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MEN BY THE LAKE

WHEN DEATH CAME TO MEET THE MEN BY THE LAKE, he offered them each a cigarette, which they politely refused. Abani, 83, tapped his chest, making the sound of a hollow pot. Robi, 79, coughed into his handkerchief, and Tirthankar, 63, opened his mouth to show the scar of melanoma arrested by chemo. With a nod of sympathy, the corpulent man—far too well dressed for an evening by the lake—took out a gold lighter from his pocket and lit himself a cigarette, putting the other two back into a velvety case. Then he let out a rush of smoke that reminded the men of the time when they were all smokers, when they didn't have a care in this world and thought nothing of death.

After the man left with the promise to return again, Abani blew his nose and broke the silence. "Upstart! That's what you call someone who smokes like that." In his 83 years, he had met a few like him—clenching their fist and puffing through the hole at the thumb to avoid any contact between the filter and the lips. An actor, known as a show-off, had made it popular in the 1950s. Tirthankar, sitting next to the man, had heard a strange sound as smoke rushed in through the thorax into the alveoli and rushed out, appearing to come not from his mouth but from some far and unknown place. What troubled Robi was the fact that the man had chosen to sit at their bench, ignoring the one nearby that was vacant, but the others thought nothing of it. "Maybe he wanted company," Abani brushed aside the worry bee's gloom. "But he could've had that bench all to himself, put up his legs, or even laid down for his smoke," Robi insisted, his dark eyes furrowed like a hare that had seen a fox. The man had given them all an eyeful, Tirthankar said, but it was no more than the gaze of a bored shopper who cares nothing for a hefty discount or a once-in-a-lifetime sale.

There weren't many empty benches to be found by the lake. By the time the men arrived in the evening, the innocent visitors had already lost their places to nocturnal creatures, like those who'd stormed out of their homes

after an argument and needed a place to spend the night or unlucky tenants evicted by crafty landlords. It was easy to spot the first timers from the way they checked the sagging planks for softness and bounce, as if checking the beds in some luxury hotel. Worn out by their troubles, they slept the soundest, and their snoring could be heard from across the lake, mixed with the curses of the regulars kept awake by the noctuary.

The regulars muttered all night. Pressing an ear to the dark wall of mist, one heard them petition and pray, scold a naughty child, or give a grand speech. The lake was their audience, and they made full use of the bench—the stage they'd wrangled free from a bitch and her litter or an urchin half dead with hunger. Singers, frightened by stage fright, sang and distracted the lovers, shifting their moods with each song and doubling the desire in their hearts. Whores—never the ones to care about mood—added their own strains of creaking wood and groans that inevitably followed a sour bargain. The benches emptied quickly with the appearance of traders showing off their precious stock of needles or phosphorescent dust that glowed in the dark like mice droppings passed on from one cupped palm to another. Lovers scrambled off and whores pulled up their blouses, afraid of getting mixed up in risky business. A good deal called for a little nightly opera, chasing the poor bitch around for a needle shot on her low-hanging teats. A bad deal did no more than splatter the benches, bringing out sniffer dogs in the morning, happy to lick the blood before setting off on the killer's trail.

Remarkably, the lake attracted its visitors in the same way as the crematorium—unpleasant but necessary. Monsoon flooded the banks, dotting the nearby park with dead and bloated animals. The benches resembled marooned boats with broken masts. In winter, a great fog rolled in, lapping at the feet and creating the illusion of an endless desert. More than the malaria and the suicides that it was blamed for, neighbours complained of the sickening smell that hung permanently over the lake and infected the breeze that blew into their bedrooms so much so that every place they ever visited in their dreams smelled of the lake. Yet, for all its faults, there were those who valued the sight of water in a city overrun with bricks, and the few nostalgic enough to remember a time when it was full of water hyacinths tricked everyone into believing that it was as heavenly as a lotus lake.

"I met Death at the lake today," Abani announced while reading the papers in bed. His wife of 59 years, who had slept the last 20 with her face turned towards the wall, sat up instantly like a mechanical toy. "What did he

say?" "Nothing," Abani replied, flicking the pages. "He just offered us cigarettes." Turning her face back, Malati started to cry, first silently and then with gentle tremors that turned into heavy sobbing and shook the bed like aftershocks. She hadn't cried like that in 50 years, ever since their first-born died of diphtheria. "It means he'll come for you soon, tonight was the warning." Malati was wrong, he felt, despite her keen practical sense. Why would Death serve notice like the municipal authorities? His friendly gesture could hardly be seen as a coded message or a veiled threat. In any case, he couldn't be after all three of them at the same time, could he? "He did say he'd return," Malati reminded him and made him promise to have a check-up the next day. He tried to dissuade her and hoped she'd forget when she woke up in the morning, but she had arranged for the doctor to make a house call at the crack of dawn even before the cat had finished lapping up its milk.

"You've had two attacks, haven't you?" The doctor yawned and shuffled the nozzle over his heart, as if he were mapping out a minefield. "Three," Abani reminded him of the first that was mistaken for indigestion. "If you've had three visits from Death already," the young man tried to cheer him up with a sleepy joke, "then you must know him better than your own son-in-law!"

Albani was worried about the burden he'd lay on his wife if Malati was right about Death's intentions. She'd be alone, not knowing what to do, her practical mind reduced to that of an infant who couldn't count the fingers on her hand. She wouldn't know which son or daughter to call, forgetting their names even. He could see himself lying dead with Malati weeping, her face turned to the wall. With the foresight of a retired accountant, he tried to prepare his wife by drawing up an advance plan for her to follow with a checklist of actions in descending order of importance. Night would be trickier than day, as she might think that she had dreamed of her husband's death, tucking him into the blanket that had strayed from his icy legs. His death would bring her to a standstill—his wife of 53 years, who had led him by the hand through childbirth and accident, burglary and heart attacks, demotions and forced retirement, children leaving and returning for short visits with English-speaking grandchildren; who had almost left him over an indiscretion with her younger cousin; and who couldn't sit still at the sight of dust or cobwebs even though she was 70 and lived in a house that was older than her by scores.

"You were afraid, weren't you?" Robi asked Abani when the topic of

Death's visit came up the next evening. Voices fell silent on the neighbouring bench, as if everyone were waiting for his reply. "Not for me but for . . ." Abani whispered. "I have no such fear," Robi said as he anxiously glanced at the lake roaring with frogs. "When he comes again, I'll ask him where he plans to take me."

Living alone, the only thing that scared Robi about death was that it'd inevitably disrupt his routine. "You don't live a life, you live a routine," he'd tell his friends at the lake, repeating himself often just to calm his nerves. His routine was largely the result of three A's: accident, availability, and acceptance. Asthma was the hereditary accident that had crippled him early in life, banishing him to the lowly pursuit of a librarian when he could've easily penned many of the great volumes that he'd dusted and stacked for 30 straight years. His mother couldn't find a suitable bride for her sick son, so he had accepted the life of a bachelor, living like a recluse in a household that by now had forgotten his precise place in the family tree. Routine made life liveable—abetted by domestics trained to follow their duties, such as boiling water for his flask that he kept at bedside to make coffee whenever he felt a tightening of the chest. Eating and bathing, reading laboriously with his degenerating cornea, and evening walks to the lake with a silver-tipped cane completed his daily routine, and he often recalled his grandfather—the one who had given him the cane—dying before his eyes and muttering like a fallen boxer at the ring about "the next round." "Death," Robi said, would set the new routine, and he had spent a good decade reading every book on the subject to find out what that might be like.

"You enter a dark tunnel at breakneck speed and come out blinded with light. Then what?" Repeating his findings, which were well-known to his friends, he looked around the bench, hoping to spot the man with the cigarettes to give him the answer.

"You are confusing death with afterlife," Abani was quick to point out. "They are totally different. For all you know there might be nothing after the tunnel, but death isn't responsible for that. He's just the delivery man."

"Every delivery man knows his destination," Robi shook his head.

Tirthankar, who had skipped death and gone straight to hell, didn't care for such arguments. It wasn't easy for him to think about death, as it came packaged with much that he wished desperately to forget. Of the three, he was the happy tourist, forever hopeful of finding an exit to bypass the frightening highway of pain. If Death had offered more than a cigarette,

he'd have gladly grabbed his chance to escape the hopeless routine of recurring symptoms and short-lived remission. He, the youngest of the three, the precocious gate-crasher into the final frontier, was the first to have offered the tantalizing prospect of meeting Death in person by the lake long before the appearance of the fat man with cigarettes.

It was a subject they couldn't discuss at home, for fear of upsetting their families, or with doctors, who frowned at its very mention, as if they'd been falsely accused of someone else's crime. Yet it mattered the most to them, being the only significant event that was still outstanding in their lives. Abani was skeptical. "A metaphysical thing like death could only appear as pure thought or a metaphor, never in flesh and blood." "But wouldn't we recognize it instantly if it did appear?" Tirthankar argued back. "Even the most unfamiliar thing must resemble something we've intimately known." It was left to Robi, the arch mediator, to extricate them from logic and metaphysics with the help of a practical routine: to make use of their evenings by looking for Death "personified here at the lake!"

And so, as fog rolled in over the waters and monsoon flooded the park, as deals were struck over the benches and shifting moods broke up restive lovers, the men kept themselves busy spotting Death among the visitors and regulars. More than a simple game, it expanded their minds and over time they became experts in eliminating pretenders, just like seasoned scientists in a laboratory full of rare specimens. "How might Death—in the guise of a man—distinguish himself from other men," they asked themselves incessantly. "What could count as a clue to his pure and superior power?"

The dwarf was their first suspect. Abani was emphatic, having observed his animal stealth and singular purpose. "He'd be constantly roaming, for Death makes no plan except to act when it's time." With the greed of an overfed pet, he scavenged the tidbits that visitors had brought along, snooping about and picking up the treasures they left behind, such as a comb, a nose ring, or a used condom. Lovers, unaware of his slinking form hiding in the moon's shadow, shivered as his breath fell on their exposed skin, which added to their titillation. Unhurried by the growling bitch, who thought him a suitor, and a desultory poet, who tried to ensnare him with a reading, he went about his business doggedly, impressing the men by the lake. "Have you noticed his bulging pockets?" Tirthankar nudged his friends. "That's where we'll end up." Robi agreed. That was the real meaning of death—"mixing up with all the rubbish, the rotting together, the blending of atoms." The cer-

tainty with which they read his personality and imagined themselves ending up sooner than later in his pocket suffered the day the dwarf fell among the traders. One of them had caught him poking his head through their legs to nick a used needle. The wall of mist echoed his wails, the lake receding in fright as they tossed him about, laughing and cursing at the same time, sticking needles where they'd hurt him most.

Abani was quick to correct their mistake: assuming Death to be male. In Greek mythology she appears as a grand seductress, and some indigenous tribes describe her as a snake that removes withered bodies from immortal souls. The men blushed and dropped their gaze as they scrutinized the amorous couples by the lake and spotted a young woman singing to her lover. Unlike youngsters who sang lustily out of tune, she made her appearance in the arms of various suitors and crooned into their ears—a funereal chant that made the skin crawl. Her voice sank deeper and resembled the blunt and remorseless noise of death itself. The liveliest among the whores ran from her client's lap, leaving him in a quandary and so saddened by the song that he didn't even feel like chasing the wench down to complete their business. A criminal, who was hiding in a nearby bush, fired a shot in the air to distract her, but she carried on undaunted. Whenever they heard her singing, Tirthankar made up an excuse to leave early, defeating the very purpose of the evening.

Then there was the policeman who came whenever he was off-duty to chat with the needle traders. The otherworldly smell of his cologne was enough to plant a seed of suspicion among the three men, but it wouldn't suit Death to act like a chameleon, they agreed. It'd dilute his personality and introduce an inner conflict capable of distracting him to failure. If anything, he'd be singular, uni-dimensional, and steadfast in his traits. If a mortal, he'd be almost plain, without flair, devoid of mysterious auras. Nothing about him would be irregular or erroneous—not even the time on his watch. The men by the lake had nailed Death down to a T, and in the process they cast a spell on themselves that lent further shades to their séance.

The maid who slipped and fell as she brought hot water for Robi's flask did more damage to Robi than to herself, but the unexpected scalding sent him into shock. He had deviated that afternoon from his normal routine, opting for his favourite fish head curry rather than the medicinal meals he had eaten for many years, and he had barely settled down to the lunch of the decade when the accident occurred and a fish bone lodged into his throat,

preventing him from screaming. As he sat in an agonizing trance before the glorious fish head, bathed in the hellish fumes of the upturned flask, he seemed to be meditating, and the loss of these few precious moments could've easily led to his death by neuralgic shock or asphyxiation, as the doctor later confirmed.

That very afternoon, Abani's heart stopped for a few seconds as he read the registered letter that had come from his accountant. Glancing over the errors made by some immature clerk, he closed his eyes and wondered what consequences would follow if indeed his liabilities were as large as the letter claimed. He'd have to beg from his children and write grovelling letters full of false love in exchange for dollars. He'd lose face before Malati, who'd surely remember the promise he'd made on the night of their marriage—to live like beggars if needed but never to beg for even a penny. They might have to sell their house and move into the modern-day reinvention of the mousetrap called a flat. He might have to give coaching classes at home to dunces who dreamed of becoming accountants. As he purveyed the list of probabilities, he was momentarily blinded by a light that could only have come from an extraterrestrial source inside the room, as the windows were shut to keep out the sun. He was convinced that it was Death and wondered how quickly he must've passed through the dark tunnel that Robi had described not to have noticed it at all, as if he had crossed the hard part unknowingly to land into the zone of divine light by virtue of his accumulated assets.

Of the three, Tirthankar suffered the most, the pangs of a relapse reminding him that the final moments of his life had arrived, leaving him with no time or desire to contemplate the shape of death. He had stopped coming to the lake for more than a month, and when doctors advised him to resume "normal life," he'd laughed them off. His pious wife suggested a pilgrimage to the Himalayas, but he was swayed by their unmarried daughter's idea of a trip to the Sunderbans, famous for the Royal Bengal Tigers that he'd always wanted to see. There were only 242 of them remaining, although he was warned by a talkative neighbour of the slim chance of a sighting. It was a matter of destiny, his wife said later, that despite being stuck on the muddy river for days and spotting nothing better than jungle fowl, only her husband among the entire party, had glimpsed the fabled beast at night when he went to the steamer's toilet and stood on deck to listen to the jungle calls. He felt the tiger was near him, and then he saw it lapping up its eve-

ning drink at the riverbank. It raised its head, as if to greet him, and its face was like a giant close-up in a film. It appeared not ferocious but quite timid, giving him the embarrassed look of a maid who had snuck into the kitchen to steal from the cupboard while everyone was asleep. They spent a good while staring at each other, and he thought the animal sighed, as if to say something to him. "Go on, tell me what's on your mind . . ." he whispered, the magical spell broken rudely by the boat's siren.

The game of spotting Death among the lake's visitors had ended the day he'd come over to sit with the men at their bench. In the following weeks, they talked about nothing else, convinced that they had finally met him. "He looks like Mahatma Gandhi," Tirthankar said, but Robi disagreed. He didn't have Gandhi's Gujarati nose, and his eyes were those of a businessman rather than a great humanitarian. Whatever his resemblance, the man with the cigarettes was the perfect embodiment, if it was at all possible for Death to assume a human form. He had looked to be on the wrong side of fifty but still youthful, and his expensive shirt matched his shoes so well that it made the eye leap from the shoulders to the feet, glossing over the bulging midriff. It was the mark of vanity that struck all three of them, which must've come from the knowledge of a deep-seated and irremediable imperfection. That he was superstitious, as he ought rightfully to be, was clear from the five rings he wore on the fingers of his right hand to bolster his character—diamond for ambition, topaz for calmness, ruby to fight the stubborn, emerald to curb impatience, and lapis for psychic abilities. On his left hand, he wore a solitary gem—a rare red opal to command unconditional love. From his velvet cigarette case to the unctuous smile, he had looked very much the upstart that Abani called him, the cultivated gloss and glitter betrayed by a pair of sad eyes. No further proof was necessary; they felt they knew him well enough to imagine even the type of car he owned and the flourish with which his chauffer would hold the door open if they went with him for a ride. "He knows he's unwanted and feared, which is why he must try to appear as friendly as possible," the retired accountant had grasped the essence of his character. "He must cultivate trust in the untrusting, persuade them silently by his gentle manners rather than by garrulous talk." It was noteworthy that he hadn't pressed them to smoke, although he must've known they were dying to taste the expensive cigarette, or overstayed his welcome, as he didn't want to arouse suspicion. "He makes you want to pity him," Robi said with a sigh, and he agreed with Tirthankar that his only resemblance to Gandhi

was the way he stooped, as if supporting himself with a stick.

While the end of their favourite game didn't spell a change in the daily routine for the men visiting the lake, it had the unfortunate effect of souring their temperament. From being grand observers they turned into fastidious critics, their keen curiosity dying a miserable death in the absence of an engaging routine. Their families suffered the most from having to put up with them, wondering why lovable men must turn incorrigible nearing their end, as if senility came wrapped in ill humour and undisguised spite. Having outlived their enemies, it was doubly hard for the men to find suitable targets to focus their ire, venting it instead on innocents, such as the bench that sagged a further inch since they'd started visiting the lake or the bitch that was pregnant yet again and had taken on the role of the dwarf, scavenging mercilessly for food. Busy fretting and fussing, they didn't pay much attention to the visitors, not expecting another visit from the man with the expensive cigarettes. "He only comes on business," Robi had neatly summed up their view on the matter, with Abani and Tirthankar agreeing.

Then, as Abani turned 84, Robi reached a new decade of his life, and Tirthankar pressed on with his death-defying act, tragedy struck with the yearly plague of infections taking its toll on Malati. She was healthy on Monday and dead by Sunday, for which the doctors blamed everyone and everyone blamed the doctors. Faced with unanswerable questions, Abani took full blame, absolving the rest. It was he who had distracted her so that she couldn't look after herself, who had left her with so little money after monthly expenses had been properly met that she couldn't possibly go for an expensive check-up, and who had troubled her so with sightings of Death that she had forgotten that she might also meet him earlier than expected. It was he who should've died first, in time-honoured fashion, as he was older than her.

It didn't comfort the children, who came from far away to raise accusing fingers and were left with no choice but to join uncomfortably in the tragedy. The habitual mourners settled into the routine of telling and retelling the collected episodes of the life of the dead, and they managed to convince the husband that she was more than just his wife. From a reclining chair in the living room, he observed her, surrounded like a bride, lying with her face towards the wall. He shouldn't have told her about their sighting of Death, whom she considered the embodiment of sheer evil, as he was responsible, among other things, for robbing her of her first-born—the one who would've

stayed home and done her proud by looking after his parents.

As the hatch came down on the crematorium's furnace, removing her body from sight, Abani felt in his pocket for the packet of cigarettes he purchased twenty years ago after his first attack. Malati had made him promise never to buy another one for as long as she lived. Promise fulfilled, he lit a cigarette, blew smoke towards the furnace, and felt a tug on his sleeves. He gave Robi one too, who had smoked only occasionally and quit under promise to no one. "Now you know why he came," he said, breathing the deep breath of an asthmatic bachelor as he summarized their observations by the lake. "He came to warn you to be prepared, just as you wanted your wife to be prepared for your death."

Death was waiting for them on the bench when they returned to the lake, all three of them smelling of the crematorium's smoke. Looking exactly the same as before, he made space for the men, polishing his rings with a scented handkerchief. As they sat in silence, Tirthankar cleared his throat and smiled shyly at the overdressed man. "Can I have one of those?" He pointed to the velvety case peeping out from his pocket. "Of course," their visitor said with an embarrassed smile as he offered him the whole case and resumed polishing. As evening turned to night, the men filled up the lake inch by inch with smoke and built a wall before them that blocked the moonlight and stopped the noise from the benches from coming through. Death was the only one who didn't smoke. He just kept sitting among them and made a sound that came from nowhere and went nowhere.