

A WAKE AT SINGH'S



A play by

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CHARACTERS

KEVIN / JAMES - Twin cabbies in their 40's. Immigrated from China by way of a few other countries. Kevin is the Little Brother, James is the Big Brother, even though they were only seconds apart.

SINGH - Sikh man in his 40's/50's. He runs the all-night Indian restaurant Singh's. His brother, a cabbie, died, leaving his nephew Shawn, who now works at the restaurant.

SHAWN - Young desi man in his late 20's/30's. A talented chef with too many interests. He works at the restaurant while sharing a cab to pay off his father's medallion debt. He's getting really into communism and not letting anyone forget it.

ANDRIC - A Polish man in his 40's/50's. Gruff, with a soft exterior. Staunchly anti-communist, but has a soft spot for Shawn.

EMMANUEL - Cabbie in his 40's from Haiti.

MO - Pakistani-American, 30's. Uber driver. Disenchanted veteran.

BAITALI - "The Boss." Bengali-American woman, 30's. Leader of the Taxi Workers Alliance.

SETTING

Singh's, an all-night Indian restaurant in Jackson Heights, Queens.

Present day.

A parked cab in the middle of the night. KEVIN, wrapped in a blanket, turns a string of meditation beads in his hands.

KEVIN

If I go home, I waste gas. And time. Better to sleep in your car sometimes. Every dollar counts.

He notices we are watching.

Can you understand me? I'm speaking Mandarin. You didn't notice? Anyway. I'm glad there's someone to listen. This job can be lonely. People aren't that interested in talking. You always meet them on their way somewhere. You do overhear interesting things, though. There are some benefits to being ignored. If they saw you as a person, they would hide things from you. But they see you as a Driver. Or they don't see you at all. You're just the thing that gets them where they need to go. And that's fine. This is the life I chose. I didn't have that many choices. But that's life, too. I had my Big Brother. We went from country to country, taking whatever jobs would take us. We're twins, but he was Big Brother. (By a few seconds.) In life, though: he led, I followed. We came for something better. That is what we were promised. But they didn't protect us. I'd meet with lawyers. I trusted my lawyers. Then I find out my house is up for collateral. My family tied to the debt. And I don't understand. I sat in that room with them. It all happened under my nose. They must have thought I was so stupid. And maybe I am stupid. Because why would this country care about me? Why would it give me what it promised? They told me I would finally have my life in my hands. And it's all slipping. Because of money. Money, money, money. Who cares about us? Leftover people from other countries with their own problems. America didn't even build Lady Liberty. They must have been embarrassed. Where can I live? Live as a human? Not livestock. Or a machine. A burden. Always a burden. Sleep. Just go to sleep. Sleep...Seep...Sleep...

The beads click in the darkness.

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Welcome to Singh's. An Indian restaurant in Jackson Heights.

Lights dimmed. Tables and chairs stacked.

SHAWN, a desi man in his mid-to-late 20's, enters with a mop and dustpan. He goes behind the counter.

Music. "Expensive Shit" by Fela Kuti. SHAWN sweeps along.

ABICHAL SINGH, the restaurant owner, enters. A Sikh man in his 50's, hair tied in a pagri, a trimmed salt-and-pepper beard. He watches Shawn, bemused, but the groove is infectious.

ANDRIC, a Polish cabbie in his 50's, enters. Then EMMANUEL, Haitian-American. Then JAMES, Chinese-American. Together, they set the place up.

By the song's climax, the restaurant is alive with song and dance.

MO enters, slightly confused.

They hit places.

Pose.

Cut music.

Blackout.

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It's late. Or early, depending on your shift.

SINGH inspects a soup dumpling pinned between his chopsticks, with ANDRIC and EMMANUEL the enraptured audience. SHAWN, the chef, watches from the counter.

SINGH

I thought you said this was wonton soup.

SHAWN

I said it was like wonton soup.

SINGH

Where's the soup?

SHAWN

Inside.

SINGH

Inside what?

JAMES

The dumpling.

SINGH

In here? How'd it get in here?

SHAWN

Thaiaji, they're soup dumplings. Try something new.

SINGH

All right, all right.

SINGH brings the soup dumpling to his lips.

JAMES

Woah woah woah—

SHAWN

Hold on, hold on-

EMMANUEL

Wait, wait, wait-

SHAWN

Hold on, Thiaji, I'll show you.

SHAWN pokes a tiny hole in the dumpling with the chopsticks, letting out some steam.

SINGH

Hey, the soup's in there!

JAMES

Let it cool.

SINGH

What's next, balance it on my nose?

JAMES

Eat, eat. The whole thing, the whole thing.

SINGH eats the dumpling whole. The rush of broth...

SINGH

Hm.

The tender wonton...

SINGH

Hmmm.

The juicy minced pork...

Hmmmmmm.

SHAWN

Well?

SINGH

Mm-hm.

SHAWN

See? You don't have to be so stubborn.

SINGH

The flavor.

JAMES

Mm-hm.

SINGH

It's like an explosion.

SHAWN

Once I figured out where to get the ingredients, it wasn't too complicated.
Thought about it kind of like a samosa.

SINGH

How much did you spend on this?

SHAWN

It's fine, I got the hookup.

SINGH

The "hookup"?

SHAWN

Yeah, James helped me out.

SHAWN and JAMES secret-handshake.

SINGH

What are you getting my nephew into?

JAMES

He asked me. Sam's working there, too, now. You know how they get ideas when they're together.

SHAWN

Remember Sam, Thaiaji?

SINGH

"Do I remember." Yes, I'm not so old. I thought he was doing some journalism thing.

SHAWN

Yeah, it's unpaid though.

SINGH

Unpaid? Doesn't he have a degree?

SHAWN

Everybody's got a degree.

SINGH

I don't understand this.

SHAWN

Well, when you tell every kid that their life depends on them going to college while defunding higher education and keeping wages suppressed, you end up with a bunch of overeducated, underemployed debtors.

SINGH

Who needs NPR, huh?

SHAWN

Don't get me started on NPR.

EMMANUEL

It's too soothing. I don't trust it.

By now Andric has tried a bite of the soup dumpling.

ANDRIC

Not bad, Shawny. You got pierogi back there?

SHAWN

I've been practicing just for you, Uncle.

ANDRIC

How'd your brother raise a chef?

SINGH

He was always curious about cooking. So guess where he got dropped off for babysitting.

EMMANUEL

It's good for men to cook.

SINGH

As long as they cook well.

SHAWN

Food is what we all share. Even if you hate the people you can like the food.

ANDRIC

Why'd you look at me when you said that?

SHAWN

I didn't look at you, Andric.

ANDRIC

Yeah yeah, go back to your fancy book.

SHAWN

I got this used.

SINGH

Now that part I taught him.

EMMANUEL

Young men should read. Feed your mind, keep yourself sharp. What is that, anyway?

SINGH

"Washington Bullets: A History of the CIA, Coups, and Assassinations" by Vijay Prashad.

ANDRIC

Sounds like a tabloid.

SHAWN

It's pretty interesting.

SINGH

Prashad? Where's he from?

SHAWN

(inspecting the back of the book)

Uhhh he was born in Kolkata?

SINGH

That doesn't tell you anything.

ANDRIC

You know what they never talk about? The Russians, and what they were doing.

SHAWN

You mean, like, all other media we're exposed to in this country?

ANDRIC

Russians are sneaky. I'm Polish, we know this in our blood.

SHAWN

Pierogis incoming. I prepped them yesterday, hope that's ok.

ANDRIC

No. I must see you roll the dough. Otherwise, it's not fun for me.

SINGH

Hey, why don't you try putting soup in those?

ANDRIC

Keep this stuff out of my dish! It's unholy.

JAMES

What's that supposed to mean?

ANDRIC

Hey, look, do what you want. Everything's fusion this and fusion that these days. What about tradition? We lose so much already coming here, then we dilute more. I'm so far from home, I want the authentic stuff.

SINGH

Have you ever had Indian Chinese food?

JAMES

That's just what I was going to say.

SINGH

Simply: imagine Chinese dishes with Indian spices, Indian dishes with Chinese spices.

JAMES

And everything has more sauce.

SINGH

Yes, we did make a few improvements.

JAMES

Watch yourself, I've seen you try to stir-fry.

SINGH

What's the big deal? You fry, you stir. You fry, you stir.

SHAWN

A lot of dishes come from some kind of mix like that. The weirdest one is chili powder. Red chilis, for example. Huge part of Indian and Chinese cuisine. Brought over from Mexico by Portugese traders.

SINGH

What are you talking about? Portugese.

SHAWN

You didn't know that?

SINGH

Is this what they taught you in college?

SHAWN

Google, Thiaiji.

SINGH

You can tell Google that chili powder is Indian.

SHAWN

Potatoes came over the same way.

SINGH

That is enough! I will not have this in my restaurant.

SHAWN

We used to make samosas with ground meat and eggplant.

SINGH

Eggplant—?

SINGH balls up a napkin and throws it at SHAWN.

SINGH

Ulukapata!

SHAWN

Aloo? Are you calling me a potato?

SINGH

Ulu! Ulu!

SHAWN

Aloo is from Portugal.

SINGH

Horse's ass! You see this? There's no respect with this generation.

SHAWN

Well, there was plenty of exchange. Did you know an Indian helped form the Mexican Communist Party? His name was M.N. Roy.

ANDRIC slams his hand on the table.

ANDRIC

Communists!

SHAWN

It's ok, Uncle. There are no Communists here. Look, see? Nothing under there. /
Nothing there...

ANDRIC

/ Don't play with that stuff, you hear me?

SHAWN

It's just an interesting historical fact. Like how Ho Chi Minh was a founding member of the French Communist / Party.

ANDRIC bangs his hand on the table.

ANDRIC

/ Communists again!

SINGH

Enough, enough! How much more can his poor heart take? Get him his pierogis. I'm not paying you for continuing education courses.

SHAWN

I will get on your pierogis, Uncle.

SHAWN gives him some space.