

We Are So Different Now

by: Shauna Singh Baldwin

A Stage Play with Dance

With her arranged marriage in jeopardy, Sheetal Talwar attempts suicide. The woman who talks her out of it claims to be Draupadi -- *the* Draupadi from the *Mahabharat*, the epic drama about the battle of the Pandava and the Kauravs three millenia ago. When Sheetal recovers and thanks her, Draupadi asks an expensive and difficult favor. Sheetal tries to evade her obligation to reciprocate -- and her life begins to echo Draupadi's. Sheetal's very name means cool, and she believes we are so different now -- are we?

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ACT I – SCENE 1

Exterior of a modest hotel in Mumbai. Sheetal appears on a white balcony, with a rope-noose dangling from it. She's dressed in jeans and tight t-shirt, with strappy high heels. Her long hair is tied in a ponytail. A small purse with a bright yellow strap is slung across her body.

On the audio-visual screen, a building is burning. Sheetal leans over the balcony, sobbing.

She moves toward the noose. Considers it. Tries it – tosses it off.

She puts the noose around her neck – then flings it off.

She straddles the balcony, then dismounts.

Enter Draupadi, below. (about 45, a little plump, dressed in a bright blue sari. White rhinestone-rimmed sunglasses).

Sheetal puts one leg over the balcony, then the other.

Draupadi sees Sheetal. Takes off her glasses to verify.

Sheetal reaches for the noose, puts it on, takes a deep breath -- and leaps.

Draupadi rushes toward her.

All lights go dark. Huge crash. Somber music.

Spotlight illuminates a broken balcony, Sheetal stretched out on the floor beside it. Draupadi, minus sunglasses, on her knees beside Sheetal.

DRAUPADI

Are you crazy? What were you trying to do?

[helps Sheetal sit up, loosens the noose]

SHEETAL

What do you think I was trying to do?

[coughs]

I can't even succeed at killing myself!

DRAUPADI

[stands]

You better thank the gods for unscrupulous builders who adulterate cement.

[kicks a fragment of the balcony out of the way]

That balcony is mostly sand!

Anyway, you have a life-time ahead of you and many things to accomplish. You young people – some little thing happens -- and it's *earth*-shattering! In my day . . .

SHEETAL

[sits up, rubs her neck]

Little thing, Auntyji? What do you know about my life? Who are you to stop me? Leave me alone!

DRAUPADI

You're not making sense right now. You're too young to have unbearable troubles. Bad things happen, we go on.

SHEETAL

Do you know what it's like to find out that your fiancé has been burned alive? Burned alive! My dreams – all my dreams just shattered.

And my dear loving family. My father, my uncles – they're worrying about how to get their engagement gifts returned, and how to collect a second dowry for me.

[wailing]

They're right. No one wants to marry a girl with a fortune as dark as her skin.

DRAUPADI

[laughs]

Look at yourself! Forget about anyone marrying you, no one will even want to be with you if you're so unstable.

SHEETAL

[stunned, shocked and silent]

DRAUPADI

Pull yourself together. What happened?

SHEETAL

You know about the wax museum?

DRAUPADI

In London? Madame Tussauds?

SHEETAL

No, no – you're behind the times. Here in Mumbai.

DRAUPADI

[pretending]

Yes, yes of course. Has it opened?

SHEETAL

No, it was being built.

DRAUPADI

[finds her glasses on the ground, dusts them off, polishes them, puts them on]

And?

SHEETAL

My fiancé was carving huge statues of Raj Kapoor and Naseeruddin Shah, Madhuri Dixit and Aishwarya Rai in wax. Journalists from all over the world wrote about the project. Multinational sponsors gave a hundred crores for the museum. But they weren't willing to spend a few thousands....

DRAUPADI

And? Did a statue break?

SHEETAL

Nooo! Not break. Not one statue -- the whole house of wax burned down.

DRAUPADI

They found five bodies there.

SHEETAL

How did you know there were five?

DRAUPADI

[takes off her glasses, faces audience. Surprised, soft]

I just . . .knew.

SHEETAL

My fiancé and his four brothers.

Nothing left.

So burned their mother couldn't bear to look.

DRAUPADI

So then how do you know your fiancé died?

SHEETAL

I know I know! And his mother looked at me with big accusing eyes and said, "You ! You brought him bad luck!"

DRAUPADI

Oh – what an uneducated woman.

Poor thing, though.

SHEETAL

No, no! She's not uneducated. The poor woman has a Ph.d in psychology.

[shaking her head].

Oh, what have I done! Just leave me please leave.

DRAUPADI

Oh don't be silly – a grief stricken woman says you brought her son bad luck and you believe her? Phd or no Phd. Aren't *you* an educated woman? You look like one.

SHEETAL

[goaded]

I am Sheetal Talwar and I'm highly educated. And I know my options. And right now all of them point to this --

[jumps up and slips the loose end of the noose over a bracket jutting from the building.

Draupadi rushes to her. Struggles, shouts]

Don't stop me – I'm going to the next life.

DRAUPADI

[urgently]

Your next life might be worse than this one. How can you know?

Talk to me, my dear. We'll find better options – you can change your life till your last breath!

Listen - I too was supposed to be married to a handsome young man. . .

(realizes Sheetal is not listening).

I understand you are upset. Your family is only trying to save the situation. What you really need, my dear, is a Plan B.

SHEETAL

[wailing]

This *is* Plan B!

Why should you care – what does it matter to anyone if I live or die?

DRAUPADI

It matters to me.

[points to the yellow strap].

You're a Kshatriya, like me.

We're warriors. We don't give up. We soldier on.

SHEETAL

Auntyji, no one will want to marry me. I've become a widow even before my wedding. What if his family doesn't give our engagement gifts back? How can my family afford a second dowry? I'll be an albatross around my father's neck.

DRAUPADI

You are not an albatross – whatever that is.

SHEETAL

Do I have to tell you: a woman needs a husband, her own home, children. Only then can you call her father fortunate.

DRAUPADI

You're responsible to make your *father* feel fortunate?

SHEETAL

Yes, of course I am. Weren't you?

DRAUPADI

Me...? [laughs] That's another story. Your father should feel fortunate just to have you.

SHEETAL

All Daddy has now is an unmarried daughter. Oh – how can I disappoint him!

[covers her face with her hands, looks up].

At least I don't have a mother to disappoint.

So you see, Auntyji, I do know my options. And right now

[picks up noose]

all of them point to this.

DRAUPADI

What does it matter what your Daddy expected of you? He doesn't have to live with your husband and his family – you do. No one gives you a medal for getting married, you know. Some women marry one husband, some of us have had five. What's so attractive about getting married, I'd like to know?

SHEETAL

The wedding! I was going to wear a scarlet lehnga heavily embroidered in gold. I was to receive Kanjeevaram and butter-silk saris. I was to wear new gold jewelry this thick [gestures about four inches wide] and gold jhumkas and anklets. Daddy already ordered cases and cases of Johnny Walker Red Label. He said the guests would sing and dance for a week!

(pause)

And once I was married, everyone would call me a woman, instead of a *girl*.

(pause)

But oh, now I'll never ever wear a gold mangalsutra around my neck.

(pause)

Now I'll never have children! And without children a woman is nothing.

DRAUPADI

Nonsense! Maybe in my day, but not in yours.

SHEETAL

If only I hadn't turned down that marriage proposal from his cousin ... I'd be married into the same family right now.

DRAUPADI

How come?

SHEETAL

My fiance and his four brothers are all sculptors. Their statues adorn the homes and office buildings built by their five cousin-brothers. My fiancé's grandfather, who's their Dadaji too – built so many buildings in Mumbai.

His cousin-brother's proposal was the only other marriage proposal I had.

Because. . .well, just look at me -- I'm soooo dark.

DRAUPADI

Yes, dark as Panchali.

SHEETAL

Who's Panchali?

DRAUPADI

Me. I used to be called that, years ago. Princess Panchali.

[caustically]

Before people started calling me "Auntyji."

SHEETAL

[sarcastically]

Oh, of course – as if you look like a princess.

Aunty Panchali – is that what I should call you?

DRAUPADI

[with regal dignity]

Princess Panchali. That's what I was called. And before that, Princess Yagyaseni, because I was born from fire.

SHEETAL

Born from fire. I know that story -- Daddy bought me a whole collection of Amar-Chitra-Katha comics when I was a child. You're named after Princess Panchali?

DRAUPADI

No, I *am* Panchali.

SHEETAL

[pause]

Maybe we're both crazy.

Leave me alone, Princess Panchali or whatever your name is. . .

The feudal days are gone. India doesn't have Maharajas and Maharanis any more.

All of us (pointing at her yellow purse) have privy purses now.

DRAUPADI

Call me Draupadi. Princess Panchali was also called Draupadi.

Did you know, she too didn't have a mother to tell her how special she was.

SHEETAL

If I had a mother, would I be listening to you?

[Overcome, walks away. Turns back]

Do you have nothing to do, nowhere to go, no one to meet?

DRAUPADI

Listen, Sheetal. When Panchali was growing up, everyone told her she was dark and ugly. When her family went for the annual Siva procession she was too ashamed to join them. She too thought she'd disappoint her father.

SHEETAL

[coming back, attracted to the story, despite herself]

I thought her father was so proud of her.

DRAUPADI

Her father was only interested in her brother.

What good was I ...

[correcting herself]

... Panchali ... to my father?

SHEETAL

[takes a step away again]

What has Panchali to do with me? What does her Shiv Procession have to do with me? I don't need all this – this ancient stuff. We're just not *into* all this nowadays.

DRAUPADI

[reminiscing]

The day of the Shiv Procession, Panchali decided she was going to be beautiful. She had seen her father's youngest wife walk with elegance. Confidence! So that day Panchali dressed in a beautiful peacock blue sari, like this one. And wore flowers in her hair. She

felt different, she felt beautiful. She knew the world thinks of you what you think of yourself.

SHEETAL

So you're saying, Get a makeover and everything will be just fine?

DRAUPADI

[pointing]

On screen, images flash -- Naomi Campbell, Tina Turner, Sade, Mariah Carey, Beyoncé, Oprah , Michelle Obama.

[persuading]

See -- beauty is in the eye of beholder, and in the body of the believer.

SHEETAL

Where's your projector? How do you show me these things? Hai Ma! Am I dead or alive?

DRAUPADI

You are very much alive, my dear. I'm the one who is not quite dead, yet.

SHEETAL

Okay, okay. I'll get a manicure, a pedicure, even a gold facial, if you want. But a makeover's not going to find me a husband, now that I have no dowry.

DRAUPADI

So you have financial difficulties! Even Maharajas and Maharanis, Presidents and PMs, directors and officers have financial problems. What do you think happened to Ramalinga Raju of Satyam? He can't find 7000 crores! Is he telling the world he has brought bad luck to his wife? Is he trying to jump from a balcony with a noose around his neck? Is he apologizing for existing?

[screen images – Ramalinga Raju, headlines BBC: Indian IT scandal boss arrested, MSN Business News: Ramalinga Raju admits fraud, quits Satyam]

SHEETAL

Who are you? How do you show me these things? I see, and then . . . oh, it's all dark again. And why do you care?

DRAUPADI

The gods send help in many ways. You fell from the skies before me – maybe I was meant to help you, and you're also meant to help me.

Come home with me for a while, my dear. Rest. Then let's see what happens.

[cups Sheetal's cheek with her palm, turns Sheetal's face to look into her eyes]

You're like water, Sheetal. Cool and adaptable. You'll find your level no matter how strong the storm.

Dancers enter.

Dance of the blue saris, dance of water molding itself, falling, vanishing as vapor, water as cloud, as life source of the world. Lord Krishna, the blue god, dances. One red sari flows amidst the blue.

Draupadi – voice over:

Remember me, the woman who rose not from a mother's womb, or her father's desire, but from flickering embers.

I am the woman with the never-ending sari.

With my brother, I played chess, moving vazeers, ghoras and pyadas across the board.

And in the forest our arrows flew swifter than the wind.

But -- unlike my brother -- I learned that my words were only for the enchantment of my husbands and Lord Krishna.

My father taught me every guest must be fed from the bounty of the earth before I ate.

And my husbands gambled me away along with their kingdom.

(pause)

My father, my brother, my husbands are long gone.

My spirit remains.

ACT 1 - SCENE 2

Three weeks later.

Draupadi's home – modest -- Spartan.

A bed, a chair. A bookshelf divider between bedroom and kitchen area.

Draupadi is sitting on her bed, reading.

AV screen closeup:

Amar Chitra Katha comic *Draupadi*.

Draupadi shakes her head, laughs, sighs. Puts it down.

Picks up a children's book.

AV screen close up: *The Mahabharat*, hardcover children's edition. Heavily marked with post-its.

Draupadi shakes her head, laughs, sighs. Puts it down.

Knock at the door. Enter Sheetal, carrying a bouquet of flowers, wearing a pink peasant skirt and a white scoop neck tight t-shirt. And the yellow purse slung across her body. She leaves a box by the door and steps in.

DRAUPADI

Aao, aao! My goodness, where are you going with these?

SHEETAL

[excited, effervescent]

They're for you.

DRAUPADI

For me? Oh.

[sits down, overcome]

No one has ever given me flowers. Not even Arjun.

SHEETAL

Still in character? Oh, you must have been a Bollywood star. I'm sure my Daddy would know your movies.

You are very convincing as Draupadi -- I believed you.

And I'm so glad I did, because -- you won't believe -- wait till you hear --

[sees Draupadi is wiping her eyes].

My goodness, Aunty, It's just a very small thank you.

DRAUPADI

A thank you. Yes, they say that to women as well as men, nowadays. I like this new custom. And the flowers are beautiful. So -- what have you been doing in the last three weeks? You look better, I must say. Did you have that that -- what did you call it -- makeover?

SHEETAL

[elated]

I'm looking better because you were right.

[slowly, still amazed]

My fiancé and his brothers *weren't* among those killed in the fire at Madame Tussaud's, after all ! All five brothers arrived home an hour after you saved my life and took me home.

DRAUPADI

[claps her hands, laughing]

[stops]

Other men died, though, and their families must be grieving.

I will ask Lord Krishna to bless them.

SHEETAL

But I want to know -- how did *you* know my fiance and his brothers...?

DRAUPADI

[shrugging with arms spread wide]

History has a way of repeating itself, just not completely the same way. Good things, bad things happen in cycles -- sukhmapatitam evum dukhmapatitam thatha. . .

SHEETAL

[completing the shloka]

chakravartparivartante, sukhani cha dukhani cha -- I too had to memorize Sanskrit shloks in school!

I just wanted to thank you for saving my life, Aunty. Now I'm getting married after all.

I'll be a woman, I'll have children. Celebrate with me!

DRAUPADI

[laughs]

First you sit down and have some chai.

[moves to the kitchen area, puts a pan of water on the burner. Busies herself with the tea things, becoming rapidly more clumsy. Turns, agitated]

Sheetal, do you know where I was when my Pandav husbands were fighting their Kaurav cousins at Kurukshetra?

SHEETAL

[Sighs]

We're back thirty five centuries again.

[humouring her]

Okay. No, I don't.

DRAUPADI

I can't find it anywhere.

[points to the books and comics].

They don't say.

SHEETAL

[picking up the *Mahabharat*, leafing through]

Really? This must be a bad translation. Maybe you should read the Mahabharat in Hindi, Aunty.

DRAUPADI

I find it more meaningful and melodious in Sanskrit.

SHEETAL

[surprised pause. Turns to the audience and mouths without sound: "...more meaningful and melodious in Sanskrit?" Turns back to Draupadi. Slowly --]

Achcha. All right –

Where *were* you during the Mahabharat war?

DRAUPADI

[a little exasperated]

I don't know, that's what I'm asking.

I'm sure I'll remember some day.

Right now, all I remember is after the war. I was between earth and sky, ascending to Swarag along with my husbands and -- I fell.

I've been here ever since. One foot in this world, one foot in the other, just like you, climbing over that balcony. That's why I was so desperately against your taking your own life – you shouldn't become a bhatakhi hui atma like me. Believe me, it's terrible to wander the world indefinitely when all your husbands and friends have gone.

SHEETAL

You know, I can see why you like Draupadi. She endured so much, but kept her self-respect.

DRAUPADI

Why did I *have to* endure so much hardship? Who is responsible for my hardships? Nobody asks that! You girls are just supposed to admire my endurance.

SHEETAL

[reading from the blurb on the back of the book in her hand]

"To avenge her honor, a whole nation went to war."

DRAUPADI

[picking up a comic book and leafing through]

Oh, yes, yes. I believed everything my father said -- that all I had to do was endure. And that my honor was so important it must be avenged. [shrugs] That was what being a woman was all about in my day.

SHEETAL

It isn't?

DRAUPADI

[irritated]

No!

SHEETAL

Then what is being a woman?

DRAUPADI

You decide what being a woman means. Every moment of every day. That's why your atman took shape. Eventually, of course, we all go back to Brahman but *not before our time*. We have to live out all the stages of life.

SHEETAL

I'm going into the next stage -- you'll come to my wedding, na? See, I brought you an invitation gift.

[steps outside and brings in the gift box]

See? Daddy spent at least four thousand rupees on each one.

DRAUPADI

And that tells you he must love you very much?

SHEETAL

Yes, of course. What else should it tell me?

DRAUPADI

Maybe he needs to show others how much money he has. Maybe he feels he is doing his duty.

SHEETAL

Maybe he loves me -- you don't know my Daddy.

DRAUPADI

True, I don't. But I don't understand ... why are you having an arranged marriage at all?
In my day –

SHEETAL

Just open it!

DRAUPADI

[opens the invitation box. Lifts up a statue of Cupid with an arrow,
with a card tucked between his legs]

Oh, this reminds me of Arjun at my swayamvar. Let me show you –

Enter Dancers**SHEETAL**

How – how do you do this to me? I see, I hear things that aren't here. It's wonderful, but
...terrifying.

Dance of the Swayamvar.

Dancers reenact Draupadi's swayamvar in dance – ancient Arjun shoots the arrow while gazing into a reflecting pool, and wins Draupadi. Lord Krishna, the blue god stands by, watching, and when Arjun wins, he shakes his head sadly.

DRAUPADI

See? Women used to have more freedom of choice.

SHEETAL

[now completely believing Draupadi is the Draupadi]

You didn't have a choice, Draupadi-ji! Everyone knows your father stage-managed that swyamvar so that only Arjun could pass his test. And you were motherless! I know what that means -- no one really cares if you were settled or not . Your father only cared about doing his duty. If you'd remained unmarried after that, he could always say he'd tried. But we are so different now, Aunty. We have the benefit of computers.

DRAUPADI

Remember it, imagine it or feel it again -- I will see it.

Dance of the Internet Arranged Marriage.

Sheetal sits before a computer. Prints off printouts and brings them to her father, rest of dancers (family). One, two three times -- her father pins the printouts to a board on the wall, moves back, and throws a dart. Then he goes over to the printout he's targeted, removes it from the wall and hands it to Lord Krishna. The blue god smiles and hands it to Sheetal.

DRAUPADI

That's not choice either. He told you which boy was acceptable, and only that one.

SHEETAL

[shrugs]

Then how does it matter? All I needed was one man to be my husband -- we only have one these days. We don't have polyandry, now. We're with-it -- I can't expect you to understand since you were married to five. Besides, they're all alike, aren't they?

DRAUPADI

No men are *not* all alike, even brothers. Any more than women are all alike.

SHEETAL

[giggling]

You should know, since you have so much experience. Five brothers in turn, one year at a time -- all because your mother-in-law said they must share everything equally.

DRAUPADI

[bitterly]

Everything, yes. That's what we women were, just things to be traded.

SHEETAL

Is it true you became a virgin at the end of each year?

[archly]

That must have been ni-ice.

DRAUPADI

Nice? Nice for my husbands, I'm sure.

Very painful for me.

(pauses, remembering pain. Returns to present)

But what good is my experience if women like you absorb whatever you're told, if you keep trusting everyone but yourself.

SHEETAL

I don't absorb whatever I'm told.

DRAUPADI

For instance?

SHEETAL

For instance, just because I see an ad for Pepsi, doesn't mean I choose Pepsi. I might like Coke better.

DRAUPADI

But just because your father gives you an ad for a man, you chose that man – what is his name, by the way?

SHEETAL

Arjun. Such a romantic name, don't you think?

Dance of the Jaimala Ceremony

Modern Arjun (in suit and tie) enters with barat procession of dancers, takes Sheetal by the hand. Draupadi stands aside watching. A buffet table is wheeled in.

Lord Krishna, the blue god, leads Arjun to Sheetal and they sit on thrones. Sheetal looks at her Arjun with a quizzical expression. She's realizing she doesn't know him at all. Guests (dancers) ignore them. Lord Krishna ushers them to the buffet table.

Draupadi puts on her sunglasses and comes forward. She reaches out with her gift of money, circling Sheetal's head in blessing, then presses the money into Sheetal's hand.

Arjun is looking forward. He opens his hand – demanding. Sheetal puts the money into it. Arjun puts it in his pocket.

Dancers fade to black – only Lord Krishna remains

Draupadi returns to her room. Opens a drawer, takes out a gunny sack. Puts the gunny sack over the Cupid statue. Lifts the statue and stands it in the corner. Brushes off her hands, plants them on her hips and shakes her head.

Lord Krishna dances.

CURTAIN

INTERMISSION

ACT II - SCENE 1

Three months later.

Dining room of Sheetal and Arjun's home. Sleek, sumptuous, hi-tech. Chandelier, crystal goblets, jamavar-print tablecloth. Not nouveau-riche/garish. Sheetal and Draupadi sit together at one end of a long dining table. Draupadi's simple sari contrasting with the elegant surroundings. Sheetal wears a sari of glossy satin-silk -- very much the lady of the house. A servant wheels in a trolley with a silver tea set, and leaves them. Sheetal picks up a notepad and pen.

SHEETAL

[Reading from notepad]

The Shivling has to be brought from Narmada.

DRAUPADI

Yes, and don't forget the yoni.

SHEETAL

Of course.

The havan fire has to be brought from one of the twelve dwadasp places – I don't even know where those places are!

The Mahashiv puran has to be recited. That alone will take the pandits seven days.

And during this recitation, pandits have to bath the Shivling in milk. Non-stop for a hundred and eight hours! Do you know how much milk I'd have to buy for that?

And then I'd have to perform unnattis. With 29 sticks.

And the pandits would pour milk, yogurt, bhang, bel patra and dhatura in the havan fire.

And you say all this can't be done here in Mumbai. We have to go to Badrinath, where your atman first rose from your body. And there we have to get pandits to perform a Navagraha puja, and read the Bhagvat puran for *another* seven days.

Draupadi-ji, this is not just a puja -- this is a very special puja. And the ceremony can't be done by you, since you're the one who will benefit.

DRAUPADI

[pushes her cup forward]

[matter of fact]

Yes.

SHEETAL

[begins to pour tea, stops]

I understand that all your sons died in the war – my condolences.

DRAUPADI

[Bows her head in acknowledgement]

SHEETAL

So they couldn't perform your last rites.

But why didn't your grandson – what was his name? Parikshit -- send your atman to Brahman?

DRAUPADI

I couldn't find him after the war – men only show up once everything is cleaned up. And don't think you can get him to redo my last rites now. He's been reborn as a rock star. In Chile, I hear – bless him. He has my whole image tattooed here

[gestures up and down her arm]

but doesn't even know my name.

SHEETAL

[begins to pour tea, stops]

So someone has to do this particular puja to send your atman home to Brahman?

DRAUPADI

Yes, someone sincere.

It's the only way. At least, that's what Vyasa said.

SHEETAL

Vyasa?

The sage who wrote the Mahabharat?

How many centuries ago?

DRAUPADI

[speculating]

Before he died.

Must have been several years *after* I died – Vyasa was a slow writer. It took him years to write our whole long story, you know.

But in my case, he just wasn't too sure how to end it, so in several versions he left me, well – hanging between earth and sky.

SHEETAL

Forever?

DRAUPADI

[pushes her cup forward]

That's what it feels like. A few centuries ago, I thought I'd look up Vyasa in the library. He's often retold our story, so I know he's been reincarnated several times. But I just can't pinpoint exactly where he is right now. I ask Ganesh-ji for his address so I can enter it in Mapquest -- I ask every time I go to the temple. But he just looks down his nose at me.

SHEETAL

[begins to pour tea, stops]

I have no idea what such a puja ceremony costs. Not just going to Badrinath, getting the Shiv lingam, the milk, the pandits making the offerings, but also feeding the pandits, and the poor.

DRAUPADI

Oh yes, but --

[gesturing around the room]

I think you can manage it.

SHEETAL

Draupadi-ji, if I need to spend more than ten thousand rupees, I have to take permission from my mother-in-law, my father-in-law and my husband. My mother-in-law gave my dowry money to my eldest brother-in-law, and he's such a gambler, he bought Satyam stock and now he says it's all lost.

DRAUPADI

But . . .

SHEETAL

[pours tea in Draupadi's cup]

I know, I know, you saved my life.

DRAUPADI

[pulls cup toward her]

I didn't want to mention it.

SHEETAL

I suppose a bouquet of flowers isn't really thanks enough.

[pause].

I get an allowance – everything has to stay within that. Meat, vegetables, daal-roti. And my makeup, my hair, my clothes –

Did Vyasa mention any other ways?

DRAUPADI

[sipping tea]

The only other way he mentions in the Mahabharat is to start another war, but I don't want more bloodshed.

SHEETAL

No, people live in Kurukshetra, now. You can't just have a battle on that plain, these days.

Oh – what am I saying? I can't be taking you seriously.

DRAUPADI

No one took me seriously, until I started a war.

SHEETAL

You didn't start a war, Draupadi-ji. I've been rereading my comics since I met you. You were an *excuse* for a war.

And don't say people didn't take you seriously. They worshipped you. Women worship you.

DRAUPADI

[sadly]

Not these days.

SHEETAL

Okay, but not long ago either. Madame Tussaud's House of Wax was built on the site of an ancient Draupadi temple.

DRAUPADI

Impossible. I've never received any prayers.

SHEETAL

It says so here.

[picking up newspaper]

And it says: "some Dalit men became angry at how they were treated when they tried to enter Madame Tussaud's and set the fire. Other sources say the fire was set by a foreign hand."

DRAUPADI

The authorities will eventually decide which version of the story should be told -- they always do. And you need to decide which version *you* believe.

Well, If you can't do a special puja for my atman, Sheetal, there's nothing more for me here.

[rises]

SHEETAL

[pulling her down]

No, that's not true. Don't go!

I – oh, Draupadi-ji. (breaks down)

DRAUPADI

Now what happened? Tell me.

Can't?

Achcha, show me – remember it, imagine it, see it again so I'll see it.

Enter dancers

DRAUPADI

Who are they? Ah, your husband's cousin-brothers. Oh, and there's the one whose marriage proposal you turned down. Ttt-ttt-ttt. I see, I see...

Dance: Holi Hai!

Enter Arjun and his brothers stage left.

Enter the five cousin-brothers, stage right. Enter Krishna, dancing his own dance.

Dance – they smear color on each other, then sit down to play cards.

Enter Sheetal. The cousin brothers paw her, pass her from one to the other in a modern repeat of Draupadi's cheer-haran.

(But worse – no neverending sari, no intervention from Lord Krishna – Lord Krishna is oblivious, wrapt in his own dance)

Arjun and his brothers clench their fists, start forward, but do nothing. Eventually the cousins leave. Sheetal is left on the floor between Arjun and his brothers.

[Fade to black. Exit all]

DRAUPADI

[gently]

What did your husband say?

SHEETAL

Nothing. His sculptures adorn the homes and office buildings his cousin-brothers build. My Arjun depends on the family business for all this [gesturing around]. Everything we own is because of it.

And his elder brothers said nothing, so he said nothing.

DRAUPADI.

And what did your mother-in-law say?

SHEETAL

[begins to weep again]

She told me I had imagined all this. That Arjun's cousins would never do such things – these things only happen in other people's families, she said. Not ours. The boys, as she calls them, were not violent.

But I didn't imagine it. Just like I'm not imagining you – am I?

DRAUPADI

We're all in Vishnu's dream, Sheetal. But in my experience when people want to control you, they first tell you you're deluded.

What did your Daddy say?

SHEETAL

Daddy! He said I mustn't shame him by leaving my husband, because what will people say?

And my father-in-law said I should see a psychiatrist.

[Uniformed servant wheels in Living room sofa and chair]

DRAUPADI

I'm better than a psychiatrist – you don't have to pay me to listen.

[Sheetal lies down on the sofa, Draupadi takes the chair and puts on her large white rhine-stoned sunglasses]

SHEETAL

Maybe he meant I should talk to my mother-in-law.

Draupadi-ji, I'll do a puja for you, but not yet. Just -- don't leave me alone right now.

DRAUPADI

I've waited this long --

[glances at her wrist watch]

SHEETAL

[sitting up]

Is that a Rolex or a Movado?

DRAUPADI

It's a Millennium. Keeps time from the start of Kalyug to now.

I suppose I can wait a few days more.

Sheetal, all I'm saying is -- [look of desperation] -- there has to be some end to this.

SHEETAL

Listen, please stay. Just till things are better. I promise I will not only do a puja for you, but build a new temple to you -- if I can.

Just tell me, what should I do?

DRAUPADI

[psychiatrist style]

You're so modern, you're so with-it -- what do *you* think you should do?

SHEETAL

Talk to my father, and in-laws? They should tell Arjun's cousin-brothers to behave themselves.

DRAUPADI

Why should someone else confront them for you? Can't you talk to your husband? Tell him he needs to do his duty towards you, not just towards his elders. Tell him he can't expect you to take harassment while he sits quiet. Talk to your cousin-brothers-in-law. Tell them you'll carve them up and eat them for lunch if they misbehave again. Especially that one whose proposal you turned down.

SHEETAL

[sitting up for a girl to girl chat]

Oh, that's a change. Why didn't *you* do that?

DRAUPADI

I never expected I'd have to ask my elders and my husband to protect me. I thought it was obvious. I didn't have the law on my side, either. In those days a woman belonged to her husband – she was a pretty face and a womb, that's all.

SHEETAL

And I should find the courage to do what you couldn't? What if they throw me out? I should risk my marriage, my family, my unborn children?"

DRAUPADI

If you want the world to respect you, you need to respect yourself.

SHEETAL

I did try.

[her eyes dart left and right]

Don't tell anyone, but I tried to leave.

DRAUPADI

Then?

SHEETAL

I went apartment hunting. I went everywhere. All I could afford with my savings from the house money was a hole in the wall. The place actually had rats. And no one would rent to a single woman.

Draupadiji -- how come *you* live alone?

DRAUPADI

I found a modern landlord, that's all. There *are* people who don't care what others will say.

SHEETAL

And you don't care what people will say? Well, you're not so young any more.

DRAUPADI

You can say old, I don't mind. Still I'm more with-it than you.

SHEETAL

[suddenly imperious]

Watch what you say, or I won't pray or do a puja for your atman.

Achcha, I always heard you were the incarnation of Lakshmi – tell me where you got the money you gave me at my wedding?

DRAUPADI

Vyasa. He pays for telling me all my suffering was caused by something I did in my past lives. You know, he made up stories about how I'd wanted a husband with so many qualities that no one man could satisfy me. In one version, he said I'd been insatiable -- some kind of nymphomaniac in a past life. Said that's why I needed five husbands – *chi!* So I told Lord Krishna to tell him: I don't care how you send it, but you pay me from your royalties. He pays – not very much, but enough for my needs.

SHEETAL

So you just make money from thin air. Well, I can't. I can't even type -- how will I ever learn the computer?

DRAUPADI

Oh, stop complaining. I'm taking computer classes – you can, too. You know, I go ego-surfing on Google. I just type in Draupadi and see what strange things people say.

SHEETAL

I don't like computers.

DRAUPADI

Drive a taxi, then. You young women, you are so afraid of life, so afraid to be alone, you trade your independence for a home like this one, for a husband, servants, a car, a driver, a bathroom with running water – an I-pod! And though I enjoy not having to fetch

wood and carry water, I also enjoy owning my own atman. I've had a long time to think about it, and

[sarcastically]

just maybe over the centuries, I've learned a thing or two.

SHEETAL

[ignoring the lecture]

But it's not safe for a woman to drive a taxi.

DRAUPADI

So what will happen? Five men will come and attack you? And your family will be dishonored? Or *you'll* be dishonored?

You've already been dishonored just sitting at home.

[sees she has hurt Sheetal]

I'm sorry. It's just that you don't seem aware there's been a women's revolution all over the world. Fear is still holding you back, just as it held me.

[gently]

Even if you were raped, Sheetal, you still own your own body.

Your jeev-atman is yours – claim it!

[long pause]

Well?

SHEETAL

No. Don't you see? This is everything I ever wanted. A house like this, a car, a driver. Look at this beautiful sari Arjun bought for me? This purse is designed by a man in Paris: Yves St. Laurent. See these shoes? They're by Fendi.

And the parties we go to! I love how people look at me.

DRAUPADI

Look at you or look at your husband?

SHEETAL

At me because of him. Yes, yes, yes.

I'm not leaving!

I'll do just what *you* did. I will accept my kismet, I can be quiet and obedient. Isn't that a woman's kismet?

DRAUPADI

(takes off sunglasses, rises. Begins to pace the stage)

This, from a modern Kshatriya woman? I can't do anything for you if you refuse to help yourself. No -- arrange the puja for me or I will...

[stops, turns toward Sheetal]

SHEETAL

You'll curse me, right?

I don't believe that.

You wouldn't. You can't.

[Draupadi folds her arms over her chest and looks implacable]

You'd curse *me*? But I thought we ...

[change in tone]

Maybe you can curse me.

But Draupadiji, you can't leave me now. At least, not yet.

[pause]

I'm pregnant.

DRAUPADI

[horrified]

Hai Krishna! Ooffo! The age old story . You can't leave for the sake of your children.

[thought strikes her]

Sheetal, do you know who the father is?

SHEETAL

[shrugs with palms open in an I-don't-know gesture]

Dance of the Mirror-world.

Dancers enter and Lord Krishna presents Sheetal with a mirror. The dancers hold up mirrors before her.

Sheetal dances, searching for her courage, her real self. Enter mother in law, father, modern Arjun, all wagging their fingers at Sheetal. She dances with each of them and they exit in turn.

Only Lord Krishna is left, and now he dances for and with her.

ACT II - SCENE 2

Five years later.

A very simple (poor) living room, backdrop of peeled-paint wall with a curtained window.

Sheetal, wearing a simple salwar kameez, stands at the window, waving. She drops the corner of the curtain, and turns back, smiling.

SHEETAL

[thinking out loud]

My boys. Both standing in line for the school bus. I can't believe it's the first day in school for my youngest.

DRAUPADI

Yes. And I'm here to remind you it has been five years since your promise.

SHEETAL

[with brittle humor]

And here I thought you'd come to see me.

DRAUPADI

I've been patient. No curses, no telling your secrets.

SHEETAL

[with barely suppressed rage]

Drapadi-ji, look around at this apartment.

We can't afford to pay our cook any more. So this morning I chopped onions. Onions!!!

[traces tears sliding down cheeks]

Arjun has gone out looking for work at a stone quarry. He said I should try making daal.

He said it's very easy, but he doesn't know how to make it. He said definitely make rice --

I don't even know how to make rice! Maybe he'll come home and make it himself.

No -- he'll expect it to be made. Perfectly.

Having a sweeper has become a luxury. So this week I had to clean the toilets myself.

Me! Sheetal Talwar.

I'm worrying about how we're going to pay our next month's rent. And you're here asking me to perform a huge puja ceremony?

DRAUPADI

If I could ask for a small puja, I would. But this is a very special puja.

[voice rising]

It's not for my health, my birthday or a new business. It's not for a long life, or good fortune. It's for my *atman*.

SHEETAL

We haven't entertained anyone since we left our old home and came to this place. How can we? All our servants had to find other jobs or go back to their villages. Of course, even if we could entertain guests, our old friends don't call us.

We are just not cool any more.

I'm not cool anymore.

[sees Draupadi is looking dejected, tearing up]

I told you long ago I would do it, *if I can*. When I can. Believe me, I had made up my mind to do it, I had even drawn up a guest list when –

DRAUPADI

When what?

[turns away, blows her nose].

I never did get the full story.

SHEETAL

My Arjun's brothers and cousins lost crores in the crash of Satyam. Then the newspapers began reporting building accidents – Arjun's cousins had been adulterating cement. The family's construction business began losing customers. There were government inquiries -- and then of course we had to pay off politicians and government officials.

DRAUPADI

[drily]

Of course.

SHEETAL

Profits fell, and Arjun's cousins began taking a larger share, then an even larger share. Arjun and his brothers aren't builders or a businessmen – they are sculptors! Their cousins don't need their art. One argument lead to another. And here we are.

DRAUPADI

[reminiscing]

My Arjun and his brothers and I were sent into real exile, you know. We lived in a forest for twelve long years.

SHEETAL

[shouting]

I know, I know. If I complain, my mother-in-law and now you say it was worse in your day. Next you'll say other women have worse problems. I know that.

Last night I called the police when I heard the screams of a woman whose drunk husband tried to kill her because she kept a little money from him for milk for his children.

And next door, there's a woman whose husband works for an IT company. Do you know, he threw their four-day-old child in a well just because it was a girl?!

But why should I be in a competition for suffering? With you or any other woman.

DRAUPADI

[gently]

We're not in competition. I was trying to comfort you.

I'm sorry. I'll come back some other time.

SHEETAL

Don't go!

[fighting to control herself]

Sometimes I think if I had a mother, I might talk to her as I talk to you.

DRAUPADI

I'm listening.

How is your Arjun fighting his cousins?

SHEETAL

He isn't. They have grabbed his share, treated him like a lackey.

DRAUPADI

And raped you, or has everyone forgotten?

SHEETAL

[turns away. Gets control of herself. Turns back]

I told Arjun he must persuade his elder brothers to take their cousins to court –

DRAUPADI

Which Maharaja's court. . .? Oh, a court of law.

SHEETAL

But he says, How can we sue them? They're our cousins.

How can I make him understand?

DRAUPADI

Pray to Lord Krishna. I find him very understanding.

SHEETAL

Oh, that's really helpful! I should read the Bhagvadgita too, right?

Why don't you just ask Lord Krishna what he thinks? He was your friend, you must have a hot line to him.

DRAUPADI

As a matter of fact, I do.

[pulls out a red cell phone and calls].

Hé Krishna. What? I know, you've been listening –

[to Sheetal]

He's soooo mischievous!

Han. Han. Ji-han.

What? I'll tell her.

[clicks off, pops the red cell phone down her sari blouse.]

He says he's given you many options that didn't exist in my time.

SHEETAL

What options?

DRAUPADI

The Rule of law. Not the old convoluted Kshatriya caste code of conduct, but a code all the same. You know, in the Constitution.

SHEETAL

That will bring justice? Ha!

DRAUPADI

Depends on what you call Justice. If you mean vengeance -- well, maybe yes, maybe no. I never found vengeance as satisfying as I expected.

Did you know I had to comfort my Arjun after he returned from battle. He felt so disturbed that he'd killed his cousins.

SHEETAL

[bitterly]

The law is not interested in justice, Draupadi-ji. Arjun's cousins will just lie because there's not a single penalty for lying under oath.

DRAUPADI

Yes, it will seem so. Every story is just one version of the truth.

I didn't say it would be easy.

SHEETAL

[idea dawning]

Draupadi-ji, where's your phone?

DRAUPADI

[patting her breast on the heart-side]

Here.

SHEETAL

Call Lord Krishna again. Redial -- please!

DRAUPADI

Why?

SHEETAL

You know Krishna-ji – who better than you! He has the power to help my Arjun win back our home.

DRAUPADI

He's a God, Sheetal. Gods are not reliable. During our war, he gave powerful advice to one side, powerful weapons to the other. Like -- like the CIA –

SHEETAL

He told you I have options. Well, *he's* one of them.

[Draupadi doesn't move.]

Sheetal folds her hands before her]

I'll do the special puja for your atman.

[Draupadi doesn't move. Wheedling in little girl voice]

I'll do a very very special puja if you call on Krishna.

Please, please?

[Draupadi sighs and wobbles her head, meaning I-really-don't-want-to-but-achcha/okay.]

Takes out her red cell phone and dials.]

Dance of the Court Room.

Arjun and his four brothers, five cousin brothers. Two lawyers.

All come before a judge.

Lord Krishna is off to the side, watching.

Sheetal mounts the witness stand. Lord Krishna comes to her side.

Sheetal steps down,

Judge gives Lord Krishna his decision.

Arjun raises his arms in triumph.

Arjun dances with Sheetal.

ACT III

Soon after trial.

Gateway of India arches above Sheetal and Draupadi. People (dancers) are sitting around, walking chatting, feeding the pigeons, some flying a kite, child-beggars are begging.

SHEETAL

We're moving home tomorrow. Arjun and the children are so excited.

DRAUPADI

And you?

SHEETAL

I wish I was too. It's just that Arjun seems different. Harder in some way, inside.

(pause)

I told him if he wanted me to return to his old home with him, we need some new rules.

DRAUPADI

What kind of rules?

SHEETAL

He has to stay away from his adulterous cousins. We should begin our own sculpture museum.

DRAUPADI

I can see it now -- Madame Sheetal's.

SHEETAL

Our sons will be brought up to respect girls, whether they are their sisters, cousin-sisters or strangers.

DRAUPADI

Oh-ho. Even strangers? That means girls who are not blood relatives? Girls *not related to your family?* Vah!

But -- what do you mean by respect?

SHEETAL

Boys have to learn that when a girl says no she doesn't mean maybe. And if she says maybe, she doesn't mean yes.

It means a boy should be taught that his future wife can and will control her own money -- a wife should be able to pay for ten pujas from her own money without asking anyone's permission.

It means...a man shouldn't show respect for his mother by disrespecting his wife.

DRAUPADI

That is Quantum Physics for boys and men – very difficult for them to understand. But I like the idea. Wish we'd had this in my day.

SHEETAL

You didn't have condoms or the pill either. Well, we're so different now – we have them, but our mothers-in-law and husbands refuse to let us use them.

I told Arjun, that has to change. Two is enough!

DRAUPADI

[claps]

SHEETAL

And I said, No playing cards and no drinking bhang. At Holi or any other festival.

DRAUPADI

[rolling her eyes]

That won't last.

SHEETAL

Maybe, maybe not. But if it comes back, I leave.

I've now warned my father, and Arjun's parents.

DRAUPADI

You're not afraid anymore?

SHEETAL

No. When I fell so low that I had to clean my own toilet, I could do it. I *did* do it. And do you know, Draupadi-ji, it wasn't the worst that could happen. I cut my fingers chopping onions, I swept the floor and cleaned the toilets – so what? Up and down the apartment building, I saw so many women who do much harder work, every day. And so many terrible things that happen to poorer women.

DRAUPADI

[quietly]

You are so different now.

[pause]

SHEETAL

And the Shivling has been brought from Narmada, The havan fire has been brought from Triambakeshwar, one of the twelve dwadasp places.

[raising her hand to stop Draupadi who is trying to interrupt]

I said to myself: I remember what it felt like to fall from the sky back to earth, just when I thought I could leave all my troubles behind. So -- the pandits who will recite the Mahashiv puran for seven days are ready.

I've bought eight hundred liters of milk to bathe the Shivling non-stop for a hundred and eight hours. It's being delivered to a refrigerated warehouse. Maybe I'll get more – that doesn't seem enough.

And the halwai delivered mishti doi instead of plain yogurt, but I'll return it.

And here's your ticket: Mumbai – Delhi –Kuruksheetra. . . the pandits tell me they must pray for your atman at Kuruksheetra because your death was unnatural like all who died on that battlefield.

DRAUPADI

Stop, Sheetal, stop.

[groans]

Oh, I'm so sorry.

I should have said something earlier. Stop the pandits, return the offerings.

SHEETAL

What?!

DRAUPADI

Return the Shivling – very politely. Don't forget the yoni.

Tell the pandits I will recite the Mahashiv puran myself.

And the milk – eight hundred liters! Please distribute it to street children in my name. They need it more than Lord Shiva.

I've decided I'm staying right here.

SHEETAL

With me? Oh Draupadiji, that's wonderful.

DRAUPADI

No, no, not with you. Can you imagine me haunting your home? I don't think your mother-in-law and I would get along.

I mean just -- here.

SHEETAL

Okay, not with me. Stay in your own home – I'll come and visit you every day.

DRAUPADI

Sheetal, I still have work to do on Earth. You no longer need my help, but other women do. I have to be their fighting spirit – I know that now.

SHEETAL

So if you're not staying, where are you going?

DRAUPADI

Where I'm needed most. To women in villages, women in the chawls. There are women and men all over India who are feeling right now, as you felt – total despair. I've been reading reports on the net. – we have a hundred thousand suicides a year. Farmers, unemployed people, retired people. People your age. So many young girls, Sheetal, so many women.

SHEETAL

Achcha? I thought it was just me. I didn't know it was so bad. Maybe they feel as I did, that they'll return in a new life, a better life. Yes – you can help them.

[preening]

you can tell them about me.

[Sees Draupadi's raised eyebrow]

How you helped me, I mean.

[pause]

But -- you'll come and see me again?

DRAUPADI

Yes, of course, Sheetal. Sometimes even spirits need vacations. I'll come and see how you raise your sons, and how they turn out. I'll check to see if you're following your own rules or falling into old patterns or back into despair.

SHEETAL

Isn't there anything I can do for you, give you?

DRAUPADI

[pointing to the yellow purse]

This. I'll wear it like you do, as a remembrance of our friendship. It's not every day I'll find a woman who needs her handbag designed by a man in Paris *and* needs to be persuaded not to commit suicide.

[Sheetal takes off the purse, takes her wallet out, and ceremoniously drapes the the purse around Draupadi's neck and across her body]

[Seeing the wallet, a beggar girl runs forward]

SHEETAL

[Giving girl a coin. To beggar-girl, promising:]

Kal aana – yahan bachon ko doodh milega. Ja! Sare bachon ko keh do.

[girl grins and runs off. To Draupadi]

It has taken days to collect eight hundred liters of milk, but it will take hours to distribute it to as many needy children as I can.

Have you called Lord Krishna lately? Ask how long it will take to give so many women your fighting spirit?

DRAUPADI

I did. He said only Lord Vishnu knows – it could happen tomorrow, or it could happen in the next millennium. You just never know with us Indian women.

Oh – by the way – don't return my train ticket – I can start my work from Kurukshetra.

[Takes the train ticket from Sheetal. Sheetal holds out her arm. Draupadi takes it.]

Something about that battleground always inspires me.

[They turn and walk through the Gateway of India].

Dancers rise.

Lord Krishna enters through the Gateway of India.

Farewell Dance

CURTAIN

Dedicated to the surviving family and friends of Pragya Mehrotra