

Sacred cow

by Bruce Sterling

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He Woke in darkness to the steady racket of the rails. Vast unknowable landscapes, huge as the dreams of childhood, rumbled behind his shocked reflection in the carriage pane.

Jackie smoothed his rumpled hair, stretched stiffly, wiped at his moustache, tucked the railway blanket around his silk-pajama'd legs. Across the aisle, two of his crew slept uneasily, sprawled across their seats: Kumar the soundman, Jimmie Suraj his cinematographer. Suraj had an unlit cigarette tucked behind one ear, the thin gold chains at his neck bunched in an awkward tangle.

The crew's leading lady, Lakshmi "Bubbles" Malini, came pale and swaying down the aisle, wrapped sari-like in a souvenir Scottish blanket. "Awake, Jackie?"

"Yaar, girl," he said, "I suppose so."

"So that woke you, okay?" she announced, gripping the seat. "That big bump just now. That bloody lurch, for Pete's sake. It almost threw us from the track."

"Sit down, Bubbles," he apologized.

"'Dozens die,' okay?" she said, sitting, "'Stars director crew perish in bloody English tragic rail accident.' I can see it all in print in bloody Stardust already."

Jackie patted her plump hand, found his kit bag, extracted a cigarette case, lit one. Bubbles stole a puff, handed it back. Bubbles was not a smoker. Bad for the voice, bad for a dancer's wind. But after two months in Britain she was kipping smokes from everybody.

"We're not dying in any bloody train," Jackie told her, smiling. "We're filmwallas, darling. We were born to be killed by taxmen."

Jackie watched a battered railway terminal rattle past in a spectral glare of fog. A pair of tall English, wrapped to the eyes, sat on their luggage with looks of sphinxlike inscrutability. Jackie liked the look of them. Native extras. Good atmosphere.

Bubbles was restless. "Was this all a good idea, Jackie, you think?"

He shrugged. "Horrid old rail lines here, darling, but they take life damn slow now, the English."

She shook her head. "This country, Jackie!"

"Well," he said, smoothing his hair. "It's bloody cheap here. Four films in the

can for the price of one feature in Bombay.”

“I liked London,” Bubbles offered bravely. “Glasgow too. Bloody cold but not so bad . . . But Bolton? Nobody films in bloody Bolton.”

“Business, darling,” he said. “Need to lower those production costs. The ratio of rupees to meter of filmstock exposed. . . .”

“Jackie?”

He grunted.

“You’re bullshitting me, darling.”

He shook his head. “Yaar, girl, Jackie Amar never bounce a crew cheque yet. Get some sleep, darling. Got to look beautiful.”

Jackie did not title his own movies. He had given that up after his first fifty films. The studio in Bombay kept a whole office of hack writers to do titles, with Hindi rhyming dictionaries at their elbows. Now Jackie kept track of his cinematic oeuvre by number and plot summary in a gold-edged fake-leather notebook with detachable pages.

Jackie Amar Production #127 had been his first in merrie old England. They’d shot #127 in a warehouse in Tooting Bec, with a few rented hours at the Tower of London. No. 127 was an adventure/crime/comedy about a pair of hapless expatriate twins (Raj Khanna, Ram Khanna) who cook up a scheme to steal back the Koh-i-noor Diamond from the Crown Jewels of England. The Khanna brothers had been drunk much of the time. Bubbles had done two dance numbers and complained bitterly about the brothers’ Scotch-tainted breath in the clinch scenes. Jackie had sent the twins packing back to Bombay.

No. 128 had been the first to star Jackie’s English ingenue discovery, Betty Chalmers. Betty had answered a classified ad asking for English girls 18-20, of mixed Indian descent, boasting certain specific bodily measurements. Betty played the exotic Brit-Asian mistress of a gallant Indian military-intelligence attache (Bobby Denzongpa) who foils a plot by Japanese yakuza gangsters to blow up the Tower of London. (There had been a fair amount of leftover Tower footage from film #127.) Local actors, their English subtitled in Hindi, played the bumbling comics from Scotland Yard. Betty died beautifully in the last reel, struck by a poisoned ninja blowdart, just after the final dance number. Betty’s lines in halting phonetic Hindi had been overdubbed in the Bombay studio.

Events then necessitated leaving London, events taking the shape of a dapper and humorless Indian embassy official who had alarmingly specific questions for a certain Javed “Jackie” Amar concerning income-tax arrears for Rupees 6,435,000.

A change of venue to Scotland had considerably complicated the legal case against Jackie, but #129 had been born in the midst of chaos. Veteran soundman

Wasant “Winnie” Kumar had been misplaced as the crew scrambled from London, and the musical score of #129 had been done, at hours’ notice, by a friend of Betty’s from Manchester, a shabby, scarecrow-tall youngster named Smith. Smith, who owned a jerry-rigged portable mixing station clamped together with duct tape, had produced a deathly pounding racket of synthesized tablas and digitally warped sitars.

Jackie, despairing, had left the score as Smith had recorded it, for the weird noise seemed to fit the story, and young Smith had worked on percentage--which would likely come to no real pay at all. Western historicals were hot in Bombay this year--or at least, they had been, back in ‘48--and Jackie had scripted one in an all-night frenzy of coffee and pills. A penniless Irish actor had starred as John Fitzgerald Kennedy, with Betty Chalmers as a White House chambermaid who falls for the virile young president and becomes the first woman to orbit the Moon. An old film contact in Kazakhstan had provided some stock Soviet space footage with enthusiastic twentieth-century crowd scenes. Bubbles had done a spacesuit dance.

Somewhat ashamed of this excess--he had shot the entire film with only five hours sleep in four days--Jackie gave his best to #130, a foreign dramatic romance. Bobby Denzongpa starred as an Indian engineer, disappointed in love, who flees overseas to escape his past and becomes the owner of a seedy Glasgow hotel. No. 130 had been shot, by necessity, in the crew’s own hotel in Glasgow with the puzzled but enthusiastic Scottish staff as extras. Bubbles starred as an expatriate cabaret dancer and Bobby’s love interest. Bubbles died in the last reel, having successfully thawed Bobby’s cynical heart and sent him back to India. No. 130 was a classic weepie and, Jackie thought, the only one of the four to have any chance in hell of making money.

Jackie was still not sure about the plot of No. 131, his fifth British film. When the tax troubles had caught up to him in Scotland, he had picked the name of Bolton at random from a railway schedule.

Bolton turned out to be a chilly and silent hamlet of perhaps sixty thousand English, all of them busy dismantling the abandoned suburban sprawl around the city and putting fresh paint and flowers on Bolton’s nineteenth-century core. Such was the tourist economy in modern England. All the real modern-day businesses in Bolton were in the hands of Japanese, Arabs, and Sikhs.

A word with the station master got their rail cars safely parked on an obscure siding and their equipment loaded into a small fleet of English pedalcabs. A generous offer to pay in rupees found them a fairly reasonable hotel. It began to rain.

Jackie sat stolidly in the lobby that afternoon, leafing through tourist brochures in search of possible shooting sites. The crew drank cheap English beer and bitched. Jimmie Suraj the cameraman complained of the few miserable hours of pale, wintry European light. The lighting boys feared suffocation under the mountainous wool blankets in their rooms. Kumar the soundman speculated loudly and uneasily over

the contents of the hotel's "shepherd's pie" and, worse yet, "toad-in-the-hole." Bobby Denzongpa and Betty Chalmers vanished without permission in search of a disco.

Jackie nodded, sympathized, tutttuted, patted heads, made empty promises. At ten o'clock he called the studio in Bombay. No. 127 had been judged a commercial no-hope and had been slotted direct to video. No. 128 had been redubbed in Tamil and was dying a slow kiss-off death on the southern village circuit. "Goldie" Vachchani, head of the studio, had been asking about him. In Jackie's circles it was not considered auspicious to have Goldie ask about a fellow.

Jackie left the hotel's phone number with the studio. At midnight, as he sat sipping bad champagne and studying plot synopses from ten years back in search of inspiration, there was a call for him. It was his son Salim, the eldest of his five children and his only child by his first wife.

"Where did you get this number?" Jackie said.

"A friend," Salim said. "Dad, listen. I need a favor."

Jackie listened to the ugly hiss and warble of long-distance submarine cables. "What is it this time?"

"You know Goldie Vachchani, don't you? The big Bombay filmwalla?"

"I know Goldie," Jackie admitted.

"His brother's just been named head of the state aeronautics bureau."

"I don't know Goldie very well, mind you."

"This is a major to-do, Dad. I have the news on best private background authority. The budget for aeronautics will triple next Congress. The nation is responding to the Japanese challenge in space."

"What challenge is that? A few weather satellites."

Salim sighed patiently. "This is the Fifties now, Dad. History is marching. The nation is on the wing."

"Why?" Jackie asked.

"The Americans went to the Moon eighty years ago."

"I know they did. So?"

"They polluted it," Salim announced. "The Americans left a junkyard of crashed machines up on our Moon. Even a junked motor car is there. And a golf ball." Salim lowered his voice. "And urine and feces, Dad. There is American fecal matter on the Moon that will last there in cold and vacuum for ten million years."

Unless, that is, the Moon is ritually purified.”

“God almighty, you’ve been talking to those crazy fundamentalists again,” Jackie said. “I warned you not to go into politics. It’s nothing but crooks and fakirs.” The hissing phone line emitted an indulgent chuckle. “You’re being culturally inauthentic, daddyji! You’re Westoxicated! This is the modern age now! If the Japanese get to the Moon first they’ll cover it with bloody shopping malls.”

“Best of luck to the damn fool Japanese, then.”

“They already own most of China,” Salim said, with sinister emphasis. “Expanding all the time. Tireless, soulless, and efficient.”

“Bosh,” Jackie said. “What about us? The Indian Army’s in Laos, Tibet, and Sri Lanka.”

“If we want the world to respect our sacred cultural values, then we must visibly transcend the earthly realm. . . .”

Jackie shuddered, adjusted his silk dressing gown. “Son, listen to me. This is not real politics. This is a silly movie fantasy you are talking about. A bad dream. Look at the Russians and Americans if you want to know what aiming at the Moon will get you. They’re eating chaff today and sleeping on straw.”

“You don’t know Goldie Vachchani, Dad?”

“I don’t like him.”

“I thought I’d ask,” Salim said sulkily. He paused. “Dad?”

“What?”

“Is there any reason why the Civil Investigation Division would want to inventory your house?”

Jackie went cold. “Some mistake, son. A mixup.”

“Are you in trouble, daddyji? I could try to pull some strings, up top. . . .”

“No no,” Jackie said swiftly. “There’s bloody horrid noise on this phone, Salim--I’ll be in touch.” He hung up.

Half an anxious hour with the script and cigarettes got him nowhere. At last he belted his robe, put on warm slippers and a nightcap, and tapped at Bubbles’ door.

“Jackie,” she said, opening it, her wet hair turbanned in a towel. Furnace-heated air gushed into the chilly hall. “I’m on the phone, darling. Long distance.”

“Who?” he said.

“My husband.”

Jackie nodded. “How is Vijay?”

She made a face. “Divorced, for Pete’s sake! Dalip is my husband now, Dalip Sabnis, remember? Honestly, Jackie, you’re so absent-minded sometimes.”

“Sorry,” Jackie said. “Give Dalip my best.” He sat in a chair and leafed through one of Bubbles’ Bombay fan mags while she cooed into the phone.

Bubbles hung up, sighed. “I miss him so bad,” she said. “What is it, okay?”

“My oldest boy just told me that I am culturally inauthentic.”

She tossed the towel from her head, put her fists on her hips. “These young people today! What do they want from us?”

“They want the real India,” Jackie said. “But we all watched Hollywood films for a hundred bloody years . . . We have no native soul left, don’t you know.” He sighed heavily. “We’re all bits and pieces inside. We’re a jigsaw people, we Indians. Quotes and remakes. Rags and tatters.”

Bubbles tapped her chin with one lacquered forefinger. “You’re having trouble with the script.”

Mournfully, he ignored her. “Liberation came a hundred bloody years ago. But still we obsess with the damn British. Look at this country of theirs. It’s a museum. But us--we’re worse. We’re a wounded civilization. Naipaul was right. Rushdie was right!”

“You work too hard,” Bubbles said. “That historical we just did, about the Moon, yaar? That one was stupid crazy, darling. That music boy Smith, from Manchester? He don’t even speak English, okay. I can’t understand a word he bloody says.”

“My dear, that’s English. This is England. That is how they speak their native language.”

“My foot,” Bubbles said. “We have five hundred million to speak English. How many left have they?”

Jackie laughed. “They’re getting better, yes. Learning to talk more properly, like us.” He yawned hugely. “It’s bloody hot in here, Bubbles. Feels good. Just like home.”

“That young girl, Betty Chalmers, okay? When she tries to speak Hindi I bust from laughs.” Bubbles paused. “She’s a smart little cookie, though. She could go places in business. Did you sleep with her?”

“Just once,” Jackie said. “She was nice. But very English.”

“She’s American,” Bubbles said triumphantly. “A Cherokee Indian from Tulsa Oklahoma, USA. When your advert said Indian blood, she thought you meant American Indians.”

“Damn!” Jackie said. “Really?”

“Cross my heart it’s true, Jackie.”

“Damn . . . And the camera loves her, too. Don’t tell anybody.”

Bubbles shrugged, a little too casually. “It’s funny how much they want to be just like us.”

“Sad for them,” Jackie said. “An existential tragedy.”

“No, darling, I mean it’s really funny, for an audience at home. Laugh out loud, roll in the aisles, big knee-slapper! It could be a good movie, Jackie. About how funny the English are. Being so inauthentic like us.”

“Bloody hell,” Jackie marvelled.

“A remake of Param Dharam or Gammat Jammat, but funny, because of all English players, okay.”

“Gammat Jammat has some great dance scenes.”

She smiled.

His head felt inflamed with sudden inspiration. “We can do that. Yes. We will! And it’ll make a bloody fortune!” He clapped his hands together, bowed his head to her. “Miss Malini, you are a trouper.” She made a pleased salaam. “Satisfaction guaranteed, sahib.”

He rose from the chair. “I’ll get on it straightaway.”

She slipped across the room to block his way. “No no no! Not tonight.”

“Why not?”

“None of those little red pills of yours.”

He frowned.

“You’ll pop from those someday, Jackieji. You jump like a jack-in-box every time they snap the clapperboard. You think I don’t know?”

He flinched. “You don’t know the troubles of this crew. We need a hit like hell, darling. Not today, yesterday.”

“Money troubles. So what? Not tonight, boss, not to worry. You’re the only director that knows my best angles. You think I want to be stuck with no director in

this bloody dump?" Gently, she took his hand. "Calming down, okay. Changing your mind, having some fun. This is your old pal Bubbles here, yaar? Look, Jackieji. Bubbles." She struck a hand-on-hip pose and shot him her best sidelong come-on look.

Jackie was touched. He got into bed. She pinned him down, kissed him firmly, put both his hands on her breasts and pulled the cover over her shoulders. "Nice and easy, okay? A little pampering. Let me do it."

She straddled his groin, settled down, undulated a bit in muscular dancer's fashion, then stopped, and began to pinch and scratch his chest with absent-minded Vedic skill. "You're so funny sometimes, darling. 'Inauthentic.' I can tap dance, I can bump and grind, and you think I can't wiggle my neck like a natyam dancer? Watch me do it, for Pete's sake."

"Stop it," he begged. "Be funny before, be funny afterward, but don't be funny in the middle."

"Okay, nothing funny darling, short and sweet." She set to work on him and in two divine minutes she had wrung him out like a sponge.

"There," she said. "All done. Feel better?"

"God, yes."

"Inauthentic as hell and it feels just as good, yaar?"

"It's why the human race goes on."

"Well then," she said. "That, and a good night's sleep, baby."

Jackie was enjoying a solid if somewhat flavorless breakfast of kippers and eggs when Jimmie Suraj came in. "It's Smith, boss," Jimmie said. "We can't get him to shut up that bloody box of his."

Jackie sighed, finished his breakfast, dabbed bits of kipper from his lips, and walked into the lobby. Smith, Betty Chalmers, and Bobby Denzongpa sat around a low table in overstuffed chairs. There was a stranger with them. A young Japanese.

"Turn it off, Smithie, there's a good fellow," Jackie said. "It sounds like bloody cats being skinned."

"Just running a demo for Mr. Big Yen here," Smith muttered. With bad grace, he turned off his machine. This was an elaborate procedure, involving much flicking of switches, twisting of knobs, and whirring of disk drives.

The Japanese--a long-haired, elegant youngster in a sheepskin coat, corduroy beret and jeans--rose from his chair, bowed crisply, and offered Jackie a business card. Jackie read it. The man was from a movie company--Kinema Junpo. His name was Baisho.

Jackie did a namaste. "A pleasure to meet you, Mr. Baisho." Baisho looked a bit wary.

"Our boss says he's glad to meet you," Smith repeated.

"Hai," Baisho said alertly.

"We met Baisho-san at the disco last night," Betty Chalmers said. Baisho, sitting up straighter, emitted an enthusiastic string of alien syllables.

"Baisho says he's a big fan of English dance-hall music," Smith mumbled. "He was looking for a proper dance hall here. What he thinks is one. Vesta Tilly, ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay, that sort of bloody thing."

"Ah," Jackie said. "You speak any English, Mr. Baisho?"

Baisho smiled politely and replied at length, with much waving of arms. "He's also hunting for first editions of Noel Coward and J. B. Priestley," Betty said. "They're his favorite English authors. And boss--Jackie--Mr. Baisho is speaking English. I mean, if you listen, all the vowels and consonants are in there. Really."

"Rather better than your English, actually," Smith muttered.

"I have heard of Noel Coward," Jackie said. "Very witty playwright, that Coward fellow." Baisho waited politely until Jackie's lips had stopped moving and then plunged back into his narrative.

"He says that it's lucky he met us because he's here on location himself," Betty said. "Kinema Junpo--that's his boss--is shooting a remake of Throne of Blood in Scotland. He's been . . . uh . . . appointed to check out some special location here in Bolton."

"Yes?" Jackie said.

"Said the local English won't help him because they're kind of superstitious about the place." Betty said. She smiled. "How 'bout you, Smithie? You're not superstitious, are you?"

"Nah," Smith said. He lit a cigarette.

"He wants us to help him?" Jackie said.

Betty smiled. "They have truckloads of cash, the Japanese."

"If you don't want to do it, I can get some mates o'mine from Manchester," Smith said, picking at a blemish. "They're nae scared of bloody Bolton."

"What is it about Bolton?" Jackie said.

"You didn't know?" Betty said. "Well, not much. I mean, it's not much of a town, but it does have the biggest mass grave in England."

“Over a million,” Smith muttered. “From Manchester, London--they used to ship ‘em out here in trains, during the plague.”

“Ah,” Jackie said.

“Over a million in one bloody spot,” Smith said, stirring in his chair. He blew a curl of smoke. “Me grandfather used to talk about it. Real proud about Bolton they was, real civil government emergency and all, kept good order, soldiers and such ... Every dead bloke got his own marker, even the women and kids. Other places, later, they just scraped a hole with bulldozers and shoved ‘em in.”

“Spirit,” Baisho said loudly, enunciating as carefully as he could. “Good cinema spirit in city of Boruton.”

Despite himself, Jackie felt a chill. He sat down. “Inauspicious. That’s what we’d call it.”

“It was fifty years ago,” Smith said, bored. “Thirty years before I was born. Or Betty here either, eh? ‘Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy.’ Mad Cow Disease. So what? B.S.E. will never come back. It was a fluke. A bloody twentieth-century industrial accident.”

“You know, I’m not frightened,” Betty said, with her brightest smile. “I’ve even eaten beef several times. There’s no more virions in it. I mean, they wiped out scrapie years ago. Killed every sheep, every cow that might have any infection. It’s perfectly safe to eat now, beef.”

“We lost many people in Japan,” Baisho offered slowly. “Tourists who ate ... ate ... English beef, here in Europe. But trade friction protect most of us. Old trade barriers. The farmers of Japan.” He smiled.

Smith ground out his cigarette. “Another fluke. You’re old granddad was just lucky, Baisho-san.”

“Lucky?” Bobby Denzongpa said suddenly. His dark gazelle-like eyes were red-rimmed with hangover. “Yaar, they fed sheeps to the cows here! God did not make cows for eating of sheeps! And the flesh of Mother Cow is not for us to eat....”

“Bobby,” Jackie warned.

Bobby shrugged irritably. “It’s the truth, boss, yaar? They made foul sheep, slaughterhouse offal into protein for cattle feed, and they fed that bloody trash to their own English cows. For years they did this wicked thing, even when the cows were going mad and dying in front of them! They knew it was risky, but they went straightaway on doing it simply because it was cheaper! That was a crime against nature. It was properly punished.”

“That is enough,” Jackie said coldly. “We are guests in this country. We of

India also lost many fellow countrymen to that tragedy, don't you know."

"Moslems, good riddance," Bobby muttered under his breath, and got up and staggered off.

Jackie glowered at him as he left, for the sake of the others.

"It's okay," Smith said in the uneasy silence. "He's a bloody Asian racist, your filmstar walla there, but we're used to that here." He shrugged. "It's just--the plague, you know, it's all they talk about in school, like England was really high-class back then and we're nothing at all now, just a shadow or something.... You get bloody tired of hearing that. I mean, it was all fifty bloody years ago." He sneered. "I'm not the shadow of the Beatles or the fucking Sex Pistols. I'm a working, professional, modern, British musician, and got my union papers to prove it."

"No, you're really good, Smithie," Betty told him. She had gone pale. "I mean, England's coming back strong now. Really."

"Look, we're not 'coming back,' lass," Smith insisted. "We're already here right now, earning our bloody living. It's life, eh? Life goes fucking on." Smith stood up, picked up his deck, scratched at his shaggy head. "I gotta work. Jackie. Boss, eh? Can you spare five pound, man? I gotta make some phone calls."

Jackie searched in his wallet and handed over a bill in the local currency.

Baisho had five Japanese in his crew. Even with the help of Jackie's crew, it took them most of the evening to scythe back the thick brown weeds in the old Bolton plagueyard. Every half meter or so they came across a marker for the dead. Small square granite posts had been hammered into the ground, fifty years ago, then sheared off clean with some kind of metal saw. Fading names and dates and computer ID numbers had been chiselled into the tops of the posts.

Jackie thought that the graveyard must stretch around for about a kilometer. The rolling English earth was studded with plump, thick-rooted oaks and ashes, with that strange naked look of European trees in winter.

There was nothing much to the place. It was utterly prosaic, like a badly kept city park in some third-class town. It defied the tragic imagination. Jackie had been a child when the scrapie plague had hit, but he could remember sitting in hot Bombay darkness, staring nonplussed at the anxious shouting newsreels, vague images, shot in color no doubt, but grainy black and white in the eye of his memory. Packed cots in European medical camps, uniformed shuffling white people gone all gaunt and trembling, spooning up charity gruel with numb, gnarled hands. The scrapie plague had a devilishly slow incubation in humans, but no human being had ever survived the full onset.

First came the slow grinding headaches and the unending sense of fatigue. Then the tripping and flopping and stumbling as the nerves of the victim's legs gave

out. As the lesions spread, and tunneled deep within the brain, the muscles went slack and flabby, and a lethal psychotic apathy set in. In those old cinema newsreels, Western civilization gazed at the Indian lens in demented puzzlement as millions refused to realize that they were dying simply because they had eaten a cow.

What were they called? thought Jackie. Beefburgers? Hamburgers. Ninety percent of Britain, thirty percent of Western Europe, twenty percent of jet-setting America, horribly dead. Because of hamburgers.

Baisho's set-design crew was working hard to invest the dreary place with proper atmosphere. They were spraying long white webs of some kind of thready aerosol across the cropped grass and setting up gel-filtered lights. It was to be a night shoot. Macbeth and Macduff would arrive soon on the express train.

Betty sought him out. "Baisho-san wants to know what you think."

"My professional opinion of his set, as a veteran Indian filmmaker?" Jackie said.

"Right, boss."

Jackie did not much care for giving out his trade secrets but could not resist the urge to cap the Japanese. "A wind machine," he pronounced briskly. "This place needs a wind machine. Have him leave some of the taller weeds, and set up under a tree. We've fifty kilos of glitter dust back in Bolton. It's his, if he wants to pay. Sift that dust, hand by hand, through the back of the wind machine and you'll get a fine effect. It's more spooky than hell."

Betty offered this advice. Baisho nodded, thought the idea over, then reached for a small machine on his belt. He opened it and began to press tiny buttons.

Jackie walked closer. "What's that then? A telephone?"

"Yes," Betty said. "He needs to clear the plan with headquarters."

"No phone cables out here," Jackie said.

"High tech," Betty said. "They have a satellite link."

"Bloody hell," Jackie said. "And here I am offering technical aid. To the bloody Japanese, eh."

Betty looked at him for a long moment. "You've got Japan outnumbered eight to one. You shouldn't worry about Japan."

"Oh, I don't worry," Jackie said. "I'm a tolerant fellow, dear. A very secular fellow. But I'm thinking, what my studio will say, when they hear we break bread here with the nation's competition. It might not look so good in the Bombay gossip rags."

Betty stood quietly. The sun was setting behind a bank of cloud. “You’re the kings of the world, you Asians,” she said at last. “You’re rich, you have all the power, you have all the money. We need to help us, Jackie. We don’t want you to fight each other.”

“Politics,” Jackie mumbled, surprised. “It’s ... it’s just life.” He paused. “Betty, listen to old Jackie. They don’t like actresses with politics in Bombay. It’s not like Tulsa Oklahoma. You have to be discreet.”

She watched him slowly, her eyes wide. “You never said you’d take me to Bombay, Jackie.”

“It could happen,” Jackie muttered.

“I’d like to go there,” she said. “It’s the center of the world.” She gripped her arms and shivered. “It’s getting cold. I need my sweater.”

The actors had arrived, in a motor-driven tricycle cab. The Japanese began dressing them in stage armor. Macduff began practicing kendo moves.

Jackie walked to join Mr. Baisho. “May I call on your phone, please?”

“I’m sorry?” Baisho said.

Jackie mimed the action. “Bombay,” he said. He wrote the number on a page in his notebook, handed it over.

“Ah,” Baisho said, nodding. “Wakarimashita.” He dialed a number, spoke briefly in Japanese, waited, handed Jackie the phone.

There was a rapid flurry of digital bleeping. Jackie, switching to Hindi, fought his way through a screen of secretaries. “Goldie,” he said at last.

“Jackieji. I’ve been asking for you.”

“Yes, I heard.” Jackie paused. “Have you seen the films?”

Goldie Vachchani grunted, with a sharp digital echo. “The first two. Getting your footing over in Blighty, yaar? Nothing so special.”

“Yes?” Jackie said.

“The third one. The one with the half-breed girl and the Moon and the soundtrack.”

“Yes, Goldie.”

Goldie’s voice was slow and gloating. “That one, Jackie. That one is special, yaar. It’s a smasheroo, Jackie. An ultrahit! Bloody champagne and flower garlands here, Jackie boy. It’s big. Mega.”

“You liked the Moon, eh,” Jackie said, stunned.

“Love the Moon. Love all that nonsense.”

“I did hear about your brother’s government appointment. Congratulations.”

Goldie chuckled. “Bloody hell, Jackie. You’re the fourth fellow today to make that silly mistake. That Vachchani fellow in aeronautics, he’s not my brother. My brother’s a bloody contractor; he builds bloody houses, Jackie. This other Vachchani, he’s some scientist egghead fellow. That Moon stuff is stupid crazy, it will never happen.” He laughed, then dropped his voice. “The fourth one is shit, Jackie. Women’s weepies are a drug on the bloody market this season, you rascal. Send me something funny next time. A bloody dance comedy.”

“Will do,” Jackie said.

“This girl Betty,” Goldie said. “She likes to work?”

“Yes.”

“She’s a party girl, too?”

“You might say so.”

“I want to meet this Betty. You send her here on the very next train. No, an aeroplane, hang the cost. And that soundtrack man too. My kids love that damned ugly music. If the kids love it, there’s money in it.”

“I need them both, Goldie. For my next feature. Got them under contract, yaar.”

Goldie paused. Jackie waited him out.

“You got a little tax trouble, Jackie? I’m going to see to fixing that silly business, yaar. See that straightaway. Personally.”

Jackie let out a breath. “They’re as good as on the way, Goldieji.”

“You got it then. You’re a funny fellow, Jackie.” There was a digital clatter as the phone went dead.

The studio lights of the Japanese crew flashed on, framing Jackie in the graveyard in a phosphorescent glare. “Bloody hell!” Jackie shouted, flinging the phone away into the air and clapping his hands. “Party, my crew! Big party tonight for every bloody soul, and the bill is on Jackie Amar!” He whooped aloud. “If you’re not drunk and dancing tonight, then you’re no friend of mine! My God, everybody! My God, but life is good.”