

Word Count: 2,422

Fires for the Dead

I've come home to watch my father die. I ride atop a derelict bus, preferring to inhale the open air rather than the recycled breaths of the tight crowd of travellers within. I arrive at dusk and disembark cloaked in road dust and dripping with sweat. It's late, so I don't call out as I enter the house. My father, this man who has dominated me all my life is a still and shrunken form on his bed. The light of an oil lamp which paints the room dim with reverent austerity does nothing to hide my mother's weary grief.

She raises her hands toward me and through the ebb of my father's life, she whispers my name, "Prakash."

"I've come Maa," I whisper in return and as I send her to take some rest, I sit on a wobbly stool by the bedside and begin my watch. My mother lies on a mat on the floor; she refuses to leave the room. I hold my father's hand in mine; his bony fingers fragile in my clammy grasp. His eyes are closed, the only signs of life are the shudder of his chest and the muted rasp of his laboured breath. I should offer prayers and mantras, but any remembrance I had of them has been misplaced. I can't even give my father the comfort of his faith, so instead I apologise.

"I'm sorry Babu, that I can't honour you as a son should. It's bad karma, I know, and I'm sorry." For a moment I think he's heard me; his hand moves just a little. His eyes open and he draws a deep breath that hangs unfinished on his lips. I call quietly to him, "Babu?" The question I dare not speak is answered by his unseeing eyes and my mother's piteous wails fill the room.

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I am preparing my husband for his final journey, and I am talking to him. His soul has not yet moved on so, actually, I am sure he can hear me. "Your son is pacing outside Kumar, if he is keeping this up, his steps will furrow a path to nowhere."

The ghee I set aside to wash Kumar's body has melted in the heat of the night. I mix it with a little milk and dampen a cloth. I lift his hand, rest it on mine and I am running the cloth along his arm, gently, for fear that I might damage this frail dead skin. "Prakash is thinking he has disappointed you. I wish you had told him how proud you were as much as you told everyone else."

My task is a lonely one. I have no daughters to help me and Kumar's sister-in-law will not come; she is fearing the disease. When I have washed my husband, I am leaning across to rub sandalwood oil on his head. My breath is not wanting to come, and a dry cough scratches its way through my throat. I am being tired and I am plagued by a headache. I place Kumar's hands in prayer and tie his big toes together. Prakash is still pacing out front. As he passes by the light of the open door, I am seeing anguish written on his face. I want to be leaving him to his thoughts, but I cannot. I heave myself up, ignoring aching muscles and going to him I am putting my hand on his arm. "I am sorry Prakash, but I am needing help to wrap your father."

I reach for the folded white sheet I had washed in readiness. My heart is breaking as the child becomes the parent and Prakash lifts Kumar. I slide the sheet across the bed and I am rubbing it smooth. We work in silence but for the flutter of moths around the lamp and the scratching of the night insects.

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It's barely twelve hours since I arrived from Delhi, barely twelve hours since my father died, but time is moving slowly. I have called four crematoriums this morning. All are booked out for days. "Please," I beg of the maalik at the fifth, "my father's body is wrapped, we must cremate him today."

"I can do nothing," comes the terse reply, "already I have turned my carpark over to the funeral pyres, and ambulances line the street outside my gate."

"What can I do," I plead. "I have money; name your price."

"You think the virus cares about your money. Come this morning to the office and I will sell you a ticket for Thursday."

"But my father's body is ready now. We can't keep him at home in the heat for three more days."

"Come for a ticket or don't," he says, and he is gone.

My mother's eyes are upon me as I look up from my phone. She sips chai, silent in her corner. She watches me. "I'm sorry Maa," I say. I walk to my father's body, anonymous in its pristine white shroud. "I'm sorry Babu, I've failed you."

My mother follows me. "I'll go to the crematorium Maa, and buy a ticket for Thursday." She nods, gently places her hand on my cheek, and I swallow a sob before it can escape my lips.

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My maalik tells everybody to come buy a ticket. As I work, I watch the mourners arrive and the line this morning is twice as long as it was yesterday. They queue with their pockets full of money, to buy time at the funeral pyres. They crinkle their noses in disgust at the pungent smell of burning flesh and squint their eyes under the assault of the clouds of choking smoke.

I have worked all through the night and now into the day; my legs are weary from running between the pyres in my row. My arms ache from tending the fires and the bodies, from cracking the skulls to liberate their souls. It is not my choice to be a dom, but corpse-burning has always been my work as it was my father's and his father's before him.

I go to the office for my pay and wait outside the door. My maalik is arguing with a customer. The mourner is a young man, dressed in expensive shoes, fine trousers and a business shirt. His face is a thunder cloud of rage.

He waves a clenched fist. "You said you could sell me a ticket for Thursday." His voice is loud enough to be heard over the wailing and prayers of mourners around the makeshift funeral pyres in the carpark.

"My father died last night," the man cries. "He must be cremated today."

"These are trying times. Even the fires cannot keep up with the dying. I have no more room. I have no more wood and no more time to talk to you. Leave or I shall call the police."

The man turns in haste but slows his pace when he sees me and is careful to step aside. I watch him go even as my maalik drops my pay into my cupped hands. Then I follow the loud angry man in the business shirt.

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I wonder how I'll tell my mother that our three-day wait to cremate my father will now be four days, or perhaps even more than that. With heavy steps I walk past the lines of mourners, their loved ones on the back seats of cars, on stretchers, in carts, any way they can get them here. In my head, I'm rehearsing what I'll say to Maa and wondering how we'll live with the body for so long, when I hear someone calling.

It's the dom from the crematorium. I step aside to let him pass, but he stops. He carries the odour of death and without thinking, I step away.

"You want a family member cremated," he says, "for the right price I can help."

A scam, I imagine, and I walk on, but he keeps pace. "I know a place, where we can cremate him tonight. You bring the wood and I will tend the pyre for you. For the right price."

“You think I’m stupid?”

He offers a toothless smile. “Anyone can see you are not stupid. I will give you the address. Bring your loved one and the wood and you can pay me once the fire is started.”

“And who will read the prayers?” I ask.

He shrugs his shoulders, “Read them yourself.” He waits and I stare at him. “You think you are guaranteed a ticket for Friday,” he says, “even if you get one you could lose your place to a higher bidder.”

“Where will I get wood?”

“This is not my problem.”

I stare. He blinks and smiles. He is profiting from death. That repulses me, but is he also my saviour?

“How much?” I ask and we barter. When we’ve settled on the price, he gives me the address and instructions not to arrive until 5:30.

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My son has come home with auspicious news. He is being successful in securing a cremation for Kumar, and in the correct time of twenty-four hours too. He will take his father this afternoon, Prakash tells me, and light the funeral fire as a son should. He asks if I will come with him and is embarrassed when I am reminding him it is not a woman’s place. He is absorbing more liberal ways from his western friends at the office. I am not telling him, but I am thinking this is a good thing.

“I must hire a truck Maa,” he says, his voice a little shaky, “and buy some wood.”

I loop my arm in his and place a hand over his heart. “Your uncle will be lending you his truck, but you will not be buying wood. The sellers’ lots are bare. I have been hearing the crematoriums want the government to allow them to be cutting trees from the national forests, and already everything in the council reserve has been cut down.”

He is looking at me. He is tall like his father, but his is the look of a frightened child.

“Take down the fence,” I say, “the wood is suitably dry.” I am leaning my face on his arm. I want to ask how this cremation has been arranged but I am knowing better. Nobody in this neighbourhood has been able to arrange a cremation so quickly; the disease is claiming too many.

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My uncle helps with the fence and the loading of the truck. He looks long and hard at me when I show him the address. "I will drive," he says. His brow is furrowed, and he shakes his head.

The dom waits by a pair of large metal gates. He watches us approach, inclines his head as he recognises me, and signals to a second man. Together they swing the gates open to reveal a rubbish dump.

"What the hell's this?" I shout, losing my balance as I jump from the truck. Have I been scammed after all? Do they mean to rob us?

"Don't worry. We have a place at the back for the funeral pyre. It is away from the rubbish." He beckons us to continue. "Come, you will see."

I climb back into the truck. My uncle sighs and I feel like a child under his gaze. How could I have been so stupid?

"Prakash," my uncle says, "Where will we cremate my brother if not here? If we leave now, he will rot before we can burn him."

The dom and his accomplice walk and we follow in the truck, lurching across uneven ground and piles of garbage until we arrive at a cleared area. Instead of the neat bricked platform of a funeral pyre, there is a low and haphazard pile of broken concrete arranged in a rectangle and atop that, paper and cardboard. The dom is unloading the wood even before my uncle kills the ignition.

They lay some of the wood atop the cardboard in closely spaced intervals. "Put the body here," the dom says, "then we will build the pyre above."

"Is this how it's supposed to be?" I ask my uncle.

"It is how it can be," he says and seeing my discomfort places a hand on my shoulder. "We will pray as his soul moves on and we will hold him in our hearts forever."

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When I am getting up, I see Prakash has returned some time during the night. He is asleep on the mat on the floor and I leave him be. I am being slow this morning, it is hard for me to breathe and I am sipping chai to stop myself from coughing. Tiredness is swamping me and I am glad there is nothing for me to do now.

I knew yesterday, even before my son arrived, that I am having the disease. Kumar had offered that I should leave him to die, to go to his brother's house, but I could not bring myself to do that. Ours was an arranged marriage. I had not met Kumar before our wedding day, but I was lucky.

He was a good man and he made us a life of happiness. It will be no sadness to me that I will not be here to be living a life without him.

I am hearing Prakash calling, “Maa, Maa.” I am rocking from side to side with his attempts to wake me. “Maa,” he says, “I’ll call an ambulance, we’ll get you to the hospital.”

I am being too tired to answer, so I am laying silent while he makes call after call. No room. No room. This is what they will be telling him. It is not their fault; too many are being sick.

Prakash sits on the stool by the bedside. “I’m sorry Maa,” he says. He takes my hand, and I find the energy to hold his. He is my little boy again. He is my joy; he has always been my joy.

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I sat with my mother for three days. Sometimes she woke and sometimes I thought she smiled when she saw me. Now, I sweat under the heat of an unforgiving sun. I’m taking down the last half of the fence so I can build my mother’s funeral pyre. I pause as a coughing fit claims me and I wonder, who will get the wood for me, and where will it come from.

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