

WHITE CITY

David Lyndon Brown



Titus Books

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*Thankyou for the days
Those endless days, those sacred days you gave me
I'm thinking of the days
I won't forget a single day, believe me*

—The Kinks

YOU'RE THE ONE THAT I WANT

‘Feed the budgerigar.’

‘Water the geraniums.’

‘And clear up those bloody leaves.’

Each morning Mr Krishna was deafened by the stentorian voice of his dead wife; and each morning he was beset by an inexplicable and persistent erection. He hobbled to the bathroom and, when the tumescence subsided, shot a surprisingly powerful stream into the bowl.

When Mr Krishna observed himself in the mirror above the handbasin he did not see an elderly Indian widower, he did not see the confused pale eyes and the snowy mane, he did not see the retired liquor store proprietor; what he saw was an earnest young man, an honours student at the University of Pondicherry, a gifted scholar of the works of William Shakespeare. All that had transpired in the intervening years – his marriage, the birth of his son, their

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emigration to this far country at the bottom of the world – was a mystery to Mr Krishna. ‘O call back yesterday,’ he quoted softly to his reflection. ‘Bid time return.’

For the last two years his ailing wife had presided from a daybed in the living room propped up like a Maharani on a stack of bolsters, her white hair cascading over her shoulders, watching the endless DVD recordings that Mr Krishna fetched for her from his friend Balu, who owned the Video King next door to his old premises. Her favourite was the American musical *Grease* and the movie played incessantly until Mr Krishna felt saturated with every line of dialogue and every note of every song.

Mr Krishna drew back the curtains in the living room. Outside, in the dawn light, the persimmon tree looked irradiated. Each vermilion globe seemed to pulse. On the lawn beneath the tree lay a perfect circle of fallen leaves. ‘Beauty itself doth of itself persuade the eyes of men,’ said Mr Krishna to the tree.

His reverie was disturbed by a scuffling, a tiny cough. Mr Krishna removed the shawl from the cage by the daybed and John Travolta fixed him with a malevolent eye. Mr Krishna

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threw in a handful of seeds and the threadbare budgie limped onto the floor of the cage, pecking dispiritedly. Mr Krishna filled the water container. 'Eat, my dear, eat and drink,' he said. 'It's just you and me now. You and me.'

For there had once been two birds in the cage. Mr Krishna had bought them to keep his wife company when he was busy at the shop. Despite the advice that a pair of birds will never learn the language of humans, Mr Krishna's wife persisted in trying to teach them the libretto from *Grease*. Unfortunately Olivia Newton-John had expired the day after his wife died. Was it from grief, or solidarity? Mr Krishna had wondered. Or spite?

Mr Krishna sat on the foot of the daybed. Then he eased himself back onto the cushions until he was lying in exactly the same place where his wife had lain when she passed away. He gazed out at the persimmon tree. He had not raked up for days. 'Those leaves are a bloody scandal,' said his dead wife. 'What must the neighbours be saying.'

Mr Krishna tried to imagine how it had felt to be his wife; he wondered what she had felt when the weight of his body was upon her, when he was inside her. Could it have been love? Surely not lust. Forbearance, perhaps.

He could not remember when they had last had sexual intercourse, but he retained the clear and vivid image of a

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fifteen year old girl nervously unwinding her sari, unleashing her hair and lying back on the charpoy in the spare room of his parents' house on a hot and spicy night in Pondicherry in 1958. Mr Krishna felt a flickering in his loins; he reached down to adjust his pyjamas. John Travolta observed him cynically from his perch and then pretended to preen one of his tail feathers.

Mr Krishna tried to imagine dying, he tried to imagine the circumstances of his own demise, how it would feel to slip and drift and then plummet into oblivion. He did not feel particularly frightened or resentful, in fact, a small part of him relished the prospect. 'I will be a bridegroom in my death,' said Mr Krishna to the bird, 'and run into it as to a lover's bed.'

To escape the stultifying boredom, the persistent memories and the disconcerting injunctions of his dead wife, Mr Krishna had taken to spending the autumn afternoons in a nearby park.

The park was located on a busy street corner – a small delta of tatty grass, a basketball hoop, a couple of ramshackle children's swings and a public lavatory. Three benches were shaded by a grove of robinia trees and there was a circular flower bed in the centre of the park contain-

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ing concentric rings of marigolds and impatiens.

At three o'clock every day Mr Krishna filled a thermos flask with strong sweet tea and stocked the old tiffin carrier he had resurrected from the garden shed with a few samosas, his dead wife's persimmon chutney, and some of the delicious coconut confections supplied by The Widow.

The Widow lived with her grandchildren in a neighbouring street. She was a voluptuous painted woman with an Indira Gandhi streak in her hair. Her saris were dazzling – fuchsia, saffron and turquoise – and she rattled with gold jewellery. She was reputed to smoke cigarettes, drink whisky and to have a predilection for gentlemen of a certain age.

In collusion with the matrons at the community centre, Mr Krishna's wife had forbidden The Widow to cross the threshold. 'That woman is a scandal,' she said, 'you should have seen her in the post office this morning, shouting into a portable telephone, annoying the customers with her fiddle-faddle.'

At the reception following his wife's funeral The Widow sidled up to Mr Krishna and inserted a slip of paper into his breast pocket. 'My phone number,' she whispered, 'for emergencies.' And then, to Mr Krishna's horror, she winked.

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Soon The Widow began to appear at Mr Krishna's door bearing gifts of food. She did not bring curries or biriani or vindaloo, it was always halva and kulfi, almond biscuits and a selection of numbingly sweet candies. It seemed to Mr Krishna that The Widow intended to stun him with sugar.

Fearful of breaking the protocol of his dead wife, so far he had managed to forestall her on the doorstep, despite her repeated appeals for a cup of tea and a bit of a chat. 'My poor, dear man,' she once said, 'don't be shy. At the very least allow me to come in and attack your laundry.'

'Get rid of this dreadful woman immediately,' said his dead wife.

Mr Krishna thanked The Widow politely for the cakes and gently closed the door.

The streets of Mr Krishna's suburb were becoming gentrified. It was no longer the working-class neighbourhood that he once knew. All his friends and confederates had either died or moved further from the city, seduced away by the real estate boom. Their houses were snapped up by young professionals, painted in tasteful shades of taupe and terracotta and amended with decks and French doors. 'To maximise their outdoor-indoor flows,' according to

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Balu at the video shop.

Mr Krishna's was the last brown face in the street. He did not know any of his neighbours these days. He saw them carting their children to and from school in their enormous landrovers and sometimes, on his way to the supermarket, he encountered young mothers with giant pushchairs containing babies enshrined like tiny deities. When Mr Krishna nodded to these women, he was amused to notice a look of fleeting panic in their eyes. 'I rather tell thee what is to be feared than what I fear, for always I am Caesar,' said Mr Krishna under his breath.

In the park in the afternoons there was often a small congregation of young men. Boys, really, thought Mr Krishna as he sipped his tea. They mooched around the swings, drinking from cans and communicating in an odd monosyllabic tongue that was incomprehensible to Mr Krishna. Some of them had their hair sculpted into horns and daggers that protruded from their heads. They wore strange, ill-fitting clothing – massively oversized or agonizingly tight – and some of them had inscriptions tattooed around their necks. Sometimes Mr Krishna saw them smoking something from a glass pipe. In the dusk, their cellphones glowed like precious jewels.

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Occasionally one of them would saunter over and ask him for money or cigarettes. Mr Krishna feigned deafness or said a few words in Tamil and eventually they left him alone. He could not understand why they weren't at college preparing themselves – *refining* themselves for the future and for some reason the sight of these lost boys filled Mr Krishna with an immense sadness.

They made him think of his son Vijay, his little prince, who had beavered his way through school and university, excelling at every exam, winning every prize and scholarship. But somehow, despite the prodigious achievements of his darling boy, Mr Krishna still felt a twinge of disappointment that Vijay had not followed in his own footsteps along the meandering path of Arts and Letters, but instead had sped off down the Information Superhighway.

Now Mr Krishna secretly referred to Vijay as Mr Big Shot. His mild, unassuming son had emigrated to Los Angeles and, in that exotic climate, undergone a radical transformation. 'According to himself,' said Mr Krishna, 'he is enormous in the I.T. department.' Mr Krishna received a phone call from Mr Big Shot every Friday evening and listened patiently as the boy recited his financial and social triumphs, his latest car, his latest blonde, the power breakfasts shared with movie moguls. Mr Krishna

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silently fumed when his son called him Pop.

Under the bed in Vijay's old room was a cardboard box containing a laptop – Mr Big Shot had threatened to Skype Mr Krishna, and Facebook him – a selection of mobile phones, an ipod, an ipad and various other arcane gizmos: gifts from his wealthy son. Sometimes in the middle of the night Mr Krishna was wakened by the distant chirping of a cellphone.

Another regular in the park was an angry looking red-haired man who sat on the same bench every day chain-smoking and drinking from a bottle. He was not as impervious to the rowdy boys as Mr Krishna, and, sensing this, they taunted him mercilessly.

'Gizza drink.'

'Gizza smoke.'

'Gizza blowjob, ya perv.'

Occasionally, and depending on the degree of his drunkenness, the red-haired man would respond, showering the boys with abuse in an dyspeptic South African accent, but usually he just sat on the bench glowering, sending out clouds of smoke.

Mr Krishna sometimes felt he should intervene, or at least express some kind of allegiance with the beleaguered

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man. But the red-head seemed to be trapped inside his own noxious aura so Mr Krishna kept his distance.

One afternoon, finding the other benches occupied, Mr Krishna approached that of the red-haired man, sat down next to him and, after a time, unscrewed the lid of his thermos flask. He sniffed the air: there seemed to be a faint smell of something burning. Mr Krishna felt that strange urge, generated by proximity, that human beings feel to communicate, so he turned to the man and said, 'Ah, the uncertain glory of an April day, which now shows all the beauty of the sun and, by and by, a cloud takes all away. Would you care for a cup of tea?'

'Fuck off, Curry,' said Larry Swan.

Larry Swan had a jutting jaw and fierce green eyes. He seemed infused with a simmering, suppressed rage, the pugnacious fury of a middle-aged Ludwig van Beethoven. He chain-smoked roll-up cigarettes and always seemed to emanate a smell of burning.

He lived in a boarding house at a crossroads on the outskirts of the city. The house was a violent place inhabited by addicts, petty crooks, transvestites and refugees from the mental health system. Sometimes, during one of the

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frequent punch-ups or police raids, he wondered why he remained in such a frightening and dangerous place. Larry Swan seemed to have been gripped by some kind of inertia ever since his wife fled back to Capetown with that insipid so-called 'Relationship Counsellor'.

One of the young men who hung around the park seemed to have taken a particular dislike to Larry Swan. He was a tall, sullen boy who always wore a long black coat, the lapels of which were decorated with dozens of pins and badges. He had very short, bleached white hair and bleached blue eyes. Mr Krishna had to strain to hear what he said as he leaned down from behind Larry Swan's bench and whispered hoarsely in his ear, 'I know where you live.'

Some days later, when Mr Krishna arrived in the park, he was surprised to find it deserted. The weather had changed – a bleak southerly pestered the robinias and the sky was a sheet of zinc. An angry looking middle-aged woman in a translucent green raincoat was stamping around by the entrance to the park. She glared at Mr Krishna and then looked at her wristwatch.

Mr Krishna sat hunched in his usual spot, wondering whether or not he should go back home, when he heard

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a whimpering, the sound of a child weeping. Mr Krishna stood and looked around him. The sound seemed to come from the public convenience on the other side of the park. Mr Krishna quickly packed up the thermos, stuffed it in his bag and followed the path to the lavatory.

Larry Swan lay sprawled face down on the tiles. He was splattered with mud and blood and shit. His pants were around his ankles. He was bleeding from a cut over his right eye. His high-pitched wailing lowered the temperature of Mr Krishna's heart. He stumbled as he knelt at the wounded man's side and a bottle skittered across the tiles. Larry Swan's eyes opened, he turned and looked up beseechingly at Mr Krishna. Then he croaked, 'Piss off you kaffir pig.'

When Mr Krishna had showered Larry Swan and wrapped him in a warm dressing gown, he attended to the cut on his forehead with some antiseptic lotion he found in the bathroom cabinet. Larry sat meekly on the end of the daybed smoking and sipping from a cup of strong sweet tea. John Travolta was dancing animatedly on the floor of his cage.

'As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods; they kill us for their sport,' said Mr Krishna solemnly, dabbing at the wound.

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Larry Swan turned to face Mr Krishna and Mr Krishna braced himself for a vituperative blast. Instead, Larry Swan put down his cup, stubbed out his cigarette, took Mr Krishna's face in both of his hands and kissed him on the mouth.

Mr Krishna started to pull away and then something happened inside his head. Something began to rewind at high speed, slowed, paused and then began to re-record. Mr Krishna leaned in and kissed him back. After a moment Larry Swan interrupted the kiss. He sighed, gazed tenderly into Mr Krishna's eyes and said softly, 'Give us a bit of tongue, Curry, for fucks sake.'

One Saturday morning, one of those benign autumn mornings which reprise the flush of summer, The Widow was feeling optimistic. She had the house to herself – her grandchildren were away for the weekend – and she felt blithe and light-footed. She lit a clove-scented cigarette and sipped her coffee, waiting for the Nan Khatai to brown in the oven. The kitchen was perfumed with cardamom, toasting almonds and orange-flower water. The Widow knew that the biscuits would be perfect; she would sprinkle them with powdered sugar, arrange them on an embroidered cloth in a little basket and she would take them to Mr Krishna. The Nan Khatai would represent, she decided, a kind of dowry.

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The Widow paused by the pots of withered geraniums that flanked Mr Krishna's front door. The door was ajar. She went to knock, but paused instead, and listened. She could hear a cellphone ringing inside the house. It rang and rang and then stopped. How odd, thought The Widow. And then she thought, I'm too late. He's dead. He has died in his sleep or he has been murdered by an intruder. She pushed open the door and stepped inside. She thought she detected a faint smell of burning.

On the walls of the hallway there was a gallery of photographs – sepia portraits of women in elaborate saris, stern turbaned men, family groups posed in front of an affluent two-storied house somewhere in India and a more recent photo of a handsome young university graduate.

The Widow heard the murmur of voices from an adjoining room. She tiptoed down the hallway and listened at the door. Mr Krishna was reciting: 'Most true it is, that I have looked on truth, askance and strangely, but, by all above, these blenches gave my heart another youth, and worse essays proved thee my best of love.'

The Widow peered around the door. In the middle of the living room there was a daybed. Above the bed, suspended from the ceiling lamp, there were dozens of saris, draped to create a kind of pavilion. The brilliant silks

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shifted in the breeze from a window opening onto a small garden. By the bed there was a cage containing a green and yellow budgerigar. In the opening of the silken tent, Mr Krishna sat cross legged. A white dhoti was loosely knotted at his waist. His eyes were closed and he was smiling. Behind Mr Krishna crouched a naked red-haired man, his pale skin dappled with copper freckles, gently combing Mr Krishna's hair.

As The Widow observed this remarkable scene, the light changed in the room. A shaft of sunlight struck the persimmon tree in the garden, illuminating the golden fruit. The budgerigar shifted on its perch, fluffed out its feathers and opened its beak. *'You're the one that I want,'* sang the bird, *'You're the one that I want. You're the one that I want.'*