

SYNOPSIS

PROLOGUE Los Angeles, 1989. India is celebrating her 25th birthday. Her elderly father, Max Ophuls, arrives in a chauffeured car and offers her a beautiful archery bow. The scene is thrown into chaos when Max's driver, Shalimar, suddenly attacks Max.

ACT ONE Kashmir Valley, 1964. In the idyllic village of Pachigam, a young Muslim boy named Shalimar practices his tightrope-walking skills for the local *bhand pather*, a traditional folk theater troupe. He is distracted when Boonyi, a beautiful young Hindu girl, begins to dance. After the rehearsal, they linger for a rendezvous. Shalimar asks Boonyi to swear that she will never leave him, a vow she seals with a kiss. Unbeknownst to them, they are seen and filmed by the school teacher Gopinath. Gopinath confronts Boonyi, threatening to show the film to the village elders unless she agrees to marry him. She defiantly refuses.

When the village elders learn of this romance, they decide to marry the young couple rather than punish them. The villagers are shocked that a Muslim-Hindu wedding is to be accepted, until Abdullah, Shalimar's father, reminds them that both groups are part of the same Kashmiri people. Shalimar is overjoyed, but Boonyi begins to feel trapped by the suddenness of their marriage. The festivities are interrupted by Bulbul Fakh, one of the militant "iron mullahs" who have emerged from wreckage left by the Hindu Indian army. He rails against the interfaith wedding and the growing power of the Indian army.

Meanwhile, a younger Max Ophuls has just been appointed as the US ambassador to India, but his wife Peggy does not share his excitement about the new post. Max meets Boonyi at a formal reception, where the *bhand pather* performs Anarkali's Dance. The attraction is immediate. Peggy observes what is clearly an all-too-familiar scene, lamenting the fact that she is unable to have children. An aide arranges a private encounter for Max with Boonyi. Shalimar returns to Pachigam alone, hoping that his wife will eventually come home.

ACT TWO As time passes, Abdullah and Boonyi's father convince a heartbroken Shalimar to have Boonyi officially declared dead so that he can move on with his life. Shalimar's sorrow slowly turns to fury, and Bulbul Fakh approaches him with an offer to join the jihadist fight against the Indian army. Spurred by his own personal rage, Shalimar marches off with the mullah.

Boonyi has had a baby girl, India, with Max Ophuls. She desperately wishes to return to Pachigam and Shalimar, which Peggy arranges. Before Boonyi leaves, however, Peggy tears India from Boonyi's arms and states her intention to raise the child herself. Surrounded by soldiers, the devastated mother has no choice but to accept. Back in Pachigam, she is shunned by every villager, including her own family. Boonyi is forced to live alone in the woods above Pachigam.

In another province, Shalimar has gained a reputation for being one of the bloodiest assassins among the jihadists. When pressed by Bulbul Fakh, however, Shalimar confesses that he doesn't care about religion. Instead, he dreams of killing Boonyi and Max. With this realization, Shalimar begins the long journey home to Pachigam.

Shalimar reaches his old village only to find it has been destroyed by the Indian army. Boonyi is the sole survivor, saved by her isolation in the woods. Together, they drift through the ruins of their childhood home, surrounded by the ghosts of their family and friends. But the moment can't last forever.

EPILOGUE Los Angeles, 1989. India has finally learned the truth about her birth mother, and is left reeling in the wake of Shalimar's attack on Max. ■



SEAN PANIKKAR



ACT I

1. PROLOGUE: COLOR OF A BLADE

[A woman, INDIA, 25, appears at the far end of the stage. She has an old, beaten bow. She's practicing archery.]

She pulls back the bow...and lets loose an arrow... the sound it makes resembles a car whizzing past...

She does it again and the sound is amplified...and it grows as if morning rush hour traffic consumes the world...and it does. She disappears.]

Los Angeles. 1989.

CHORUS

Santa Monica,
California!

LA, CA

Look out your window, and
All you see is cars, cars, cars...

You see a bullet,
Steel, color of a blade.

The color of a woman
Or a man betrayed.

The color of lights,
Color of day.

When the man says go
You take the wheel.

[A fast tabla beat seems to express the rush hour traffic of Los Angeles.]

Santa Monica,
California!

LA, CA

Look out your window,

You drive him,
Drive him,
Drive him to her.
You're just a driver.
All you see is cars, cars, cars...
Santa Monica,
California.
Santa Monica.

INDIA

Another LA morning,
The colors of the years
Blend into one.
Amber, green,
Drowned in the sun.
The colors of my birthdays,
I'm twenty-five!
I'm so old, but barely alive.
I'm barely alive!
I think...a lot.
What I think about a lot
Is breakfast,
The color of...

CHORUS

A bullet...

INDIA

The color of...

CHORUS

A knife...
Colors in the dawn.

INDIA

The colors of my life,
They aren't as bold

Or as bright as I want.
I want something more,
I want something more.
I want more!
I want...
I want...

CHORUS
Santa Monica, California.

INDIA
...a croissant.
I just want something for my birthday.

CHORUS
Look out your window.
Santa Monica
[A car pulls up...a driver, an Indian man in his 40s, dressed in chinos and a button-down shirt, steps out of the car and opens the door for MAX OPHULS, 80s, India's father.

He holds an absurdly large, brightly wrapped birthday present, with an enormous bow. The driver steps to the side, and looks to the ground. He is nearly invisible.]

MAX
India!

INDIA
Dad!

MAX
Happy birthday!

INDIA
What the hell is that, Dad, am I six years old?

MAX
This is for you, love.
Your birthday present!

INDIA
Open it!

MAX
No.

INDIA
Open it, Daddy, please!

MAX
Come down, India.

INDIA
Alright.
You do look funny with that big old thing!

MAX
For my beautiful, lovely little girl,
Your heart of hearts I think I know.

INDIA
A bow!

SHALIMAR
Stop!
Stop the world turning round.
That's the girl!
Stop!

MAX
A gold Olympic standard bow!
Do you like it?

INDIA
I love it!

MAX
You love it?

INDIA
I love it!

MAX
My daughter!

INDIA
I love you!

SHALIMAR
Stop! Ambassador!
[Shalimar in the background suddenly draws out a large knife.]

INDIA
Daddy!

MAX
India!
[Shalimar slices Max's neck wide open. Blood spatters against the wall. India freezes in a scream. Shalimar stands over Max, frozen. Blackout.]

2. THE BHAND PATHER

[25 years earlier. 1964. Pastoral music. Kashmir. The village of Pachigam. Paradise. The most beautiful place on earth. A young Shalimar practices the tightrope, only a foot off the ground.]

ABDULLAH
The rope is not a rope.

SHALIMAR
The rope is not a rope.

ABDULLAH
The air is not the air.

SHALIMAR
The air is not the air.

ABDULLAH
Understand, don't ask why.

SHALIMAR
I'll try.

ABDULLAH
Just learn how to fly.

SHALIMAR
How to fly!

ABDULLAH
[To Shalimar, but Shalimar can't hear.]
I have a secret, Shalimar.

SHALIMAR
Don't look down!

ABDULLAH
Among all my sons, you are my favorite.

SHALIMAR
Never look down!

ABDULLAH
The kindest,
Sweetest boy in the world.
One day you'll walk on air.

SHALIMAR
Look, Dad, I think I've got it now!

ABDULLAH

Good, great!
But please, don't tell your mother what
I showed you.

[FIRDAUS, *his wife, Shalimar's mother, enters.*]

FIRDAUS

Abdullah!!
What's this nonsense?
Teaching a young boy the rope!
Do you want him to fall and crack his head...

ABDULLAH

Please, Firdaus,
Just look at him!

SHALIMAR

Mom! I'm standing on air!
[*He loses his footing.*]
Well, I stood for a while...

FIRDAUS

Get off that rope, boy,
Before I whip you good!

ABDULLAH

[*Holds his wife.*]
Just watch that boy,
One day he'll be the star of our troupe!

FIRDAUS

A star...
That falls...
And cracks his head...

ABDULLAH

[*Groans.*]
Ugh! Enough!
Where are my other sons?
[*Shalimar's two brothers enter, slapping on
clown makeup. They fool around, hitting each
other, pushing, goofing off.*]

BROTHERS

Look, it's Shalimar,
Walking on the rope.
What a dope!

[*The two brothers playfully attack
Shalimar as he tries to walk the rope.*]

BROTHERS

Look, it's Shalimar,
Floating on...the air.
[*They knock him down.*]

Not fair!

SHALIMAR

Stop it! Dad!

ABDULLAH

Okay everyone!
Get ready for rehearsal!

[*The chorus enters, setting up for the
rehearsal of the Kashmiri Bhand Pather,
Clown Stories.*]

CHORUS

WOMEN: The Bhand Pather!

MEN: The Bhand Pather!

WOMEN: The Bhand Pather!

SHALIMAR & MEN

The Bhand Pather!

CHORUS

The Clown Stories of Kashmir!

SHALIMAR

[*Watching with awe.*]
The story of my life!

ABDULLAH

Rehearsal, everyone!
Places!
The Clown Prince!

[*The entire chorus fills the stage — carnival
folk dressed as clowns, giants, kings, and gods,
some with instruments, some doing acrobatics
or sword swallowing. A giant hand-painted
banner on old parchment is displayed. This
banner reads: THE CLOWN PRINCE. A
ridiculous, self-important clown walks about
trying to be important, but keeps falling,
tripping over his subjects.*]

CHORUS

MEN: Clown Prince of Hindustan.

WOMEN: Clown Prince!

MEN: Very, very, very important man.

WOMEN: Very self-important man.

MEN: Will not stand for ridicule.

WOMEN: Though he's quite...miniscule.

MEN: And so he falls and falls and

WOMEN (*joining*): And so he

ALL: Falls and falls and falls and falls and falls!

[*A different banner is revealed. It reads:
THE CLUMSY GOD. An equally prat-falling
god appears.*]

CHORUS: WOMEN

Ah!

CLUMSY GOD (CHORUS: MEN)

O Silly Prince of Hindustan,
I am the Divine Presence above you.
Above you!
And when I walk,
The world trembles.
And when the world trembles...

CHORUS: WOMEN

What?

CLUMSY GOD (CHORUS: MEN)

I get scared.

CHORUS: MEN

He gets scared.

CHORUS

And when he's scared he runs and runs
And when he runs...he falls!

[*A different banner reads: THE COWARDLY
GIANT. A giant enters on stilts.*]

GIANT (CHORUS: MEN)

I am the Giant of the Forest!