

Scene: I am in Varanasi, sitting on the ghats and drinking a chai by the Ganges River. It is nearly sundown. The banks are filled with people; tourists, locals, ferrymen, beggars, salesmen, and sadhus. A flute salesman makes eye contact with me as he is playing a slow, sweet tune. I prepare myself for the pitch.

F.M. Namaste. Hello, brother.

A.K. Namaste. Hello, sir.

F.M. What is your name?

A.K. Alex. And you?

F.M. I have no name. Call me Flute Man.

A.K. It's nice to meet you, Flute Man. You play the hell out of that flute.

F.M. (Motions towards the flute.) It is my mother, my friend, and my wife. It is all I have, all I need. You play any instrument?

A.K. No, I'm a shit musician. My only instrument is the pen, I guess.

F.M. Ah! A writer. You look like a writer. It is a gift from the gods to be a writer.

A.K. It's just the glasses. I don't know about a gift from the gods, but I'm trying. So are you a flute player or a salesman?

F.M. I'm a flute player by trade and, as you say, a shit salesman.

A.K. Maybe that's why I like you.

(Both begin to laugh.)

F.M. The only thing worse than a salesman is a politician.

A.K. Aren't they the same thing?

(Both begin to laugh, again.)

F.M. You're from America, I think.

A.K. How did you know?

F.M. I can just tell these things. America is filled with politicians and salesmen, and people who like to get sold things from them. But you don't look like a buyer or a seller.

A.K. Are you sure you're not a philosopher, Mr. Flute Man?

F.M. (Flute Man grins, showing his tobacco-stained teeth.) I'm no philosopher, but I can also see you're looking for something. I know it's not a flute, but maybe I help you.

A.K. (Sighs and takes a long sip of chai.) Another good guess, Mr. Flute Man. Maybe you should be an astrologer or something. You'd make a lot more money. (Both laugh.)

A.K. Well, I suppose I'm looking for *moksha*, but I'll also settle for contentment.

F.M. (The Flute Man puts on a grave face.) They are the same thing, no?

A.K. I've never had either so I wouldn't know...It seems like you're more enlightened than all these so-called sadhus, Flute Man.

F.M. Maybe. But I'm also just as dumb as the most ignorant one.

(The Flute Man takes out a bidi and offers one to me. I take it and we fall silent for a while.)

A.K. Chai?

(The Flute Man nods and I order him a chai.)

F.M. I can say this, Alex. I can tell you are not bad. But you think too much. Maybe that is the writer's problem, I don't know. But let me ask you this: did you ever look for contentment as a child?

A.K. (I shake my head.) No, I suppose I didn't.

F.M. And were you happy as a child?

A.K. Most of the time, I think, yeah.

F.M. There you go thinking again!

(Both laugh.)

F.M. Well, I met many yogis and sages traveling India. Most of them were shit, but the few real ones looked like children.

A.K. What do you mean?

F.M. In the eyes they looked like children. They had the eyes of children. Both knowing and unknowing. Amazed. (He opens his eyes wide for emphasis.) You understand?

A.K. I think I understand what you're saying, Flute Man, but how do I achieve that?

F.M. Agh! Now you sound like an American! Don't worry about achieve. Just keep doing and it will come.

(Chai seller hands me the chai and I hand it to the Flute Man. I pay for my chai and his.)

A.K. Ok, I will.

(I get up, and the Flute Man winks at me. He begins to play a tune as I walk away.)