

THE BURNING ROAD

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10/15/15 Draft: 10-PAGE SAMPLE

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Setting:

Malaysia – a hotel room, a home, the jungle, a traditional village, the open road.

Characters:

DEVON: Asian American, late twenties.

Half Malay/Half White, he grew up in Nebraska and still lives there where he is a literature PHD candidate. This is the first time he has traveled to Malaysia where his biological father, Tok Ramli, is a master practitioner of Wayang Kulit (Malay Shadow Puppetry) and a political dissident.

JARED: White, late twenties.

He grew up in Malaysia, the son of an American preacher doing missionary work. As a young adult he studied shadow puppetry with Tok Ramli. He is fluent in Malay and works as an occasional translator. He is married to Alice.

ALICE: Asian-American, late twenties.

Chinese American, she was raised in San Francisco. She lives in Malaysia and works for a relief organization and has written some freelance news articles for various publications. She is married to Jared.

A MALE PUPPETEER to manipulate the shadow puppets that move on the upstage screen between and during scenes.

THREE MUSICIANS of any gender but there must be at least one woman among them. The Musicians play gamelan music to accompany the puppeteer.

IMPORTANT NOTES FOR PERFORMANCE:

- /* = *an overlapping line*
- = *an interruption*
- ...* = *a thought trailing off (not an interruption)*
- []* = *lines in brackets are not to be said*
(usually they are translations of the line before)

When indicated, “a moment” simply means a pause in the dialogue.

Prologue: The Stage

*Lingering in the audience
no one seems to know him or notice him.
No one really pays attention to his wild white hair
or his skin like brown leather.*

*They simply hear the sounds of gamelan bells
and notice the minimal stage with its wide off-white screen.
If they arrived early enough they might have seen a group of musicians
led by a young woman retreat behind the screen and start to play their
instruments.
But no one notices the man with the wild white hair.*

*Until
he passes through the aisle and steps onto the stage.
Before he continues,
he stops
and looks back the way he came
then approaches the only structure on stage –
a wide off-white screen,
standing above a solid platform reaching out from its feet.
On the platform are a handful of Malay shadow puppets
Flat, colorful and made of cut leather.
He takes one puppet in his hand
And begins to animate it.
The puppet comes alive.
He laughs.
He gathers the rest of the puppets
and takes them with him behind the screen.*

*A light illuminates the screen from behind
And a figure crosses it
It is a puppet with rough lines and exaggerated features.
The gamelan music crescendos slowly.
THE FIGURE WITH ROUGH LINES looks back in the direction it came
and sings in a language the audience does not understand.*

*The sound of a truck, belching diesel is slowly heard in the distance.
It is a sound outside of the world of shadows and gamelan music
Yet the figure on the screen hears it and stops singing.*

*Two actors emerge and stand near the edge of the playing area.
They acknowledge each other silently and then step into the light.*

1. On the Road, Outside of Khota Baru

The figure on the screen grows in size and becomes the shadow of a passing truck. As the truck passes, so too does the shadow and we are left only with the screen which has become the sky, bright and cloudless.

Brown skin and sharp clothes, DEVON HANSON holds an old leather journal in his hands. JARED ELLINGSON, sunburnt and sweating, has a cell phone to his ear. He waits impatiently for something on the other end.

DEVON

That's the third military vehicle that's passed us.

JARED

That's not the military.

DEVON

It *looks* / like the military...

JARED

(Into the phone) Ya? Ya? Anda terlambat. Kapan kau akan menjemput / kita?

DEVON

(Under JARED's conversation)

What –

JARED

Mengapa kau tidak bisa datang? Saya tidak / faham... Apa?

DEVON

What are they –

JARED

Kau bilang kau akan berada di sini. Bagaimana kita boleh pergi ke / Kota Baru tanpa anda?

DEVON

Jared... what is it?

JARED

(To DEVON) Dude. I gotta...

(back to phone) Uh huh uh huh, ya ya. Okayokay. Terimah Kasih. *[Thank you]*

DEVON

What's wrong.

JARED

What are we doing here?

DEVON

We're meeting the uh / nephew that was

JARED

You've never talked to the Dalang.

DEVON

Dalang...

JARED

The puppeteer. Tok Ramli.

DEVON

I talked to his wife.

JARED

Wait, you met Jelita?

DEVON

She called me.

JARED

When did she call you?

DEVON

Well I mean it / wasn't really

JARED

So you never / actually...

DEVON

Jared. You know what I know.

JARED

The journal said to come here.

DEVON

And call her nephew.

JARED
Right.

DEVON
So...

JARED
Yeah he's not meeting us.

DEVON
I don't understand. It says / here

JARED
This is fucked.

DEVON
Are you're sure / it was

JARED
I should have set this up / myself.

DEVON
Jared.

JARED
Jesus you have no idea...

DEVON
No. I don't.

JARED
This what, this guy who was gonna take us there...

DEVON
His nephew.

JARED
His whatever - dude with a car – he isn't coming.

DEVON
That can't be what he said. You must have misunderstood.

JARED
I didn't misunderstand *that* part. He definitely / isn't coming.

DEVON

But it says here... / very specifically... I contact you,

JARED

(under DEVON)

It was the other shit he said...

DEVON

(Continuing)

we come here... the final stop on the bus out of Khota Baru, we call his / nephew, he picks us up and takes to the Village.

JARED

Devon... Devon it isn't... Devon.

Where are we?

DEVON

Uh.

JARED

Exactly. We're two hours east of nowhere, waiting for some guy we don't know.

DEVON

There shouldn't have been any problems.

JARED

You're in Malaysia. Nothing ever goes as planned.

DEVON

You're upset.

JARED

I'm frustrated.

DEVON

What. What is it / you're not

JARED

He was saying some weird shit.

DEVON

Okay...

JARED

But the dialect is different out here. It's hard to understand / sometimes.

DEVON

Take a stab in the dark.

JARED looks at DEVON for a moment.

JARED

He said "Tok Ramli's heart burst and became the stars in the night. Beware the night."

DEVON

I don't know what that means. What does that mean?

JARED

You tell me.

DEVON

Why would I know?

JARED

Because you're the one who fucking hired me!

DEVON

He didn't say anything else?

JARED

He's spooked and he's heading home to his family.

I swear these guys see ghosts in their cereal.

DEVON

These guys.

JARED

I mean. You know what I mean.

DEVON

Not really no.

JARED

Not you.

DEVON

Not me.

JARED

I mean you don't even speak Malay for god's sake.

DEVON

I'm from Nebraska.

JARED

Dude look I didn't mean anything. Just. Whatever.
I need to find someone to pick us up.

*JARED dials his cell phone and walks around trying to get service.
DEVON sits down, holding the leather journal in his hand
and looks at the road.*

DEVON

I didn't think it would be so...

JARED

Hot?

DEVON

Empty.

JARED

Just farms and buffalo out here.

DEVON

Why does the bus even stop here?

JARED

For people to get to the farms and buffalo.

DEVON

But he can't be far right? She wouldn't have told us to come here...

JARED

Let me ask you something.

DEVON

Okay.

JARED

Tok Ramli's been missing 38 days.

DEVON
Uh huh.

JARED
You got here *yesterday*.

DEVON
I had to look into some things.

JARED
For a month?

DEVON
I had to find someone to cover my classes.

JARED
Really?

DEVON
It's not easy just dropping everything...

JARED
Dude he's your dad. And he's been here all your life. Where have you been?

DEVON
In Nebraska.

JARED
I got that.

DEVON
She uh... she called me.

JARED
Jelita did call you.

DEVON
So she's his wife... his second wife I guess... but somehow she knows about me and she sends me this journal and even calls me to make sure I got it. And this guy, this guy who once upon a time was my father, he's disappeared.
I didn't even know he was alive, much less be someone who could go missing.

DEVON looks at the journal

I mean... I've been reading about him. His what his political / opposition...

JARED

You really don't understand do you?

DEVON

I think we have established that.

JARED

There are like five Dalangs left. Five masters anyway.
When these guys die Malay Shadow Puppetry as we know it dies.

DEVON

And apparently my father.

JARED

Right.
I didn't mean... Hm. What did I mean.

DEVON

I didn't even know him.

JARED

What I mean is that this isn't the end. It's only the beginning.

DEVON

This doesn't feel like the beginning

JARED

We'll track down Jelita. Which is probably what we should've done in the first place.

DEVON

But the journal...

JARED

We'll find him.

JARED sees something in the distance.

Truck's coming.

DEVON

What?

JARED

Look alive Nebraska.

DEVON

I am not riding in a stranger's truck.

JARED

(laughing) Okay.

JARED exits the playing space.

DEVON is left alone for a moment.

Begrudgingly he collects his bags to follow.

Before he does, he notices something.

A shadow. A flutter on the screen. Perhaps a trick of the hot sun.

2. In Shadows, Alice

*The sky on the screen fades to the color of the screen itself.
Dirty off-white, the color of a crumbling building wall.
Flashes of red light flicker on the screen.*

*Two actors enter the space and become ALICE and JARED
They sit on the platform at the foot of the screen
and it becomes a bed in a hotel room, the screen its bare wall.
JARED raises his hands and the flutter of the last scene becomes a bird,
A shadow made by two hands coming together to form a puppet.*

*Something is happening just outside the room's single window,
and the red flickering light that plays upon the screen covers them as well.*

JARED
Once upon a time.

ALICE
Really?

JARED
It's a beginning.

ALICE
I expected so much more.

JARED
Oh yeah?

ALICE
An incantation.

JARED
Right...

ALICE
A call to the muses.

JARED
I forgot my / audience.

ALICE
A memory. Of childhood revealed with subtlety in shadow fluttering on the wall.

JARED
You're trouble.

ALICE
Am I?

JARED
Always.

ALICE
You just don't get me.

JARED
I really don't.

ALICE
Am I that complicated?

JARED
You didn't tell me you were coming.

ALICE
I'm impulsive.

JARED
Are you?

ALICE
You were telling me a story.

JARED
You could have, I don't know, called...

ALICE
Once upon a time...

JARED looks at her for a moment and relents

JARED
There was a princess.

ALICE
Is *that* what that is?