

The Orient

Charles Poverman

A chapter from a novel, *Deathmasks of Xo*.

When Bombay was far behind me, I got down from the bus and started walking along, trying to hitch a ride—I didn't really know how it was done here or if it was possible, there weren't that many cars and it took me a few minutes to remember that cars drove on the left over here just as in merry old England. But at least here was the countryside, villages, villagers, farmers in bullock carts, waterbuffalo, goats, and as I walked along the road, I felt comfortable splashing through the monsoon puddles with the smell of animals and warm mud.

Toward the end of the day, a monsoon shower blew up, the sky grew black, the branches and leaves on the trees turned over, the leaves white like the bellies of dead fish, the rain came pelting down. A while later, the sun came out for a minutes, the mud and road smelled of steam and earth, the sun set. Exhausted, I rolled myself into my poncho under a banyan tree—I was lying in the mud, but so tired I didn't care. I put my head on a root and slept dreaming of Xo.

I woke up for a second when they hit me. I couldn't get out of the poncho, I was all tangled up, arms, legs, everything, feet were all around me, I was knocked out.

Then water brought me around, I wasn't in my poncho, but spread out on it, we were in the middle of a field, a lantern hissing and faces shining in white light. We were in a circle and I was one point of the circle, a dazed point on his back—and everyone was looking through my stuff—not much—I thought, shit, if they're disappointed they're going to kill me, I noticed they were wearing skirts and saris and they had very long hair and were wearing nose drops and earrings and anklets, bangles, and other matching accessories, in other words, they were chicks.

My head was pounding, I felt very very strange, something was not quite

right. They were all gabbing, it was Ram Lal this and Ram Lal that, they were gabbing and bickering, waving their hands around, they had deep voices, awfully deep voices for chicks, they inspected my passport and a couple of my knives, got the switchblade figured out pretty quick and start snapping it open, waving it around, easy, ladies, and fighting over who was gonna get it.

I kept my lids all but closed, I watched them through the cracks as I lay on my back. Then I thought, okay, I've had enough of this stuff, time to split, I jumped up, I forgot I was dizzy, I staggered and almost bit the dust just as they gave a big yell, I got my footing and started to run.

They tackled me—hard—brought me down and started to beat me and hit me with sticks (I later learned they were lathes) and kick me and suddenly one chick raised a long curved knife which I later learned was a kukri, I screamed just as someone grabbed her wrist.

I don't know. That might have been it. Right then. But Ram Lal called them off . . . Her off. He was their leader; that was another thing. They weren't chicks.

I guess that night Ram Lal decided I'd be useful to them and maybe he got a kind of crush on me. He was a little shorter than I was with hair as long as a saddhu's—or mine for that fact—he had a handsome dark face with large light brown eyes, lighter than most Indians—but the main thing was he had speed—he was quick!—he was clever, and he commanded the others with absolute authority—they were afraid of him; they really didn't know how many bolts of magic he might be able to deal down on their heads.

That night, they set right about it. They had my passport and everything else, they had me outnumbered. I couldn't do a thing.

They held me down and pierced my ears with the tips of daggers, they smeared my ears with ointment, they hung heavy silver earrings though the bleeding holes. They made me put on a big tribal skirt, a sleeveless vest covered with small mirrors like armor and embroidery swirling all in between the mirrors. They had to crush and squeeze my hands until I screamed to slip the gold bangles up onto my wrists. By now, when the others saw how Ram Lal was fitting me up, they started getting jealous because he was blowing some of their best jewelry on me. Ram Lal sat with the lantern hissing in front of him and insisted and that was that. No one wanted to mess with him. He took toe rings and anklets out of a pouch and put the rings on each of my toes so it was painful to walk at first. The anklets had bells on them. Every step I took made them jangle. Here I come.

When they dressed me, I was still dazed from the beatings and daggers being poked through my ears—the blood was drying on them—so when Ram Lal told me to stand, I staggered. He directed me to turn in the lantern light. He smiled. He dug it. His hunch about my white skin was going to be proved right—another thing that would add to his power.

When I realized what they were going to do with the dagger, then I fought again and they had to fight like a bitch to hold me down, though Ram Lal wouldn't let any of them hit me too hard, I struggled until I started knocking

some of mirrors off the blouse and then Ram Lal came over and slapped me and said something I couldn't understand, but the way he looked at me almost stopped me. When I kicked him, he laughed out loud. He kicked me back and stared at me. His eyes were strange. I got feeling numb. Hands covering every inch of my head so I couldn't move, they pushed the tip of the dagger through the back of my nostril, at the bite of the iron I ground my teeth, I wished they were at least chicks. . . .

They set a guard on me. I finally feel asleep.

In the morning, they washed the blood off my face and put more medicine on my ears. Then Ram Lal brought a small gold nose drop out of his pouch and they fastened that in my nose.

Eventually, Ram Lal and I became lovers and got to understand each other, he teaching me some Marati, I teaching him back some English. We passed information back and forth with our eyes, not in a faggy way, but in a way of understanding—this guy is bad news, this situation is going to get out of hand in thirty seconds, heads will get bloody . . . that kind of thing.

The first few times, I followed along with the troupe, but didn't try to do anything. I was still tan enough from the boat and crossing the Equator—the Equatorial Sun—so that I looked dark enough to pass off as Indian, I wouldn't be noticed; or, if I thought it as to my advantage, I could wrap a half-sari about me and pull it down completely over my head, holding the corner in my teeth like the chicks did for a little quick purdah while still digging what was going on by staring through the cloth, that was to my advantage to do the first few times we went out together while I observed.

Even on the road, as we would pass in twos and threes, I'd notice the farmers in their bullock carts, the women, the children, everyone would give us wide berth. They'd see us coming and they'd cross the road.

Weddings were the big thing. During the wedding season we'd travel all up and down through Maharashtra and Gujarat, oh, man, Ram Lal knew all of the rich ones, all of the important days. He's map the whole thing out so that we'd make a sweep from one place where there would be two weddings—we'd hit 'em both—to the next place and so on and so on.

We'd show up outside the gates of some Big Brahman's pad and you could see from the look on the chipossi's face right off he was thinking, oh, shit, man, now we're in hot water, the master's going to be out plenty and these guys are bad news, no telling what curses. . . .

The wedding party would come out to the gates to get a glimpse of us, and surprise, there we'd be stoned up todi—wine from the sap of the todi palm—and also, they had some very fine hemp *bhang* and *gunja* or in plain English grass and hash, we'd crank up a few drums, finger cymbals, flutes, harmoniums and shenais, we'd dance up a storm for them, hump and grind and dance in trances, it was really a ball.

They didn't really have any choice but to watch. They were kind of what you might call a captive audience. They'd look at each other uneasy as if they weren't sure how they were going to get out of this. . . .

They'd have food brought out to us by servants.

Which was fine. I dig a good meal.

But the main way they were going to get out of our dancing was by paying us money—plenty of money.

You see, Ram Lal was known among our kind as a very potent man, a man to be reckoned with . . . a man of powers. And one way of keeping these powers from descending on you and your family in the form of the bridegroom being struck impotent, zonk, a womb being scorched barren, a child being born with two heads or no legs, or the old man dropping dead or developing leprosy, was by paying Ram Lal.

So we'd dance and the bread would fly.

Ram Lal would indicate by a certain very cool sang froid reserve that the head of the house had the right idea, that really, basically, he was doing just fine, and after a little more dancing, he'd really get the idea . . . which was our signal at the clap of his hands to do a few more numbers.

We'd stop and money money would come from the wedding party. I loved it. It was like rain.

There was no way of beating Ram Lal. I don't care what you might have heard about some of the others, the way Ram Lal ran it was we'd dance and dance and they'd pay and pay. No matter how much they paid, they could never ever pay enough (though Ram Lal might have gotten ten times what he'd expected), because Ram Lal'd always pretend he was outraged at what they'd paid him and curse them in some small but harmless way just to keep the fear alive in them.

Almost everyone paid. They had to—even the educated ones—because there was enough guilt, non-specific, generalized happy-go-lucky, nameless guilt. And if by some strange coincidence disaster struck and some one hadn't paid up, why, he'd feel responsible. So . . . pay Ram Lal. It wasn't worth it not to pay. Sure, you might say to yourself, this Ram Lal is a big phony, and his curse isn't worth a thing, it's harmless, but what if . . . what if. . . .

The money always came.

In several cases where the people treated us badly, well, one family we heard afterward was in a terrible car accident—the old man fell asleep at the wheel, veered, hit a waterbuffalo; the bride was killed, it took the police two hours to get the buffalo out of the bride's lap, the old man was paralyzed from the waist down and hasn't said a word to this day—the police came hunting for us, but they didn't look too hard because they might catch us and then if Ram Lal . . . if. . . .

Ram Lal insisted I keep my face and arms covered and stay out of the sun as much as possible because he wanted me nice and white.

I have funny eyes, kind of grey green around the outside of the iris, maybe light brown in the middle, and a spot of black pigment in one iris, they have

lots of colors really, Ram Lal liked to stare into them, he'd nod and shake his head as if he were staring into my head and thought pictures on the inside back of my skull, I didn't care much for this staring activity pastime of Ram Lal's.

He taught me to put my eyes into a kind of trance look. When I'd faded nice and white, he put kohl around my eyes—which is like black eye shadow—we were getting dressed up to go to a big wedding. He said to me:

When I tell you, you come forward, up close to the bride and groom, dance slow in one spot and stare through them until they cover your feet with money. Don't move until they're covered.

We were coming through the streets and I saw this big beautiful-looking woman coming toward me a split second Xo inside a shop Xo window the woman Xo me Xo shook me so hard I had to sit down on the curb because my knees began to shake.

When Ram Lal looked down at me sitting on the curb, I knew he had immediately understood.

At this wedding, I danced forward and tranced up my eyes like Ram Lal taught me. I stood in front of the bride and groom, I don't think they'd tied the string on their wrists, yet, here was this beautiful young girl, maybe sixteen or seventeen—shy, blushing, in a gold Benares sari—and her groom, a nice-looking young cat, maybe twenty, the two of them almost like fawns, and I felt really kind of mean, and also, sorry for the young girl, but I danced up closer and closer, and dancing in one spot, I moved my feet up and down slowly so the only sound was the jangle of the bells on my anklets, I swayed in front of them, then, just her, like a cobra, she didn't blink, but stared back into my eyes, she was fascinated by the color, by the spot of black pigment, I raised my hands slowly over my head, her eyes never moved from mine.

Even in the heat, the coins were cool as they started to sprinkle my feet. Then, there was the feathering of banknotes on my feet and ankles like birds' wings. I suddenly realized what Ram Lal had taught me to do with my eyes—and what I had known in the jangle of the ankle bells—was to hypnotize her. One of Ram Lal's real powers was to hypnotize—to hypnotize the fear into them—to hypnotize his curses into them.

The car accident?

My arms met, forming a vault over my head, my anklets jangled softly, the bangles on my wrists jangled together as I raised my arms higher.

I knew that she was hypnotized, and suddenly I felt so sure, I looked away from her eyes, looked down into the circular mirrors of my tribal vest and saw the thousands of splintered faces of the bridal party, of Ram Lal, of the troupe, the servants, the bride, each one, separate, and all together, reflected in each of the mirrors, each of the mirrors flashing like a beam of sunlight on a wave, I looked down over the left side of my chest, then arched my back slightly, still softly stamping the jangle of my ankle bells like the whisper of a telegraph, I

looked down at the faces reflected on my back; then, turning slowly back to the bride, I peered down on my right side and was instantly blinded by thousands of suns, it was to my right or it must have been in the East, my eyes ached, and I suddenly thought, what am I doing here?—where am I?—how did I get hung up on a gig like this I gotta go find Xo.

Ram Lal was very pleased with me—as a lover, as a chela—student, as a . . . Ram Lal was pleased that I could go into a wedding party and knock 'em dead, bring the gold out of their pockets.

I started getting my own reputation.

No one knew who I was or where I came from. I had various names—the one with pigment in his eye, the white one, and so on. It was a gas watching the brides right off look into my left iris, searching for the black spot, yes, it's him!

I'd nod for Ram Lal who would start to smile because word had already been here ahead of us and it would be a cinch.

It was a cinch.

I don't think he was jealous. It was more bread for everyone.

I don't know how long Ram Lal had been considering this next move, but one time the gig wasn't proceeding so good—a very uptight wedding party, no money. I'd been dancing in trances in front of the bride, nothing was working, Ram Lal had threatened to curse them, they weren't intimidated. . . . They were getting ready to have us heaved out.

Ram Lal clapped his hands and got us all dancing, not frenetic, but a very steady, very slow, menacing kind of dance, Duleep playing the deep drum, very slow, very loud, like it was tolling, booom . . . booom . . . can the finger cymbals, no sparkling sounds.

Ram Lal danced slowly through the troupe over to me and staring straight into my eyes, looking up slightly because I was taller—though I always thought of him as taller—he put his arm around my waist and swaying his head in a trance so I had to fight to keep from passing out and falling over in the dust, he taught me the first curse.

It was humid, very hot and close, flies swarmed in the air, it was the season for chills, convulsions, viruses, fevers, unnameable diseases, bad water.

The sky a coagulant mucous, trembling,

I danced before the bride and with the drum tolling

softly softly

trembling

I said it as Ram Lal had said it.

I didn't even know what it was and maybe that was why Ram Lal taught me—because there was no power if you didn't know what it meant? Maybe he thought I'd forget. Or wouldn't even know it was a curse. Or maybe he trusted me.

Whatever I said, the coins cooled my feet in the dust. The flutter of bank-notes. . . .

They had to pay plenty more that day to buy the curse back off.

Ram Lal took the curse away himself, but only after hours and hours, plenty of money . . . not until the old man got down in the dust, stretched out his hands, and cried. I didn't like Ram Lal for that and wouldn't sleep with him for a few nights after.

He loves me so much.

And now I'm worth more than ever. He watches my every move, I've really gotta find Xo, he obviously knows I'm thinking about Xo.

We're getting rich.

The other members of the troupe have grown afraid of me.

Fucking Ram Lal. But he really turns me on, too. Compared to him, Pretty Blue was—nah, I loved Pretty Blue, just different. But I'm almost a prisoner of Ram Lal. I'd split, but if he curses me?

One day Ram Lal took me aside.

His arm encircling my waist, we strolled slowly along while he spoke: like a brother, like a father, like a son, like a lover, in all these ways, and so many other ways, I love you more than any other person, you are the most beautiful faced person, the most beautiful of movement. . . .

Ram Lal told me lots of other things.

We made love.

The sudden chalky seawater gag of him in my throat.

We slept. After washing in a stream, he said, now my lover, I'm going to teach you some simple tricks so if I am ever hurt or killed or cursed to death or you are being hunted, with these tricks you can survive anywhere in the world.

He taught me to crush a lightbulb in a handkerchief and eat the glass.

He taught me how to get out of chains and straitjackets.

How to hold my breath for long periods.

How to take pain.

He taught me tricks in controlling men with my gaze.

He taught me to put a dagger through my arm in the space between my taut biceps and the bone.

He taught me to swallow half of a sword which he assured me was very good. He could get it down until the hilt clanked against his teeth.

He taught me to handle venomous snakes—cobras, adders, etc.

Simple things like how to slit a pocket with a razor for a wallet or papers.

He taught me lots of things.

The first time I tried the mouthful of gasoline was like when I was cherry to

come in my mouth, I gagged and puked and wept and wouldn't try it again, but Ram Lal said it was the fear of the gasoline that was choking me and not the gasoline itself, I said, fuck you, Ram Lal, don't give me any of that fancy talk, and puked again. The first time it was miserable.

But I remember another first time. It was getting dark out. Ram Lal and I were apart in a maize field, the farmer had threatened to drive us off, we threatened to curse him, so he said, cool, stay, be my guest; the boys were cooking over fires, about half a mile away there was a railroad track running through the countryside, old crones, stooped over like fat herons, were pecking their way down between the tracks, picking up chunks of coal in the wake of a locomotive. I had the mouthful of gasoline, the flame of the torch in front of me, and Ram Lal, his brown eyes bright even in the last light of day, nodding, smiling, said trust trust with his eyes right up until the last second when he stepped aside and I terrified staring at the flame the terror suddenly dropping away like a body not mine I blew the gasoline out into the air across the torch, saw the evening stars, calm and still in the purpling, disappear in the orange white blast of the fireball, felt my face dusky, thicken, and scorch with the blast, spat and cut it off like he'd taught me, it can go back down your throat . . . I started laughing, the stars came back.

He'd been standing right behind me with a blanket ready to throw around me just in case, but when the fireball disappeared in the air, he dropped the blanket, he ran over to where I was. He was laughing hysterically kissed my lips still sweet with gasoline fumes. (Kissing on the lips was something I taught him.)

Above us, the low branches of a banyan tree were still crackling with flames, you could smell the scorched bark and the sap from some of the leaves, I didn't like that too much, the tree was minding its own business, and a bird, fluttering in flames at my feet, making its way into the maize to die, too late to do anything for he or she.

Ram Lal explained:

With the things I have taught you—you will always be able to make your living anywhere in the world. People will always pay to see a man risk cutting his arm open, gag on glass, or catch fire. Always. Their secret hope is this time he slips and burns up. With this secret, they feel guilty; you can shame them. You can shame them more for wanting a free show. They will pay. Believe me, they will always pay to see you gag on glass or see the fireball come back around your head, leap down your throat. They want to see flames come leaping through your chest, they want to see your heart still beating in the fireball. They will pay to buy back the ghost they want you to be.

I really loved Ram Lal at this time and didn't care that I wasn't free to do anything. I often kneeled and kissed the ground he walked on. I even thought I didn't care that much about Xo anymore, though I loved her more than ever, but didn't know it. Perhaps the worst curse of all.

So it was more of the same old thing, like anything else, it gets to be old hat,

me and Ram Lal and the boys, up and down the countryside, both of us now with big reputations, worth a lot to placate and buy off, and now Ram Lal was teaching me more and more curses because they were having such good results coming out of my mouth, shit, one wedding we showed up and they had about three astrologers and a couple of saddhus hanging around ready to field our curses like infielders shifting around for a line drive hitter, they thought they were going to be able to fight off our curses, that was a joke, I got so pissed seeing all the temple cats lounging around big and fat and well fed on the people's money and really having nothing they could do or give back to the folks, that I did go out of my mind, or so they told me afterward, I brought down every curse Ram Lal had ever taught me, all of them, pissed and mean as I could be, and when they threw money this time, I laughed and picked it up and ate a few of the coins and threw the rest back at the wedding party and the saddhus and astrologers, I tore the notes up into shreds and ate the shreds, I spat them out, I danced on them, I threw them at the saddhus so that when I caught my breath and looked down in one of the mirrors, I saw a look of terror horror and amusement all at once on Ram Lal's face, maybe *he* was a little afraid of the saddhus, but I didn't give a kilo of turds, and, but, beyond all that, and more important, when I saw Ram Lal's lips moving quickly, I knew he was trying to ward off my evil, maybe he thought I was possessed and maybe I am, but two things I immediately knew, when I tore the money and ate it in handfuls, there would be much rending of clothes and exercising on the old homestead this night, and, most important, when I saw Ram Lal mumbling preventatives and anodynes, I knew I had him on the run, I knew he could be had, I was no longer afraid of him, at least completely afraid of him; soon, I'd find a way to split and find Xo, because now I knew I was going to find her.

I think he's finally taught me all his curses. He's so greedy, selling out his curses like that, I know if I were him I'd never do it—if I were in his shoes, but one thing he's right about, when I say them, the folks *know* they have to pay. Word travels. Folks have heard about my throwing the money back. Even the other dudes in the troupe avert their eyes, now. And, Ram Lal is afraid of my come! Haaa!

Out for a walk yesterday evening, at the edge of a field, suddenly Ram Lal pops out from a ditch and says, where you headed, Wolfie.

For a walk I tell him.

He sure didn't believe that. He thought I was splitting.

He took my hand and insisted on coming with me. Now I don't like that from *anyone*.

Yesterday, he said he wanted to do a big gig, two hundred kilometers north-west, small village, I'm tired of going in the wrong direction, I don't like traveling west, if only for a few miles. Each morning I see the sun come up, I want to go

that way, East for Xo. Anyway, Ram Lal said we could knock off this gig in pretty quick time. We were washing up by a stream and I start moving my lips, a plain English curse, Goddamn your ass, Ram Lal, let's move East for a change!

Ram Lal was rinsing out a skirt when he saw my lips moving, he couldn't hear because of the rushing of the stream, but he dropped the skirt, the current swirled it away down stream, Ram Lal jumped back, then his lips started moving, what? what? He laughed it off, but I knew he was afraid I'd laid one on him, the skirt was gone and I had him on the run.

Finally I said, look, Ram Lal, you've been good to me, there's no getting around that, good to me right from the start when you could have let them kill me for the fun of it.

You've been good to me and taught me life breath and meditation and lots of street arts.

We've made a lot of bread together.

And you've loved me.

I don't want to be ungrateful, but let me go find Xo and then maybe we can work something out.

I tried to be kind.

He wouldn't hear of it.

Fear of my leaving is making him irritable. Impossible to live with.

He curses everyone at the weddings now—bad curses no matter how much they pay. I feel guilty because indirectly it's my fault. When Ram Lal, dark circles under his eyes, lets the curses go, I repeat the anodynes as fast as I can to myself, I try to find someone in the wedding party to concentrate on I beam ****energy**** with my eyes****. Sometimes I get through, sometimes I don't. Ram Lal might be jamming me, but I don't think he can curse them hard and jam me at the same time.

I felt sorry for the folks.

Just because I wanted to leave and find Xo, Ram Lal's curse go haywire, it screws up the entire sense of justice. When I see the old fathers quaking with fear at the weddings, I feel so lousy because they're getting gyped. They're not getting what they're paying for. One gig Ram Lal was so angry, he even tried my trick of eating the money—which pissed me off because that's my scene.

Redoubled guard, Ram Lal a pain in the ass!

Another gig. Ram Lal wasn't doing too hot at all, monsoon making him irritable, I finally had to step in and do the curse for him. Later, jealous and quiet under a tree, he stood on his hands and mumbled some funny little song, I couldn't catch the words, but anyway, I kept the anodynes going the whole time.

Still feel uneasy, though, because he must know lots of ways of getting through, even though he swore at the time he taught it to me, that the chant of the four days would take care of anything. I've been jamming him as hard as I could.

He's trying to pick me like a lock. I've lost ten pounds concentrating on keeping him out. He's not liking the way I'm looking lately—a little peaked, Wolfie.

Yeah, Ram Lal, I wonder why. You're looking a little thin yourself.

We tacitly called a truce when we both lost another five pounds.

Made up last night and made love, things good again, Duleep, Ram Lal and me war councilled up some new ventures. Ram Lal wants to steal some kids and sell 'em to the beggar gangs. Young ones, he insists. Preschoolers. The beggar kings can deform them anyway they want while they're young and pliable . . . keep them in boxes to stunt their growth, put nice curves in their spines, etc. break their arms, gouge out their eyes— anything to make them pitiful, but you've got to get them while they're young. There's a lot of money in it. The beggar kings and their gangs are loaded. Gold hidden everywhere. We'll get some of the shepherd boys, we can sell them to rich old fags. The rest we can nab on the way home from school.

No kids, Ram Lal!

He called me a sentimental young fool. Imagine that?

Wolfie, I'll do what I please. We're stealing kids!

Okay, Ram Lal, you steal kids and I won't ball you no more! Okay? Find yourself someone else. I'm moving EAST.

I felt a curse knocking on my nervous system and jammed him. . . . His face immediately looked drawn and I knew I was younger and could wear him down on sheer animal energy—though he had the experience and the moves. He knew it too, but gave the whole thing up immediately.

Alright, Wolfie, no kids. . . . How about this? If no kids for the beggars, let's do a straight kidnap and ransom.

Ram Lal, kids are out in all forms!

I put a stop to that shit. Kids are where I put my foot down.

Christ, Ram Lal's driving me nuts today. He's so uptight. Now he's accusing me and Duleep of having something going.

Duleep's practicing his juggling, and I've got a lotta full of gasoline we've siphoned from an Ambassador, I've already put up one beautiful fire-ball—almost a perfect sphere except for the neck itself, and, amid shouts of atchal and shabash! from the boys, I'm feeling pretty good, very fluid and limber, when Ram Lal sits down next to me and starts sharpening his daggers on a whetstone. Sunset, my favorite quiet time—next to sunrise—and he has to sit down right next to me and start screeching away with his blades. Now look, I ask you, impartially and fairly, isn't that interference? Isn't he hassling me? I'm not making any excuses, but I blew the next one pretty badly . . . the ball took a nice enough shape, but he'd shaken my confidence with the knife sharpening, suddenly, the ball kind of fluttered and collapsed, the fireball was coming back at me, it was going down my throat, I cut it off, ducked—something Ram Lal told me never

ever to do—duck. The flame died about an arm's length from my lips. Lucky. I can't jam him when I blow fireballs. Did he almost nail me? Was he doing it?

He started right in. You are terrible. You can do nothing right.

He picked up the torch, took a mouthful of gasoline and shot out the biggest fireball I'd ever seen, really, it was beautiful, high, round, perfect, and it seemed to hang for a split second, stretch, and inflate as though there were a big face inside puffing out its cheeks like those hoary old faces of the wind in the corners of 16th century maps. Mmmm. Ram Lal didn't even look at me. He flung the torch on the ground and walked away.

Well, there wasn't much I could do. I knew he was trying to take me over again, scare me, beat me down, and though I couldn't stand the thought of it, the gasoline really had me terrified, but I had to do it.

I picked the torch up out of the grass real quick like nothing in the world was wrong, like I wanted nothing more than to put one up in the air, and more, that Ram Lal's was ordinary, just ordinary.

I think the boys sensed it was coming down to some kind of contest because they gathered around, I could see them in a circle at the edge of the torch light.

I put up a real beauty.

Ram Lal matched it.

I put up another one. I'd never blown better fireballs.

Ram Lal matched it.

I swear it wasn't premeditated, I'm not that bad, it was when I had the mouthful of gasoline, it suddenly came to me, and maybe I was a little drunk or sick or stoned on the fumes, my head and eyeballs seemed to be burning with it, I was so liquid and black with the gasoline, and now the stars were out like phosphorescent seeds floating in the gasoline fumes in my sockets, I held the torch in front of my lips, saw Ram Lal in the corner of my eye, his arms crossed haughtily on his chest, the gold bangles shining in the firelight, and suddenly, I turned and spat the whole thing out across the torch. He looked transparent in the flames, almost as though he'd been x-rayed.

He started rolling in the flames, he was really beautiful, his hair and clothes burning, he drew back his hand and threw one of the daggers, I could hardly take my eyes from his flaming arm to duck, the dagger came at me in flames, but he missed, then I knew I was going to make it, I threw the lota of gasoline over him, in the flames I could see his lips moving, the flames starting to go down his throat, but he was still cursing me, and I suddenly broke through the circle and started to run across the field for the road, some of the boys were trying to beat the flames out and I hope to God they did, he was so beautiful, and I didn't want to kill him, I just wanted to be free to find Xo again. I felt so sick for her love Xo love, some of the boys suddenly started to chase me, they were about thirty or forty yards behind, waving torches and throwing daggers, and they were gaining, when suddenly I stopped dead, raised my torch below my lips so they could see my lips moving and I began to curse them—things to shrivel them, make them impotent, make them blind, make them gnaw their own arms and legs, things to make them go mad and things to kill them. They stopped dead.

They made a lot of noise, but not one of them dared come forward . . . I even walked back toward them, but they backed up. They were completely mine. I turned and walked across the field to the road without looking back once over my shoulder.

On the road, I dropped my skirt.

When I took off the tribal vest, I suddenly realized a big part of me loved the vest and jewelry and so I took the vest and smashed it on the surface of the road again and again the way the dhobi smashes a shirt on rocks in the river again and again until my hands were bloody from the shattered mirrors and the vest was in rags.

I was free to look for Xo.