

Kunti's Prayer to the River

(Based on an incident from the *Mahabharata*.)

Characters:

Kunti: a princess, adopted daughter of King Kuntibhoj

Durvasa: a respected, powerful sage; feared for his temper

Bala: a servant girl (made her up; she doesn't appear in the *Mahabharata*)

Surya: the sun god

Ancient India. A river bank. It is a hot day. Durvasa is meditating under a tree. Kunti brings him a basket carrying his breakfast. Durvasa is an old, cranky sage, dressed in a simple robe; he knows pieces of the future. Kunti is a pretty young princess; she wears an expensive blue Indian dress. She always respects herself as a princess, though acts subserviently for her self-interest. Whenever she walks, we can clearly hear her bangles and anklets jingling. Off on the side, Bala washes bright red clothes in the river; she concentrates very hard on this labor, trying to distract herself from something. Surya, the sun god, sits on a platform near Bala. He wears simple yellow silks. He can also see bits of the future. Note, from Earth the other characters only see him as the sun, not his human form. During the play, Surya focuses light on different characters by moving his hand; in this way he exercises a certain persuasive power over them. Now, he looks at Kunti longingly, without focusing light on anyone.

DURVASA (*without opening his eyes*): Hello Kunti. You have come with my breakfast. The rasam smells delicious.

Kunti remains standing. Silence.

DURVASA: Now, you are standing still in front of me. (*opens eyes*) I was right. Anklets and bangles are lovely things—I hear you come, I know what you are doing without you speaking a word.

Kunti silent.

DURVASA: My, it is hot today. (*shading his eyes, he looks at Surya. Surya smiles back*). Surya scorches the earth.

Kunti takes out a fan from the basket and starts fanning Durvasa.

DURVASA: I would like some breakfast now.

Kunti attentively and agilely serves Durvasa. Durvasa eats quickly, so Kunti is constantly refilling his plate with various items, knowing exactly what he wants without being told. While he is eating, she also entertains him like a clown—juggling mangoes and bananas

before cutting them up to serve him, frothing his tea (pouring the tea cup to cup quickly, extending the height between the two cups from pour to pour). Kunti does this all with a straight face. Occasionally, Durvasa nods his approval or burps loudly.

DURVASA: I am finished.

Kunti nods, begins stacking dishes.

DURVASA: Wait.

Kunti puts down stacked dishes.

DURVASA: Do you know why today is special?

Kunti doesn't answer.

DURVASA: I am leaving you today.

Kunti nods.

One year. If I stay any longer in a palace, I will become spoiled and fat, full of ghee.

Kunti nods.

Durvasa leans forward.

Ask me how I've liked my stay.

KUNTI (*pleasantly*): How have you liked your stay?

DURVASA: Very much.

KUNTI (*bowing her head a little*): I am happy you are pleased.

DURVASA: You sound sincere when you say that. But I know I'm not an easy man to deal with. Why, last month I turned some farmer boy into a horse for sneezing during my meditation. (*Kunti is expressionless. Durvasa chuckles.*) But you have been a gracious host.

KUNTI: Thank you.

DURVASA: No, thank you, Princess. You will make a fine bride one day. Praise the lucky man you choose in your swayamvara.

Kunti nods.

DURVASA: I do not flatter—that husband of yours will be very fortunate. You can see what a man wants, even when you avert your head. (*pause*) I have never slept so well in a palace before. The slightest sound of people awakes me. (*pause*) It is hard to read your face, so calm. That is the best way to be with a sage.

Kunti nods.

DURVASA: I do not only curse, I also bless. Let me leave you with a present.

Surya looks shocked but curious.

KUNTI (*pleasant, but a break to her voice*): You are kind, but it would be immodest of me to accept.

DURVASA: Do not worry princess, this is a wonderful gift. Let me properly give you my thanks.

KUNTI (*takes stack of dishes, stands up*): Let me clean this up first.

DURVASA (*dangerously*): Sit

Kunti clasps her hands together, almost in prayer, but also angrily—she looks down. Surya looks at her, concerned.

KUNTI (*pleasantly*): Your kind words are all the thanks I need. I am happy you have stayed here, and I am happier than you are pleased.

DURVASA: I will be more pleased if you accept my gift. Listen, I want to leave you with a...mark of me. (*sees her face and grins*) You are much easier to read now.

Kunti grips a plate. She is afraid, but also angry. She has worked a full year to please Durvasa, and prevent his curses.

DURVASA (*laughs*): You do not trust me.

Durvasa stares at Kunti for a long moment. Bala wrings the wet red cloth dry. Then she proceeds beating the red cloth against a large rock to dry it further. We can hear the sound of this beating—and in some way it should reflect the anger rising in Kunti.

DURVASA (*playfully*): I see that you are afraid that I will—No, I am not like that. You are beautiful, but I do not care for such pleasures. (*quietly*) Penance to god has given my words power, and I will give you my thanks through that power. Princess, I will leave you with a gift or a curse. The choice is yours.

KUNTI: Will you tell me what the gift is before you give it?

DURVASA: You are keen. You did not throw that dish at me, though you were tempted (*pause. smirking as Kunti waits for an answer*) It is a mantra. When you recite it, think of any god in heaven and he will come to you. The swift Vayu, the wise Dharma, (*Surya murmurs something, and makes a sharp movement with his hand. Light focuses on*

Durvasa) The handsome Surya! We only see Surya as a bright dot in the sky; imagine if he were standing before you, in the flesh?

Bala stops beating cloth against rock. Wipes sweat from forehead and takes a break.

KUNTI (*uncomfortably, but slightly relieved*): I can call any god at my own will?

DURVASA: Yes, come here. Let me tell it to you.

Letting go of the plate, Kunti shifts closer to Durvasa. Durvasa whispers something in her ear; as he whispers it, we hear a whistled tune. After Durvasa finishes telling Kunti the mantra, the whistling fades out.

Durvasa leaves. Kunti sits still under the tree. Surya moves hand, focusing light on Kunti. She looks at Surya. Blackout.

Lights return, though dimmer. Late afternoon, evening. It has been days since Durvasa left. Same location as previous scene. Surya standing on the platform, moving arms to focus light on Kunti. Kunti dances with Bala. They dance with no clear “leader”—they spin each other around, spin themselves, holding hands and spinning together in a circle. They are amused by the way their dresses mushroom up as they dance. Kunti wears a garland of flowers in her hair.

KUNTI(*spinning Bala*): Everyone’s chattering of Amita’s swayamvara. All the handsomest kings will attend.

BALA: Whom do you think she will choose?

KUNTI(*spins*): I don’t know.

BALA (*spins Kunti*): Who would you choose?

KUNTI: (*still dancing*) Someone brave and kind.

BALA: And handsome?

KUNTI: Radiant.
(*smiles at Surya, and Surya smiles back*)
And he should like dancing too.

BALA: Do you know such a man?

KUNTI: Of course!
(*Kunti takes the flower garland from her hair, and respectfully places it around Bala’s neck*)

BALA(*sheepishly*): I'd make a rotten husband.

KUNTI: You fit my requirements perfectly.

BALA (*cracking a grin*): But we'd dance all day and get fat on ladus.

KUNTI: Yes!

BALA: And we couldn't have children.

KUNTI (*slowly stops spinning. smiles.*) You're in a sour mood. *Bala and Kunti both stop dancing.*

BALA: No.

KUNTI: Listen, I told you what Durvasa whispered in my ear.

BALA: A mantra that calls any god in heaven.

KUNTI: Yes, and I can call it when I please. It's not a curse at all.

BALA: But you've been having those dreams...

KUNTI: I had it again last night.

BALA: Don't say that, a recurring dream always come true.

KUNTI:

I know Father is thinking of my *swayamvara*. Last night, Rohan commented that I was nearly a woman now and...(*kunti holds bala's hands*) Yesterday the dream was so—so strong. (*a little embarrassed*) Surya comes down from the sky, and we—

BALA: (*quietly*) You...

KUNTI: (*lying*) We danced.

BALA: You sound afraid.

KUNTI: No, those dreams—when he came down to me, it was... Even though his light was hot, I felt... Come here. (*Bala hesitantly walks to Kunti; their faces are close to each other. Bala is nervous and excited from their closeness, but know Kunti is describing a feeling towards Surya.*) Turn around. (*Kunti holds up Bala's hair and blows on her neck.*)

BALA: Like that...

KUNTI: A chill.

BALA: (*dazed and hurt*) Surya makes you feel like this?

KUNTI (*slightly embarrassed*) Yes...

BALA: (*anger seeping in*) Miss... you shouldn't say such things.

KUNTI: I know.

BALA: It's not proper miss! It's—filthy.

KUNTI: No! (*embarrassed and irritated*) No, I'm perfectly fine, Bala! How—how dare you speak to me like that.

BALA: (*hurt*) I will leave if Miss wishes it.

KUNTI: Yes, go!

Bala gives Kunti the garland of flowers and gloomily exits. Kunti stares at garland of flowers blankly. Suddenly, she throws it to the ground. Surya looks at her sympathetically; the light brightens around Kunti.

KUNTI: Who does she think she is. I'm *filthy*, she says. I just want to *see* him. We wouldn't *do* anything.

Kunti feels the sun, and turns towards the light.

KUNTI:

(*quietly*)

I want to meet you.

(*Surya answers with shifting light around her.*)

KUNTI:

No, Durvasa probably gave me a phony mantra; he would trick me. The old crank thought of me as a little doll, a toy.

(*shifting light around Kunti*)

KUNTI

(*murmurs*)

That silly mantra, silly...

(Kunti is quiet. Her mind wanders, and without really thinking mumbles the mantra. We hear the whistling tune from before. A flash of blinding light. Surya descends from platform and appears before Kunti. Kunti is wide-eyed in awe and fear.)

SURYA:
Greetings, Kunti.

KUNTI:
You are beautiful.

(Surya plucks a flower from the garland and places it in Kunti's hair)

KUNTI:
(smiling, but concerned)
Thank you for coming—
I did not think you would come. But...but you must leave soon. Someone will see.

SURYA:
I can shape the light any way I wish. No one will see us. *(pause)* Would you like to dance?

(Kunti nods. They dance, Surya leading Kunti, twirling her. Kunti is charmed and a little shy throughout this whole dance, and Surya is confident, calm. A sharp contrast to the fun-loving dance between Bala and Kunti.)

KUNTI: You are beautiful. Even in my dreams, you weren't so beautiful.

SURYA: I will give you a son just as beautiful.

KUNTI *(shocked silent. laughs uneasily)*: Oh, you are funny too.

SURYA: I am not joking, Kunti.

KUNTI: I am not married.

SURYA: You called me for a son.

KUNTI *(horrificed)*:
Durvasa never—

SURYA: He lied to you. What he whispered in your ear was a birth-giving mantra; by invoking it, you can have a son with any god in heaven.

KUNTI: I would never use it if I knew.

SURYA: That is why he misled you.

KUNTI *(dazed)*: I only wanted to see how you looked like.

SURYA: You will remain a virgin afterwards.

KUNTI: I am not married—I can't raise a son.

SURYA: Our son will be born with all my radiance—he will be handsome, brave, generous, the best of warriors. He will be born with earrings and armor dipped in ambrosia.

KUNTI: Please forgive my mistake and go.

SURYA (*gently*): Kunti, I have long loved you.

KUNTI:

(*holding hands over her eyes*)

No... Why... why did you want me to say such a mantra, when you knew—

SURYA: I am the Sun. I cannot leave the sky at whim—only a mantra such as Durvasa's can bring me to you.

KUNTI: You still do not listen. I am not married.

SURYA: Our son will be...

KUNTI: No...

Surya touches her face.

SURYA: The mantra holds me—I cannot leave without fulfilling it. Kunti, please be at ease. You will stay a virgin, and his birth will be instantaneous. Painless.

Kunti is speechless, pale. Surya, still holding her face, murmurs something. A flash of blinding light. In front of Kunti is a basket, holding a crying baby. Surya has disappeared. It is night. Dim, blue light.

Kunti touches baby and begins to cry. We hear a mix of her and the baby's crying. Eventually, Bala comes onstage. Kunti steadies herself, but the baby continues crying.

BALA: I—I wanted to apologize. Kunti? (*hears and sees baby. stunned silent.*) What is—

KUNTI: I found him floating down the river.

BALA: He looks unharmed, sounds loud and healthy. From a wealthy family—(*taps on armor...makes a steel sound*)

KUNTI (*detached*): He is a divine child.

BALA: May I hold him?

Kunti nods.

BALA: He could be our son! You chose me as your husband after all! (*Noticing garland of flowers at her feet. Still holding baby, takes garland.*)

KUNTI (*repeats to herself*): I am not married...

BALA (*forcing laugh*): I was joking. *She puts garland on crying baby, touches flowers.* (*to baby*) Do you smell it? This is Kunti's scent. (*rocks baby in her arms. baby quiets*)

KUNTI (*blankly*): I should tell father. I found him by the river.

BALA (*places baby back in basket*): Yes, the king could find your parents, little one. (*to Kunti*) He's asleep. Look.

Kunti looks at him.

KUNTI: He looks dead, so still, with that garland around his neck.

BALA (*to Kunti, who still stares at the sleeping baby*): Your father knows sage Narada, right? Narada knows all secrets; he could surely tell us the birthparents of this child.

KUNTI (*repeats blankly*): Tell us the birthparents.

BALA (*concerned*): Kunti.

KUNTI: No, we can't show father.

BALA: Why not?

KUNTI: Father should not know the birthparents.

Bala looks closely at Kunti. She guesses that Kunti is the mother.

BALA (*quietly*): It will be impossible to hide him in the palace.

KUNTI: I know.

BALA: Sooner or later your father would find out—

KUNTI: I know. (*pause*) I would like for him to live by this river. Whenever I missed him, I'd put my hands in the water and know that he was close by.

(Silence. Bala is deep in thought.)

BALA *(suddenly)*: I can say he is mine.

KUNTI: You are not married. No, you both would be cast out.

BALA: There must be something I can do.

KUNTI: Yes. *(pause)* Promise never to speak of this to anyone.

BALA: I swear. I swear on my life. Ask anything else.

KUNTI: Leave us alone.

BALA: Kunti, I...

KUNTI: Don't worry, everything will be just like it was. We will play chess tomorrow morning, Father and I will discuss the Vedas at noon, and at night, we'll eat too many sweets and chat until the sun rises.

Kunti holds Bala's hand, and kisses her on the cheek.

KUNTI: Thank you.

Bala is shocked at first. She slowly nods, smiles, and exits. Kunti kneels to sleeping baby.

KUNTI *(quietly)*: The world will curse me if I reveal you, and I will curse myself if I abandon you. *(Kunti breathes heavily, she reaches over to touch the baby—she hears her bangles jingle, and suddenly yanks them from her wrists and throws them at the tree Durvasa had meditated under. The baby awakens, crying. Kunti holds up the baby and hugs him for a long quiet moment. The baby falls asleep again.)* My words will have power too. *(She carefully tucks baby in the basket again. Then she clasps her hands fervently in prayer. She murmurs to herself. Opens eyes and looks to river.)* Goddess of the River, please take care of him. Bring him to a loving home. *(Shakily, she holds the basket and stares at the baby)* My son...*(She places the basket in the river. She watches the basket drift and weeps.)*

Blackout. We hear the gentle river, and the baby crying. The other end of the stage lights up. A shabbily dressed man carries wood, but at the sound of the baby's crying, approaches the river. He lifts the basket from the river, and stares at the baby for a long moment. He tickles the baby, who gurgles happily. Smiling with love, he exits with the baby. Blackout.