

Of Soulful Cheese and Melted Needs

by Elaine Chiew

Two fine-young-things scan the menu board of In-N-Out Burger off Interstate 101. Dressed like twins -- hoop earrings, tank-tops and mini-skirts, ballet pumps — you could hardly tell them apart, except for their Cleopatra and Marilyn Manson hairstyles.

As they lean over the counter, Raj can smell them - a sour, clammy smell mixed with stale cigarette smoke. Both Raj and Kukri pursue them with their eyes. It's not everyday that fine things cross the threshold as wanton as brides. And Raj...Raj is desperate not to be a virgin at 23.

The afternoon burns the asphalted drive-through, and Raj waves his hand and clears his throat. "If you could fry an egg outside, you'd see the vapors."

Kukri, his fingers skimming the buttons of the cash register, sits gnawing a wheel of cheese. His teethmarks leave a craggy profile, like the California ocean-side cliffs carved out on Fontina. "Can an egg have a ghost?"

Cleopatra cocks one eyebrow. Marilyn Manson laughs, hissing, "Dickweeds."

Kukri adjusts his chef toque. "All things have souls. Burger patties, corncoobs, sesame-seed buns."

Raj puts on a canyoushovelthisshit look. "Uh huh. Like the bitumen outside." He nods. "This very fantastic-tasting cheese you're

gnawing."

Raj makes eyes at Cleopatra. "'My fine friend here, Kirk, as in Captain Kirk from the Starship Enterprise, knows something about spirituality, vapors, souls and such. So spiritual, this fellow."

The girls cackle with laughter. Raj smiles, but he's unsure why the girls are laughing; he hasn't cracked a joke. After a nasty surprise in a sandwich, Raj had to have four stitches to his torn upper lip. It curls, like a puckering zipper, revealing its pink underside. Raj believes, with his flawed-handsome looks, there's no telling what he can be. His lips balloon with potential.

"If you listen hard enough, tune your ears to the earth, you can hear the muffled oats, the frantic dust, the babbling ash on an old man's sleeve." Kukri pinwheels one arm in beautiful circles.

Marilyn Manson leans over the counter, focusing her eyes on Kukri's thrumming fingers. Cleopatra hauls her ass onto the counter, shifting the laminated menus askew. Raj gestures at himself, "Hi, I'm Rog, like in Roger Moore."

Cleopatra sniggers. "Isn't he English or something?"

Raj frowns. "So what?"

Marilyn Manson clamps one hand on Kukri's fingers, lifts them to her nose, sniffs deeply. "Well, for one thing, brownie, I totally dig the accent but it durn't sound very English." Her voice is mannish and deep.

"Hi, that's nice." Kukri says, as Marilyn Manson begins to suck his fingers, one at a time. Raj's jaw falls open.

Kukri's eyeballs glow white.

Cleopatra swings her legs onto Raj's side of the counter. Raj gets a glimpse between her legs. No underwear. Suddenly, Raj begins to feel very hot under his collar.

Cleopatra begins to feel him up with one foot. Raj swallows hard. Cleopatra leans and whispers in one ear, "Just like in the movies. Ever done it in your place of employment?" Raj struggles to come up with a cool answer.

"I've done it in McDonald's, Taco Bells, Burger King, KFC, Denny's," she pauses to think, "Wendy's, Dairy Queen, Jack in the Box, Dunkin Donuts," her voice drops to a whisper, "except they've got no bathroom, so Jonas and I had to use one of them big silver trays."

"Very hot, this summer." Raj squeaks. "Unseasonably dry."

Cleopatra laughs. "Well, this'll be your lucky day then." She unzips his jeans, and Raj's penis springs out. He can hear smacking noises from Kukri and Marilyn Manson, and Kukri mumbling about his uncle who got electrocuted by a cappuccino machine in a Polish bar.

Electrical charges course up and down his body, and Raj shivers when Cleopatra caresses him. She hikes up her skirt and wraps both legs around him. Raj topples. The hard landing is buffeted by the sudden velvet softness sheathing his penis. It's all too much, and he convulses.

Wracked, Raj barely registers that Marilyn Manson has just smacked Kukri a couple of times across the jaw. "There's no Belushi here." She kicks Kukri in the shin. "Open the damn till."

Kukri wipes his eyes, shakes his head.

Marilyn Manson saunters over to the grill, picks up a grease-

spattered spatula. "Open the damn till."

Cleopatra stands. She pulls out a penknife. The rush of air across his exposed self is humid and warm.

Kukri pushes the button and releases the till drawer. It springs open, with a clang.

There aren't but a few dollars, really, since business from the highway has slumped. As they leave, Cleopatra blows Raj a kiss, while Marilyn Manson wipes the spatula on Kukri's shirt. "You talk like you're amped out, dude, you really had me."

Later, Kukri says, "I know of someone who tried to electrocute moles in his garden and ended up frying himself. There was enough voltage to run a power chain-saw or food-mixer."

Raj splashes himself with cold water in the cubicle toilet, shaking. "Shut up! Okey-dokey!" He thinks to himself, Kukri doesn't know his head from his arse. What just happened out there? He felt robbed. Sad. Angry. Lost. But it wasn't his money.

He emerges to find Kukri rolling a joint with thin cigarette paper, Kukri's fingers tamping gently at the ends to keep the powder mix from spilling. Raj shouts, "Don't you see, you stupid wall-eye? Don't you see what's happened here?"

Kukri smiles, lopsided. "Brother, be calm. Take this."

They both light up, inhale deep. The taste and smoke burn through Raj's throat. "Mother of God. What's this shit?"

"This my old Mum's Kashmiri dum-aloo mix - 1/2 tspn cardamom powder, 1 tspn dry ginger powder, 2 tblspns fennel powder, pinch of clove powder and asofoetida. For extra spicy, add 1/2 tspn roasted

cumin powder."

Raj coughs. "Was this what you been smoking all along?"

"Nirvana isn't reached by sitting on your finely-shaped buttocks under a tree." Kukri takes deep. "What we need is a car."

Raj laughs, a disbelieving, mocking laugh that ricochets off the oil-streaked walls and deep fryer.

"That's how you get girls, na." Kukri shifts the joint from one side to another, like a toothpick. His eyes are wild, shooting in different directions. "My uncle is a used car dealer. We can get one from him cheap cheap. Then we go cruising."

Raj wants to cry. But all he can do is watch the puff-rings Kukri blows out; they fill the air with a pang of dum aloo homesickness and the clandestine whiff of Punjabi girls.

