 bout of food poisoning that he caught up in the hills of Uttarkashi. 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