

THE BLASPEMER

- as a one-act
- by Daniel Curzon

CHARACTERS:(6)

KAREN RALSTON-RAJEEB, a female novelist who has written a book condemned by a fatwa from the Ayatollah, American, 27-65

KEVIN RAJEEB, her husband, half-British, half-Indian, a musician, same age as Karen

FOUR UTILITY PLAYERS, to play different parts as needed, two men, two women, 20s-40s.

SETTING: Bare stage with mere suggestions of different locations if necessary. Usually it is clear from the dialogue where things are happening.

HOTEL ROOM

KAREN: (gesturing as if she just heard a POLICE OFFICIAL on TV) They don't know we're here. That's something.

KEVIN: I wonder what happened to the one who got in our apartment.

KAREN: The one you stabbed? Is this really me talking? "The one you stabbed." Did you hear me? "The one you stabbed."

KEVIN: Maybe he got out and bled to death somewhere else.

KAREN: Maybe he recovered and is outside the door. Maybe it's the Ayatollah himself!

(Sudden knock on the door, making them jump. They huddle, frightened. They put their fingers to their lips to hush each other, remaining very quiet.)

VOICE

AT DOOR: Room service!

KAREN: (whispering) Did you order room service?

KEVIN: (whispering) When you were taking a shower. We have to eat.

KAREN: I'm not hungry. And what if it's a trap?

(Another louder knock.)

VOICE

AT DOOR: Mr. and Mrs.? It's room service!

2

KAREN: (to KEVIN) We can't live like this. (She flings open the door, half expecting to be killed.)

WAITER: (entering with two trays on a cart) There you are! I was beginning to think you'd gone out.

KAREN: (relieved but still nervous) No, we're still here.

WAITER: Well, this should hit the spot! (Pulls up the dish covers at the same time.) *Voila!*

(Both KAREN: and KEVIN flinch, thinking it may be a bomb.)

WAITER: Is something wrong?

(KAREN and KEVIN look at each other and smile, even begin to laugh a bit.)

KAREN: Nothing's wrong. Everything is just fine. . . Thank you.

KEVIN: Yes, thank you.

(KAREN and KEVIN begin to laugh very hard, out of hysteria and relief; then they tear into the food, eating eagerly and messily, as the waiter stares.)

BLACKOUT

ASSASSIN'S HOME

ASSASSIN: (at first he finishes assembling a bomb as his PREGNANT WIFE watches, both silent; then he begins to tape it to his body) This time I will not fail.

ASSASSIN'S

WIFE: You have barely recovered from your wounds yet.

ASSASSIN: What is this to me! (Dismissively touches the stab wound that KEVIN made.)
When I find them this time, I will not toy with them. That was a mistake. This won't be. (Touches the bomb he is taping to his body.)

ASSASSIN'S

WIFE: But you are not strong enough to try again.

ASSASSIN: I am strong enough. God makes me strong.

ASSASSIN'S

WIFE: Let another do it.

ASSASSIN: I wish to be the one.

3

ASSASSIN'S

WIFE: (worried about him) You must die as well?

ASSASSIN: I will die as well.

ASSASSIN'S

WIFE: (Covers her mouth to keep herself from speaking.)

ASSASSIN: When I am a martyr in heaven, you will collect the reward. You and the child will be taken care of..

ASSASSIN'S

WIFE: It was not the money I am mourning for.

ASSASSIN: What I do is noble.

ASSASSIN'S

WIFE: But you do not have to die! Someone else can do it!

ASSASSIN: Here is a letter in which I explain everything. Present this to the authorities after . . . (Hands her a letter.) It is stained with my blood should there be any doubt about who did this. They will believe you. It will be the same blood. (Touches the bomb.)

ASSASSIN'S

WIFE: You cannot do this.

ASSASSIN: What?

ASSASSIN'S

WIFE: (keeping her voice quiet, but defying him) You cannot do this.

ASSASSIN: (looking at her, then looking away, quietly but firmly) . . . You will not tell me what I cannot do.

ASSASSIN'S

WIFE: But!

ASSASSIN: Enough. Do not make me raise my voice.

(The ASSASSIN continues taping the bomb to his body.)

(The wife is silent.)

ASSASSIN: Do not forget, when our son is born, the first words he must hear on entering the world. Whisper in his ears . . . Promise me . . .

ASSASSIN'S

WIFE: . . . There is no god but Allah, and Mohamed is his prophet . . .

(He smiles, pleased; the wife is sad.)

FADE

IN THE WORLD

FANATIC: We managed to penetrate the so-called security forces in Britain that have been protecting Karen Rajeeb from the punishment she so richly deserves. She managed to escape the last time, but there will be a next time. And a next time. And a next time.

RABBI: As Chief Rabbi of Adler House, I feel I must speak out on how we can end this horror. We have legislation proscribing the excesses of freedom of expression, laws against blasphemy, pornography, libel, incitement to race hatred, subversion, and breaches of national security. We need an international agreement to protect the supreme values of innocent human life and freedom! By outlawing the amplification of words which, as this whole experience has shown, can poison the atmosphere and become as lethal a threat to mankind as any physical pollution.

A WRITER: Dear Editor, with all that has been written and spoken about the Ralston-Rajeeb affair, I have not yet heard any non-Muslim voices raised in criticism of the writer herself. On the contrary she appears to be some kind of hero. But to this writer's mind she is nothing but a dangerous opportunist. This kind of sensationalism does indeed get an indifferent book to the top of the best-seller list, but what a cheap way of doing so! It also puts a severe strain on the very proper principle that the writer has an absolute right to write what he or she likes. But, no, I say! We all have a moral obligation to apply a modicum of censorship to our own work in order to reinforce this very valuable principle of free speech. Is this too much to ask?

BLACKOUT

HOTEL ROOM

(Lights up on KAREN and KEVIN in twin beds.)

KAREN: (throwing some remnants of food away) Do you think we'll ever get out of here?

KEVIN: Probably not.

KAREN: Someone's going to know it's us eventually — a desk clerk, a waiter, a maid.

KEVIN: You want to move?

5

KAREN: Again?

KEVIN: At least we don't have to pack. (Starts to get out of bed, only partially dressed.)
Let's go.

KAREN: Let's not. (after a moment) How do you feel?

KEVIN: (holding a towel or sheet in front of himself) Never nakeder. But I'm managing.
How about you?

KAREN: I'm a little cold.

KEVIN: Really?

KAREN: Aren't you? (Holds up the covers a little bit for him.)

KEVIN: (hesitantly) You're sure? (meaning getting into bed with her)

KAREN: I'm sure.

KEVIN: (Gets in her bed, then snuggles under the covers.) Cozy?

KAREN: (snuggling) . . . Cozy. (sitting up fast) You aren't the assassin, by any chance?

KEVIN: Want to check me out?

KAREN: You mean . . . here? (She feels him under the covers.)

KEVIN: That's a start.

KAREN: I don't feel any weapon there.

KEVIN: Try over here. (He moves her hand to his crotch.) How's that?

KAREN: That must be it.

KEVIN: Yeah? Why do you say that?

KAREN: How shall I put it? Because I feel like it's going to explode. Just don't explode
without me. (She turns to him and kisses him.)

KEVIN: My darling! My darling! I'm so sorry! I'm so sorry! Oh, Karen, I'm so sorry!

(They kiss passionately as the LIGHTS FADE.)

6

IN THE WORLD

MALE

FANATIC: With each day as the blasphemer eludes us, our shame grows. Are we not men?

FEMALE

FANATIC:

Can no one tell us where she is?

ASSASSIN: (wearing bomb) We must stand up for truth. Will no one join me to end this monster's life once and for all? Islam is in danger! We have won before and we will win again! Blasphemers must pay the price.

FEMALE

FANATIC: (stepping forward with a weapon) I will join you.

MALE

FANATIC: (stepping forward with a weapon) And I.

MALE/FEMALE

FANATICS: Death to all those who blaspheme!

(An imposing line is now organized and arraigned against their enemy.)

FADE

THE HOTEL

KEVIN: (getting dressed) We can't stay here any longer.

KAREN : (still in bed) Hit and run, huh?

KEVIN: (serious) You'd better get dressed.

KAREN: I think that made me pregnant.

KEVIN: (surprised) Can you tell?

KAREN: Not really. . . . I hope it makes me pregnant.

KEVIN: I don't. We don't need another hostage to fortune.

KAREN: Well, thank you very much!

KEVIN: You know it's true.

- KAREN: (Starts to protest, then doesn't.) You're right. I know it's true. We can't have another child. . . . I'll pack. (Gets up, starts to look around.) We don't have anything to pack. . . . Nothing.
- KEVIN: We could steal some sheets and pillow cases.
- KAREN: I just had a vision. As we really are. We have nothing between us and them but these walls. (Touches the wall.) Absolutely nothing, is there?
- KEVIN: . . . Just our love. . . Here. (Hands her some of her clothing.)
- KAREN: (putting it on) Thanks.
- KEVIN: Need anything zipped?
- KAREN: Not really. . .
- KEVIN: Where are we going this time?
- KAREN: (Doesn't answer.)
- KEVIN: Do you think we should get out of the country? Go back to the States? Turn ourselves back over to Scotland Yard?
- KAREN: (Doesn't answer.)
- KEVIN: (when she doesn't answer) Karen?
- KAREN: (Still doesn't answer.)
- KEVIN: (finishing dressing) There, I'm ready. But we really should have a plan before we leave here, don't you think? Not just burst out. Let's sit down and think it through.
- KAREN: . . . Actually I have a plan.
- KEVIN: Oh? Would you mind telling me!
- KAREN: When we get downstairs, I'm going to go in one direction and you're going to go in another.
- KEVIN: (remembering an article she forgot) Wait! I almost forgot this. (Gets it) And where do we meet up?
- KAREN: . . . We don't.
- KEVIN: What? You're not making any sense.

8

KAREN: We're going to separate.

KEVIN: Separate? For how long?

KAREN: For . . . For . . .

KEVIN: (the realization dawning) You mean . . . forever?

KAREN: Just until this passes.

KEVIN: Then you do mean forever. (genuinely upset) I don't want to separate. . . . I want to stay with you.

KAREN: If you're with me, they'll kill you too. If you're alone, they . . .

KEVIN: (a sad realization) . . . won't.

KAREN: It's best.

KEVIN: It's not best! It's the worst! I'll never see you again.

KAREN: We'll see each other again.

KEVIN: If we separate now, I know we'll never —

KAREN: You can't remain with me one minute longer. Don't you see? I don't want them to kill you, my darling. . . . Don't you see? I love you so much . . . (holding in tears) Don't you see?

KEVIN: Oh, Karen! (He embraces her.) I see! Oh, I see! But I don't want to leave you. You can't be alone.

KAREN: I won't be alone . . . (meaningfully) for long.

KEVIN: (crying, hugging her desperately) Oh, Karen! Oh, darling! What can I do for you? What can I do?

KAREN: I'm afraid there's nothing anyone can do. Goodbye, luv . . . (disengaging herself) But live for me. Finish your music.

KEVIN: Oh, my God.

KAREN: Wait a few minutes after I leave, and then you go. Go to the police. Say you will.

KEVIN: Karen! Oh, Karen! This is horrible! (not wanting to let go, hanging onto her)

9

KAREN: (quietly) Kevin, Kevin . . . (He holds his hands, then frees herself.) All right? All right? . . . Tell me you'll do that. (harshly) Tell me!

KEVIN: (Reluctantly, slowly he nods his head.)

KAREN: Don't look this way. (Moves away from him.) Don't look. Don't say goodbye. Don't say . . .

(KAREN goes toward the door, looks back at KEVIN, then leaves.)

KEVIN: (his back to him) Are you gone yet? . . . Karen? . . . Karen?

(He runs toward where she exited, then stops.)

KEVIN: Forgive me. Forgive me. But I am so afraid. I am afraid!

(He places his arms around himself and cries hard, his tears turning to shivers, his body shaking.)

(Lights slowly fade.)

(Lights up on:)

SOCIETY FOR

TOLERATION: Allow me to say, for the Society for Religious Toleration, that what is needed very badly is a reasonable defense of what I call the 'virtues of fundamentalism'. There has been an unargued assumption on the part of the press, indeed on the part of almost everyone, that fundamentalism has no intellectual basis. But people should be allowed to defend the better side of fundamentalism! The courage and bravery of fundamentalism!

BLACKOUT

ON THE RUN

(We see KAREN running in the semi-darkness, perhaps on a street, almost out of breath. She stops for a moment. She is sweating.)

KAREN: (to herself) I must remain calm. I must not draw attention to myself like this.

BEGGAR: (emerging from the shadows) Can you spare some change?

KAREN: (startled) No! Leave me alone!

BEGGAR: Sorry! Have a good evening anyway. (Moves off.)

10

KAREN: (sweating) Maybe I should go back to the police? . . . They couldn't protect me before. . . . A cottage somewhere! The north? Some unobtrusive cottage in the highlands . . . I'll hole up again. (desperate) No! They can't kill me — it took so long to make all these cells, this brain. To fill it with these thoughts. To learn to walk. To read. . . . To learn to run. . . . Who am I fooling? I can't go anywhere. (yelling) I CAN'T GO ANYWHERE!

(A sinister figure emerges from the shadows.)

KAREN: I have no change.

ASSASSIN: (wearing the bomb, making himself clearly visible) Karen Ralston-Rajeeb?

KAREN: No.

ASSASSIN: Come to me.

KAREN: No!

ASSASSIN: I will come to you.

(Takes a step; there is a sudden explosion. The ASSASSIN disappears.)

KAREN: (cowering) What happened? What happened? (Moves closer to where the ASSASSIN was) You blew yourself up, you son of a bitch! (half laughs) You blew your fucking self up, you vicious son of a bitch, didn't you?

(Another threatening FIGURE appears. What follows takes place in KAREN'S imagination — an anticipation of the reality. Fog and shadows and lights swirl around her.)

FIRST

FIGURE: (from one side) Karen!?

SECOND

FIGURE: (from another side) Karen Ralston!?

THIRD

FIGURE: (from the audience) Karen Ralston-Rajeeb, we will find you!

VOICES

TOGETHER: KAREN / RALSTON/ RAJEEB!

11

FIRST

FIGURE: (quickly, very near KAREN) And what is your name, Ma'am?

KAREN: (standing up, yelling, offering herself to them defiantly) . . . I am Karen Ralston-Rajeeb!

(The moment holds, then:)

FIRST

FIGURE: (moving closer) You have been found guilty.

SECOND

FIGURE: (moving closer) A sentence of death has been issued.

KAREN: (making a joke) Has it been carried out yet?

THIRD

FIGURE: Are you not repentant, even now?

FIRST

FIGURE: There is yet time.

THIRD

FIGURE: There is yet . . . mercy to be had.

KAREN:

What is the condemned to say? Have you not written it out for me this time? No? Well, I have written it for myself. I know there isn't much time. Some notes. Just notes. (holding them up, referring to the notes at times) Yes, I apologize. I humbly apologize. . . . I apologize because I let you terrorize my mind and body to the point where I have almost forgotten who I am. I apologize for not being clear and passionate about my freedom, about my truth. As clear and passionate as you. I apologize because I have not shouted that your standards, your morals are not more humane than mine, are not more decent than mine! You act in the name of goodness? But you are murderers. I am a thinker. Yes, I apologize to my murderers because I only flirted with "blasphemy" against your orthodoxy. I apologize because I let you for a time tell me what I can write, what I can say aloud. I have no desire to be a martyr. I do not think I will go to heaven. Or hell. You dare impose your beliefs upon mine because they do not agree with yours? You dare to tell me no one can leave your religion?! You dare to tell me that I can only think what's been thought before? You dare to tell me what shall be in my own mind? . . . Oh yes, yes , I deeply apologize . . . but only because I have been vacillating, weak . . . and afraid. Until now. You can end my life, but you do not own me. And you cannot — and you will not — ever make me believe (passionately) WHAT . . . I . . . DO . . . NOT . . . BELIEVE!

(KAREN looks at the audience.)

(A shot rings out.)

12

KAREN: (taking her time, time has slowed down) They have won. That is their bullet that is speeding toward my brain. That is their bullet that will silence my tongue, this pumping heart. That is their bullet that is hurtling from the back of this theater not toward the brain of Karen Ralston-Rajeeb, but toward the brain of _____ (The actor playing KAREN names herself and steps out of character). For it is in such brain-burned, fanatical cowards lurking there in the darkness with a gun that tyranny — cruel, mindless tyranny — speaks the final line.

(The actor holds out her hand toward the audience, an act of true bravery, for who knows who might be there to silence her?)

(The actor playing KEVIN now appears, stepping out of character as himself, standing beside the actor playing KAREN.)

KEVIN: (with head up) And I am _____ (Gives his real name.)

(Then other actors playing the other parts step forward, as themselves. All this should parallel the line of volunteer FANATICS earlier.)

(They all hold the moment.)

(Then to BLACK.)

End of Play