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Githa Hariharan

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The Art of Dying

Abstract

My mother has a good memory, but she is not a storyteller. She is too much of a hoarder for that. I once said to her: When we were children, Ram and I ran off one long afternoon and pretended we could not hear you call. We ran all the way down the road, crossed it, holding hands like daring adventurers, and explored the huge empty plot four streets away. We hid there, lying dose and still in the tall grass. You found us somehow, just before it got dark Do you remember?

GITHA HARIHARAN

The Art of Dying

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I once said to her: When we were children, Ram and I ran off one long afternoon and pretended we could not hear you call. We ran all the way down the road, crossed it, holding hands like daring adventurers, and explored the huge empty plot four streets away. We hid there, lying dose and still in the tall grass. You found us somehow, just before it got dark. Do you remember?

She looked at me sharply for a moment. It must have been some nonsense you made up, she said then, in a tone that hovered between distrust and disbelief. I remember nothing about it at all.

We travel together everyday now, willing victims of a time machine. The home-made contraption moves in only one direction however. It slips its worn-out seat belts around us, singly, or together, but most often one after the other, the latecomer breathlessly trying to keep on to the same track.

In my younger days, when my body was something precious, not just a machine to be oiled and exercised at the right times; but examined, caressed, even, on occasion, flaunted – I had a buffer between me, that living, demanding thing, and death.

There is a sound enough reason, I know, for the obsession with backward movement. I don't really owe my bedridden mother the obvious illustration she provides. The future brings only that yawning emptiness, infinity, useless to compress and fit into the mind.

Death – or madness – is far too sudden, dramatic. The tenor of my life wifing, childbearing – has been determined by the subtle, undulating waves of progress creeping over my body. Bleed, dry up; expand with life, contract with completion. A peaceful, gentle existence; motion, not quite blunt-edged change.

I am better equipped now to acknowledge the claims of the past. On long leave from the familiar clutter hundreds of miles away – the distractions of husband, college-going children, the hours at the Counselling Centre – I have suspended life temporarily. Like her, I have begun to remember.

My mother is a full-time trader in memories. I began ten years ago, in a small way, when the children still needed my attention, and I could

work only part-time. Two years after my brother Ram died on his own examining table, I joined the Counselling Centre as a volunteer.

I began as bystander, sympathetic spectator to other people's memories. She has had a head start. She ties the finest of knots that lend strange charms to truth. She is her own confessor, poet, philosopher, apologist, storyteller.

The past is the inevitable appendage. This I learnt, not in the heavy-moleduled air that hangs in this house; or in the whispered queries from the occasional visitor about tumours, benign or malignant, their terminal nature.

I must have learnt it earlier, not, I think, in the crash course in psychology, but over the years of counselling, overseeing real-life disasters. The words come now, years after the evidence.

My mother, clean and well-scrubbed, smells of lemony soap. Her hair, still thick and long, is in a girlish braid. It is only the middle parting of her hair that has grown a little wider with the years. Her scalp, a pale ivory, shines through like a well-beaten track of light.

She has no growths anywhere; at least nothing palpable, visible to X-rays. But she is ailing, dying of unidentified causes.

For almost a year I once conducted a long-distance flirtation with a glamorized death. The middleman was a patient of mine, a case who later became enough of a friend to show me the rows of unfinished paintings in his studio.

He was then a young man, an aspiring painter who had broken away from the thriving family business to live alone in a studio and paint. He looked the part: he had a thin, poetic nose, thick-lashed eyes, and a strained look on his face, as if he was constantly on the verge of discovery.

I spoke to him, in a professional capacity, off and on for a year. I did not have to probe or ask questions. He spoke very little, but when he did, he came back, compulsively, to a long list that enumerated different ways of dying.

Death by fire. Drowning in dark, turbid seas; asphyxiation in a burning labyrinth. He woke up to see a noose, every fibre and coil of the rope in sharp-detail focus, round his neck. He went to bed with an image as clear as an eyewitness-report: his body, trapped in a car speeding to the edge of a dizzyingly steep cliff.

All his deaths were sudden and violent; the pain was as deep-rooted as an unsolvable mystery.

When he invited me one evening to see his paintings, I went prepared to make a house call. I had seen pictures drawn by depressed patients before; they were crowded with contorted monsters. A chase by hounds, or fiends, frozen mid-frame. The mouth of the victim in the foreground is pulled open in a long, silent, shriek; the muscles are taut with the expectation of capture.

I was not prepared for the elegance of his paintings. They were fine, soft-tinted greys, lilacs, pale blues. Minutely-detailed figures reclined in graceful languor, framed by an intricate crisscrossing of lines.

There was one large canvas of a solitary nude. The young man lay on a thick, grey sheet, each fold lovingly painted in. Muscles and nerves stretched over a framework of bones; the entire body was a fine tracery of arteries and veins. He had a lovely expression on his face that I had never seen before; his head fell back, totally relaxed, lolling free of a boneless neck.

Much later, when I had not seen the painter for several years, I made the connection. I dreamt one night of Ram – a rare dream for me – and I saw, once again, his dead face, the well-built body that lay slack, like a rubber figure that could assume any shape or posture you dreamt up.

When I woke that morning, I thought I saw his dead face framed on the wall before me. I knew then where I had seen the man before – the face devoid of emotion, the muscles free of expectation, movement, tension, life. Beneath the lacy cobweb-shroud of my patient's paintings, all the people, even those with wide-open, staring eyes, were actually corpses.

Love and death. My mother could give it all up now, struggle individually with the death closing in on her like tomorrow, two lone combatants, or lovers, the rest of us forgotten. She knows the face of the shadow inching nearer by the hour. Its presence turns her mother's grief, a commonplace enough thing, into a grand passion.

He left me behind, she says suddenly. The words hang in the quiet sick-room with the bitter weight of conclusion, not complaint. He was always impatient.

She drifts away and returns on a different current. I sit by her bedside, ready to receive stray bits of flotsam, her legacy of stubborn dregs.

Life all around us, she says, and we are in death. To me a metaphor, to her a fact. Why does she hold on to him then, worse than ashes, a mere memory?

She lets herself be cleaned, bathed and dressed. She lies there, neither resisting nor actively cooperative, while I sponge her, pat her dry, and turn her over.

When Ram died (the appropriate word, I learnt later, is collapsed), she was completely dry-eyed. Without a whimper or a moan, she groped for her widow's narrow bed. She lay there for days, eyes open, arms frozen by the sides of her body, playing dead.

On the fourth day, just before I left for Australia to claim his body, I forced her to eat. Two servants, subdued by my revulsion at their noisy, breast-beating grief, held her down. I spooned the mashed rice, pulpy baby-food, into her tightly pursed lips.

She does not have a single wrinkle on her face. It is exactly as I remember it from twenty years ago, except perhaps that it is thinner, more

spare. Her muscles have condensed, withdrawn into themselves, not sagged with the burden of her tearless, unsmiling face.

The night air is so still, so heavy with its obvious, palpable silence, that I can hear her breathe. There are hardly any symptoms, just as Ram had nothing to describe, no messages or explanations to leave behind, before he keeled over on to the table.

Did he feel this weakness too, she asks me. She is bitter that it is an undignified, drunken weakness. Her slim legs feel elephantine; her eyes blur, a fraction less than perfect focus, when she raises her head.

When I prop her up against the pillow and the room swims languorously about her head, she is furious.

I want pain, she snaps at me, refusing to reconcile herself to second best.

Good, excruciatingly sharp pain. Only its shooting clarity will define her love in precise terms.

If I loved him, she says, I should have stopped breathing the moment I heard. Instead, I was stunned. Something in me, a vital organ, disconnected itself and turned a clumsy somersault. I cheated myself: the heart, the lungs, ruthless survivors, betrayed my love. One continued to beat, the other inhaled and exhaled callously.

Once a couple came to the Centre for advice because the woman had not been able to conceive in spite of being married for four years.

He was a heavy, thick-set man in his late twenties. Though his fleshy, pock-marked face had a double chin, and he wore a loud and shiny yellow shirt, there was something tender about the way his hands moved, almost of their own accord. He patted his wife now and then on her shoulders, gently, or moved his hand from one part of her armrest to another, as if trying to decide what would comfort her. In the face of all this concern, the wife was totally impassive. She sat silent and expressionless, as if her husband was talking about someone else's problem altogether.

I suggested they see a doctor, and offered to write down an address for them.

But we must have your advice first, he insisted, and I began to get a little impatient. What did the man want?

A week later, they were back, this time with the doctor's report. The man was even more restless this time. His hands wriggled about the armrests of his chair, like a pair of oily eels.

What is this? I snapped, reading the report. I was convinced the man was trying to make a fool of me.

The report clearly stated: there was nothing wrong with her, unless you count virginity as an illness.

Even now, she didn't open her mouth. Nor did she look at him. He said, very quickly, the words tumbling out of his thick lips: She calls out to my mother when I touch her.

And what does your mother do? I asked.

She has been sleeping between us every night for the last four years, he replied, his hands still at last, clasped furtively on his lap.

My mother shuts her eyes as I massage her scalp lightly with a thick, green oil. We are a quiet family. Doctor, nurse, mother: creatures of habit, dedicated to the housekeeping of the body. It is the mind, and the cunning, prismatic nature of remembering, that we are shy of.

My hair, she says in a hoarse whisper. (She speaks, I have noticed, of her dead son in a clear, unchoked voice.)

Your father was always jealous. He caught me combing my hair once in the balcony upstairs. That was the last time I was allowed to stand there alone.

It was a different time, I say. Perhaps he was protecting you from neighbourhood gossip.

My father's authority had a long-distance quality to it, something like a powerful memory. He rarely spoke to us, but his word – sometimes unspoken – was our law.

He was afraid, she says, her contempt undiminished by the decades in between. He was petty. Stingy. I was beautiful.

These are certainties. She struggles with shade and nuance only when she talks of Ram. When she tests, over and over again, her capacity to love, and its dismal failure to keep him bound to life.

I have been taught that forays into the past can heal, so I listen to her. But I cannot summon up, at least not yet, my disinterested counselor's voice in this well-dusted room crowded with familiar ghosts.

The Counselling Centre is a small dingy room in the basement of a crumbling old building. It is lit only by tube-light, which gives the faces across my desk, muscles straining with anxiety, a faintly bilious green pallor.

The first few weeks I worked there, I missed windows. I would rush up the stairs every hour and stand at the top, watching the snarling, smoke-spitting traffic, taking deep breaths.

It became something of a joke with the other volunteers. It must have been a relief to laugh aloud at someone's disabilities, after years of smoothing a great deal off their faces. Sniggers of contempt, snorts of disbelief, even genuine amazement or outrage have very little place in our professional lives.

Finally, I decided it had to stop. I was only a volunteer, but I still believed I had to be a source of strength to our patients. (We call them cases; we are called helpers or initiators.)

I got my younger daughter to draw me one of her bright, garish pictures; an open window, orangy sunlight pouring in. I no longer remember if I looked at it often then, but I cannot imagine my corner now without the faded crayon-window.

It requires a special strength, my mother says, her head drooping like a wilted flower that refuses to shed its petals. I don't need to ask what she is talking about. When she decides to foist her memories on me, she rarely waits for prompting. She is beyond the mundanities of conversational etiquette.

She opens her eyes and looks at the pen in my hand, wavering indecisively over a pad of letter-paper.

Death, she says, the word rolling off her tongue with intimacy, demands strength, not a final weakness. Ram had it and I didn't. That is why I could not follow him as I should have.

I treat this confession exactly as I receive the sexual confidences my patients sometimes make. I say nothing. I deftly slip on a mask of listening, all smooth, unknotted muscles, withholding judgement.

My letters home: I want to describe the density of the air I now breathe, not part-time or nine to five, but day in and day out.

The family I grew up in has little talent with words. The words spring out, independent entities, with no sustaining attachment to their source. They do not betray; they are indifferent to the nuances we try to infuse into them.

My daughters, however, need words. They have not been trained for survival in the undercurrent of purely emotional entanglement. Like many progressive parents, we have read entire tracts on child rearing. We hope to be their friends, not great brooding memories darkening unexpected corners of their future.

My only grudge against my father is that he rendered us incapable of piecing him together. You could say he wrote his biography in our child-minds for posterity, word for word. We remember him as he wanted us to, one-dimensional firm fatherly-hand, totally unbelievable.

The year he died, he posted two copies of a studio photograph. One to Delhi, one to Australia, registered airmail.

He did not waste time on unnecessary subtleties. This photograph of your mother and me, he wrote to his son and daughter, both grown up, living lives he had not planned in two different corners of the world. The photograph is for you to frame and hang in your living-room when we are gone. Find a reliable framing shop; but there is no need to be extravagant - ordinary, plain wood should do.

It is Ram who hangs on the wall now, ornately framed, garlanded like a revered ancestor. A glass cupboard below the photograph houses row after burnished row of undeniable testimonials: silver cups, gold medals, plaques of appreciation, citations, extravagantly signed certificates.

The idol did not live long enough to make a false move. The last time I saw him alive, he showed me a photo of Janet, his white girl-friend. He was not sure whether he wanted to marry her. Neither of us mentioned our mother.

As he described Janet to me, his arms cradled my younger daughter,

sleeping against his broad chest. It is madness to compete with, or even grudge, the impossible standards set by a brilliance frozen in youth. My mother has never noticed my sudden interest in psychology. It is easier for her to believe I don't even try. I know a little of the dangers that the knife of a surgical quack poses, but I would like her to see that I too am a healer of sorts.

Sitting by her bedside, through her long afternoon naps, I continue my patchy education. Our small library in the Centre is full of booklets on other voluntary organizations. All of them talk of caring and sharing with slippery ease. The more weighty books – covered with brown paper, labelled – are condensed editions of Freud, Jung, Adler, transactional analysis.

Most of our cases are passed on to doctors. Despite the titles we are given, we are do-gooders, mere listening posts.

I read: With the high standards of our civilization and under the pressure of our internal repressions, we find reality unsatisfying. We entertain a life of fantasy to make up for these insufficiencies in reality.

We have a case in the Centre who we had nicknamed 'the dreamer'. The dreamer came closest to providing us what we, in unofficial terms, thought of as comic relief.

She was a wealthy young woman who had travelled a little and tried her hand at many things. Painting, interior decoration, a small business of her own, but nothing endured.

Very soon we discovered her reason for coming to us: she wanted someone to listen to her dreams. She had been to an expensive psychiatrist for a couple of years, but she never referred to that. She sensed, perhaps, that her dreams left little room for interpretation.

She really expected very little of us. Her talent was dreaming, and she needed an audience.

Sometimes her dreams were worth the long, wasted mornings of listening. She hated any interruption. Questions, clarifications and requests for repeat performances made her furious, and she would leave, enraged, only to be back a few weeks later, a fresh compilation ready.

She dreamed: that she was Napoleon's mistress; that she had saved Jesus Christ from the crucifix at the last, critical moment; that the Buddha shared a bowl of sweet water with her, while telling her about his life as Siddhartha. She flew around the world, without wings, and floated in a deep blue and cloudy space well above the earth.

I dreamt that I had died, my mother called after her nap. The afternoon light was golden and slanting, and where she lay, her profile had a calm, beatific glow to it.

It was beautiful: my body lay there, and I hovered nearby, completely light and carefree. I had thought I would feel a great triumph, like the

man who has just rolled a boulder uphill. But this was even better: nothing, not hill, nor boulder nor triumph, mattered. I felt the beauty of nothingness, of not thinking or feeling, begin trickling into my pores like a cool, fresh stream.

Then I heard a muffled noise below, something distant but so familiar that I stopped to listen. If I concentrated on the sound I could hear it, faintly at first, then more and more clearly; the peaceful trickle had to be slowed down so that I could hear better.

It was Ram. He sat on my bed, holding my dead body in his arms. He wept, in big, shoulder-convulsing heaves. The tears gushed down his face, chin, and neck, on to his broad chest.

I couldn't bear it. Ram, I called. Don't. Don't cry, my son. I know your love. That's enough, dry your tears now.

There is a secretive look on her face like the gloating of a smug lover. How much of it is fantasy, how much memory trace?

We are trained to protect our patients from self-injury and death. When we have a suicidal patient – a common, everyday business at the Centre – my job is to equip him to escape, put off death. Meeting death gracefully, preparing for it, does not fit into our professional kit.

There is nothing that is trivial, arbitrary or haphazard. An untidy nest of unacknowledged needs, impulses, drives and instincts lies hidden in the heart of every human being. We are told: Look for a motive in every case, even when you have no expectation of one. Indeed, prepare to look for several motives. It is only our innate craving for simple, direct causality that leads us to settle for a single psychical cause, midway during the demasking procedure.

A medical education is a training course in problem-solving. You seize an amorphous situation, structure it, and solve the resulting problem. Your instrument is your black-and-white thinking, sensible and down-to-earth. The therapist's tools are great big clouds of woolly thinking; he trains himself to hold several points of view at the same time.

Questions I could ask myself: is she in love with death? Ram cheated on her – he never regained consciousness for a minute – and she lived in blissful ignorance, totally unsuspecting, till the phonecall came. Is she jealous of his new lover? Or is it just that ugly, ramshackle shadow, the guilt of the survivor? Is love – or Ram – really her opponent, her enemy who is a genius at disguises?

I read: People notice that the patient has sore spots in his mind, but shrink from touching them for fear of increasing his suffering. But like a surgeon who does not hesitate to operate on a festering limb, the therapist uncovers the wound only to heal it.

Husbands, wives, mothers, daughters, fathers, sons. Most of the cases I have seen speak of themselves through their families.

The dramatic case, after some years of experience, I found the most obvious, the least interesting. The real challenge is what lies closer to normalcy, separated from it by a swift and subtle twist.

A young medical student came to the Centre for help because she could not stand the sight of blood.

She was in the fifth year of her MBBS degree and still, she felt faint every time she saw the most innocuous of cuts.

Tell me about yourself, I said.

There is nothing much to say, she replied. I live with my mother. She has no one but me. I can't go on like this. I must finish my education somehow.

What does your mother think of your fear of blood, I asked. Think? She is distressed, of course. She has worked very hard to give me this chance.

I watched her face, which had suddenly become rigid, confronting a certainty.

She loves me deeply, she said. She pours fresh, cold water on my head while I sit on the stool in the bathroom, stark naked, on the third day of every month. Even if I am still bleeding, she bathes me like a baby. Not even my stale blood can contaminate her.

She washes, the medical student said, her eyes now beginning to fill, my white coat herself, though it is not blood-spattered, every single night.

My mother wears a maroon sari with yellow stripes, a slippery mixture of silk and cotton, the kind of counterfeit-silk sari we have always given servants when there is a marriage among them.

I bought her other, better-quality saris with my money and the money Ram has left her. She has never worn them; perhaps she gives them away to the servants. The same sari-seller she has known for decades continues to visit her once a year with his wares. All his saris are gaily striped and bordered, unchanging despite fashion or the age of the buyer.

All evening I have been ironing my mother's clothes. There is someone else who usually does it, someone who is paid in piece-rate terms.

I fold the sari first, into two equal rectangles. It is impossible to handle the whole thing at a time. The material, so soft and elegantly pleated on her, is now surprisingly crumpled. I smooth out the most stubborn of tiny wrinkles along the edge with my hands and stretch them tight. The third time I do this, the material gives way and I hear a rip. The border, a bright yellow one, tears off neatly and hangs like a festive, silken streamer in my hand.

Like the impeccable housekeeper I am, like a filial nurse and volunteering samaritan, I iron the sari anyway. Without the border, it is easier to smooth out. I press down on it with the hot iron, again and again; up and down, left to right, till all the tangled knots, the intricate folds, have disappeared. The sari is now one big, blank sheet. I can fold it in any way I choose.

Even in her sleep my mother calls out for Ram. If I strip off the topmost layer, will the raw skin inside confess?

My supervisor at the Centre tells me: Look out for what the patient can tell you. A sinner confesses what he knows. A patient has to do more than confess. He has to tell you what he does not know, at least as yet.

He has escaped me, she whines.

I could say: He will always escape you. I prefer anger, a bitter resignation; her helpless, broken-hearted old woman evokes only a little girl's spite.

He escaped into his books, into childish adventures of discovery in which he fearlessly led his older, more prosaic sister. He escaped into his thoughts that were too large and sweeping for any of us, to Australia; then the ultimate escape, making sure none of us could follow him.

When Ram was a little boy, my mother suddenly remembered, he would sometimes hide from her.

He could keep it up for hours – he would be completely still and silent in an old trunk or a cupboard full of forgotten junk. When he had done this several times, she began tying him up. She would tie him up in the kitchen where she was, with a soft old sari, giving him a leash just long enough.

Luckily, I think, he did not marry. Many condoling visitors said as much when he died; strangely, this seemed to give my mother a moment of relief.

It seems to me that psychotherapists write books endlessly. When I read a novel, I can read fast and skip the dull bits, but a healer has to learn to read like a scientist, slowly and carefully.

I have spent the hours by my mother's bedside reading books about, for, and against therapy. Nothing has changed in spite of the verbose history, the acrobatics of jargon. Psychiatry has remained the same. It talks less of curing patients than managing them.

The last two days my mother has insisted that I sit by her all the time. Her tenacious attachment to the past, an old woman's lust for living, is now an open declaration. Ram is an emotional tic.

I watch over her while she sleeps. The house is so silent that I doze for a while. I wake up suddenly, hearing a soft, clicking sound near her bed. On the wall behind her, a fat, unblinking lizard stalks two moths sitting recklessly close to it. I switch on the tube light by the lizard and the moths flutter nearer.

Even before I can settle down on my chair to watch, the lizard's tongue darts out like an invisible magnet and draws in the bigger of the two moths. It opens its mouth for an instant so that I can see the moth stuck on the tongue. The wings of the moth are folded; it refuses to struggle.

The lizard watches the other moth as I watch the lizard. The small moth flutters near the lizard by the tubelight like a flirtatious tease.

Before the lizard can pounce again, it flutters in dizzy circles, then falls headlong down to the floor.

I pick it up by its thin, papery wings and throw the dead moth into the waste-paper basket.

She is better, the doctor says. Her fury, the ardour of her confidences, are now muted. She sleeps, and in between she complains, like any other old woman, in a thin, reedy voice.

There are no gurus. Only the need exists, to seek a guide who is stronger, wiser, better and happier. The therapist is a power-broker who aspires to a world full of hard-working men, docile wives and mothers, and obedient children.

There is life in death, in spite of all its ancestral legacy of terrors. The true healer labours to ease this passing.

Evening again. The light is not yet on and I can just about see, in the dim light, a pin-point flurry of movement. I hear its persistent buzzing and whining clearly enough. I have shut all the doors and windows, as they should be at twilight, but there is one mosquito left in the room.

I try several times to track it down by sound, but its swift, zigzagging movement deceives me.

Finally I lift my mother's mosquito net, and crawl on to her bed. I hold the net open, waiting for it to enter the trap. Through the net, I press the switch of the bed-lamp gently so as not to wake her.

I hit it the instant I see it, sitting black and stupid on the inside of the net, as if it has a right to live, sit, dream, after gorging itself on an hour of whining. It leaves behind a small blotch of brownish-red, stale blood on the white net. My mother does not wake up.

She is, whatever the doctor says, a terminal patient. Her fragile body is chained to the life-support machine of her memory. I have witnessed the torture of needles and tubes; her love and jealousy.

To come back, nurse her again, relieve the burden, feel the same remorse: who says she should be kept breathing at any cost?

It would be simpler to help her forward. It would take only a minute or two to give her what her heart yearns for.

She will leave behind only a useless and empty shell, a shell of silence. Her real self, the young, full-blooded woman with long, thick hair, who loves so passionately, with such fierce loyalty, will, without a faltering step, set off in the right direction.

He awaits her, his chest as broad, his face as unlined as in his framed photograph, the eternal lover.

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