

# **ENTERTEXT**

Coloured

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Ganesh walked in the intense Texas heat, wondering how on his first trip to America, the land of opportunity, he managed to miss the grand vistas of beaches and mountains shown on the BBC and instead only found dumpy cityscapes similar to the outskirts of Calcutta. The dry dust of Houston held little promise of fulfilling Ganesh's desire for the blue sparkling water of American beaches, warmer in the Gulf of Mexico than the frigid waters of the English Channel. No, locked by land, and doomed to boredom, he had one more night to suffer.

Ganesh had come to Houston with the address of the only person he knew on the North American continent, Simon O' Shea, a childhood friend who wasn't even American. Nor, as it turned out, was he here, in the country. Simon, in typical unpredictable fashion, was back in Ireland on a holiday.

'Look me up mate, if you ever leave this sorry rock,' Simon said. He tipped his hat to Ganesh. The last time he'd seen Simon, over two years ago, after graduation from Oxford. Bound for his next adventure, Simon left Ganesh standing on the train platform at Paddington Square, squinting against the fading sunlight. This was one of the first times since boarding school the two were separated. After breathing in the last of the train fumes, Ganesh loped home, ignoring the pitying gazes of the household, and he went straight to his room.

Of course, once there, the next easiest thing was to pull her out. His blunt fingernails searched for the discrete lip signaling the small compartment he'd carved in the rich sandalwood of the bed. Finding it, he used his pinky nail, the one that drew unending looks of disgust from his mother, to pry it open. Inside the inches of space hid his secret treasure. He lifted her out, a slip of the full woman, his redhead.

Ganesh, unable to subdue the centuries old Brahmin blood running through his veins, couldn't keep the entire magazine Simon insisted was a present. So he selected his favorite woman, peeled her from between the slick pages, and placed her under his pillow at school. When time came to go home, guilt knocked loudly at the thought of his mother finding her, and so, apologetically, Ganesh separated his love from her considerable assets.

Sweat trickling down the inside of his collar, Ganesh sighed. Swearing and women aside, Simon had been a prize to know in school. All alone in the world the minute his parents set sail for the return journey to India, Ganesh had been mercilessly teased by the boys at prep school. His soap, scented with the lightest of sandalwood, drew wrinkled noses from the other boys and although Ganesh was a sure bet for a full meal on fish and chips night or kidney pie and liver, it wasn't until Simon's arrival and companionship that Ganesh made into the secret societies.

'Let's tie one on, old chap,' was Simon's favorite line, whether they were in the midst of studying, or unnecessary boredom, as he called it.

'Man wouldn't survive on his own,' Was another of Simon's sayings, 'without the power to tie 'em on and forget the rest.'

'Let's do tie one on,' Ganesh mutters to himself, glancing down either side of the street. Down to the left, a few slow moving men confirmed that Ganesh was not the only one affected by the heat. Their worn shirts and faces weren't unlike those in the John Wayne epics he would sneak out to while his parents thought he was at temple. The thing was he *would* go to the temple; after the stolen cinema, arriving in time for the priest to sprinkle holy water, smelling faintly of roses, on Ganesh's bent head, contrite amidst the other worshippers. He would receive the sacred ash mark, grey, and then the small red stripe with a contrite soul. His cupped palm accepted the *prasad*, the food blessed by Lakshmi, the Goddess of wealth and the temple's patron deity, a blessing he later transferred a small banana leaf to take to his mother. In this way Ganesh felt no conflict between going to the temple and making time for his John Wayne movies. As he knew from watching Simon's juggling of daily Mass and neighborhood pubs, a smart bloke knew how to manage his time.

At the moment, however, the temple, his mother, and their blessings were far away from what he was about to do. A good thing, since his mother would have been horrified at the thought of hundreds of years of Brahmin lineage riding his shoulders into a Texas bar.

He headed for the nearest bar, swinging the door open with one hand. He had wanted the swinging doors of the movies, but it appeared there were none to be found. So he did the next best thing, strode into this bar, holding this torso straight so as to emerge in a broad muscular expanse like the hero of a Wayne epic. But the door was heavier than expected, much sturdier than the sandalwood exterior of his youth. The dark wood of this particular saloon turned, how unexpected! Inward. Ganesh crashed into it like a young cow.

Why would they put a handle on something you have to push? he wonders, trying to ignore the fact his arrival into the bar was reminiscent of a Western, only he was playing the role of the gawking newcomer, rather than the debonair stranger.

Nevertheless, entrance aside, he managed himself to a seat without further incident.

He smiled to the left and right to reassure people that he was all right, but was met with unblinking flat-lipped stares. He found it unsettling being the sole object of attention under these unflinching orbs of different colors. He wondered how John Wayne overcame the stymieing gazes. How could Ganesh draw life into the heavy stone that his heart had become? His nerve had sunk like ten tons to the bottom of his liver. Chin up, Ganesh reminded himself, chin up, swivel legs in, and order. You've seen this done a hundred times. He coughed into the stillness.

A sharp memory of Simon's voice, crisp, cool, and mocking, helped him regain his bearings. 'When you're in a pub, the world over, you're the boss.' Simon's voice came from over his shoulders, poking into Ganesh's hunched shoulders.

The two were out of school for the winter holiday, ostensibly to visit Simon's parents in Manchester, but they'd chosen to stay in their dormitory at university instead. Simon's parents, traveling on business, hadn't bothered to inquire why he'd elected to stay, and Ganesh's parents, holding implicit trust in their only son, hadn't reason to question his visit to his classmate's home. The two boys had full range of the empty hostel, save for the eldest proctor who kept to himself, a drunk, Simon cheerfully explained. Simon, set on finishing out Ganesh's 'proper education,' included pub etiquette in the course of the weekend's education.

'I'll have a gin and tonic,' Ganesh said, happy to hear firm tones rather than the quaking he felt in his vocal chords. The man behind the counter lifted an eyebrow. Ganesh began to doubt himself. Despite the room's dank interior he felt himself go hot under his arms. Gin and tonic? Was that in fact what he meant? Was it a woman's drink he'd just ordered? Brahma save me, he thought, ignoring the fact that his desire to drink American alcohol was the least likely of a Hindu god's concerns.

Ganesh felt the room contract around him. What would Wayne do right now? he thought, seeing the watching group of men in the corner shift their stance.

The man behind the counter said nothing, just flicked a small towel at the bar top where Ganesh was resting his arm. Ganesh blinked.

'I beg your pardon?' this time he heard the dreaded squeak. There were guffaws around the room. I've turned into my namesake, he thought, Ganesh, half man, half elephant. Why won't this man serve me? Ganesh looked across the counter into the bar mirror, half expecting to see an elephant head in place of the top half of his reflection. No, instead all that stared back at him were his own brown eyes, and, he realized, the eyes of everyone else in the room.

He wished the stone that had been his heart, now hiding in his liver, would stop beating so he could fall down dead.

Somehow she appeared, there was no other way to say it, she appeared at his elbow, and her hip perched on the lip of the counter, skirts full and blue. A blue so sharp it hurt his eyes, encasing a slim but flared waist traveling up to so much exposed white flesh, Ganesh felt a different kind of heat tingle his earlobes.

'There ain't nothing here for the likes of you, colored,' Ganesh heard someone mutter as he admired piles and piles of rich, red hair.

Never in real life had he seen red hair –

The flick of the cleaning towel in his face broke Ganesh's line of vision just as he caught sight of two of large blue eyes. They reminded him of the Queen's commissioned coronation crown, with sapphires rumored the size of robin's eggs.

The red haired beauty at his side pouted.

'Now Jack, you stop it. This here's a man living in England. He's our guest. It's an honor sir,' she said flipping her arm at the elbow and presenting her hand to in a flourish Ganesh. He was so close to her he could see slight marks around her wrist, little puckers as if she'd been tied up.

Ganesh reached for her hand whose slender fingers were fluttering in front of his parted lips.

'Touch her and you'll die, dirty nigger,' the man, Jack evidently, was closer now, edging into Ganesh's eardrum. He saw the watching group on the move; they seeped toward him, eyes hooded.

'Jack!' she protested but let her hand drop to the counter. She glanced down at







'Run,' she screamed, shoving him forward. Ganesh looked down and saw blood where she had so recently stood. Then she bolted past him toward the door, but Jack grabbed her by the hair and jerked her to the floor.

The last vision he had of his love, before feeling the cool night air, was of her brilliant hair fanned around her, spreading around her, on the floor. Red was the color he saw as he ran. Red, red, red; the night was still and dark before him, a deep black, deep enough to be violet. And the moon was an ivory almond barely hanging in the sky.