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# THE DEATH OF VISHNU

'A wonder of a book. Astonishing' Amy Tan

MANIL SURI

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OF VISHNU

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BLOOMSBURY

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*For my mother and father*

#### AUTHOR'S NOTE

Although the persons and events depicted in this novel are fictional, the central character was inspired by a man named Vishnu who lived on the steps of the apartment building in which I grew up. He died in August, 1994, on the same landing he had occupied for many years.

'I am Vishnu striding among sun gods,  
the radiant sun among lights . . .  
I stand sustaining the entire world  
with a fragment of my being.'

From Krishna's discourse to Arjun, Chapter Ten  
*The Bhagavad-Gita*  
Translated by Barbara Stoler Miller

## CHAPTER ONE

Not wanting to arouse Vishnu in case he hadn't died yet, Mrs. Asrani tiptoed down to the third step above the landing on which he lived, teakettle in hand. Vishnu lay sprawled on the stone, his figure aligned with the curve of the stairs. The laces of a pair of sneakers twined around the fingers of one hand; the other lay outstretched, as if trying to pull his body up the next step. During the night, Mrs. Asrani noted with distress, Vishnu had not only thrown up, but also soiled himself. She had warned her neighbor, Mrs. Pathak, not to feed Vishnu when he was so sick, but did that woman ever listen? She tried not to look at the large stain spreading through the worn material of Vishnu's khaki pants, the ones that her husband had given him last Divali. What a mess — the jamadarni would have to be brought in to clean up such a mess, and it would not be free, either, someone would have to pay. Her large frame heaving against the sari in which it was swaddled, Mrs. Asrani peered at Vishnu from the safety of the third step and vowed it would not be her.

A more immediate problem had to be dealt with first — what to do about the cup of tea she brought Vishnu every morning? On the one hand, it was obvious that Vishnu did

not have much need for tea right now. Even yesterday, he had barely stirred when she had filled his plastic cup, and she had felt a flutter of resentment at not having received her usual salaam in return. On the other hand, giving tea to a dying man was surely a very propitious thing to do. Since she had taken this daily task upon herself, it would be foolish to stop now, when at most a few more cups could possibly be required. Besides, who knew what sort of repercussions would rain down upon her if she failed to fulfill this daily ritual?

Pressing the edge of her sari against her nose to keep out the smell, Mrs. Asrani descended gingerly to the landing. Using the scrap of brown paper she had brought along for the purpose, she fished out the cup from the small pile of belongings near Vishnu's head, taking care to always keep the paper between her fingers and the cup, so as not to infect herself with whatever he had. She placed the cup on the step above the landing and poured tea from the kettle. Hating the idea of good tea being wasted, she hesitated when the cup was half full, but only for a second, filling it to its usual level to fulfill her pledge. Then she ascended the steps and surveyed her handiwork. The cup lay steaming where she had left it – but now Vishnu looked like he was stretching out across the landing to try and reach it, like a man dead in the desert, grasping for the drink that could have saved him. She thought about moving the cup to correct this, but the scrap of paper she had used now lay on the landing, and she couldn't be sure which surface had touched the cup. There was nothing she could do anymore, so she turned and climbed up the remaining steps. At the door of her flat, it occurred to her that she still didn't know if Vishnu was alive or dead. But it didn't really matter, she had done her duty in



either case. Satisfied, Mrs. Asrani entered her flat and closed the door behind her.

The steam rises lazily from the surface of the tea. It is thick with the aroma of boiled milk, streaked with the perfume of cardamom and clove. It wisps and curls and rises and falls, tracing letters from some fleeting alphabet.

A sudden gust leads it spiraling down to the motionless man. It reaches his face, almost invisible now, and wafts playfully under his nose. Surely the smells it carries awaken memories in the man. Memories of his mother in the tin-and-cardboard hut, brewing tea in the old iron kettle. She would squeeze and press at the leaves, and use them several times over, throwing them away only when no more flavor could be coaxed out. Memories of Padmini, the vapor still devoid of cardamom or clove, but smelling now of chameli flowers fastened like strings of pearls around her wrists. After they had made love, and if she did not have another person waiting, the tea would be carried in by one of the children at the brothel, and they would sit on the bed in silence and sip it from metal tumblers. Memories of Kavita, the steam finally milk-rich and perfumed, her long black tresses framing her smiling face as she bends to fill his cup. For almost a month last year while Mrs. Asrani was sick, it was her daughter Kavita who performed the daily ritual. Vishnu would scrape a broken comb through his knotted hair every morning and wait to deliver a toothy 'Salaam, memsahib!' when she came, winking at her with his good eye.

All these memories and more the steam tries to evoke in the man. His mother discarding all her used leaves on

festivals, even scooping out a few spoonfuls of sugar to sweeten the tea. Padmini pressing her lips against the metal rim, laughing as she offers him the tumbler stained with unnatural red. Kavita trying to keep her dupatta from falling off as she bends down, passing the kettle from hand to hand so as to not burn her fingers.

A breath of exhaled air emerges from the man's nostrils, fraying the steam into strands. The strands shimmer for a second, then fade away.

It had been almost eleven years now that Mrs. Asrani had been bringing Vishnu his morning tea. Before that, it had been Tall Ganga for whom she had brought the tea, the old woman who had slept on the landing between the ground and first floors since as far back as anyone could remember. One day, Tall Ganga had announced to Mrs. Pathak and Mrs. Asrani that she would no longer be bringing them their milk bottles in the morning or cleaning their dishes in the afternoon. She had finally saved up enough money to have the last of her daughters married and would be going back to her village to live out the rest of her days with her eldest son. It would be Vishnu who would be taking over these duties in a week, and sleeping on the landing as well, so they should pay Vishnu and bring the tea and leftover chapatis for him after she had left.

The news had been received with dismay by both Mrs. Pathak and Mrs. Asrani. The problem was that Vishnu was a drunk, lolling around every afternoon on the small ground-floor landing that was a few steps above the street. They had entreated Tall Ganga to find a more reliable replacement, to

leave their milk bottles and dishes in better hands. 'You've been staying here with us all these years,' Mrs. Pathak had reminded her reproachfully. 'Surely you owe us this much.'

The last statement had outraged Tall Ganga. 'What do you think, I've been staying here due to your generosity? I came here long before you did, Pathak memsahib. Every family that's ever lived in this building has eaten off dishes washed by my hands. I may not be rich like you, but I have more right to be here than anyone in this building!' The hot tears in Tall Ganga's eyes had silenced both Mrs. Pathak and Mrs. Asrani. Tall Ganga had straightened out from her old woman's stoop and stretched to her full height, until her head was actually pinning the sari covering her hair against the ceiling. 'I've already given my word to Vishnu,' she had declared, staring down at them, 'that he is to be my replacement. And I hope, as the person who brought the milk that your children grew up on, that you will preserve my dignity.' Mrs. Pathak and Mrs. Asrani had been unable to do anything but nod their heads. It was only later, when Vishnu was entrenched on the new landing, that they learned from the cigarettewalla downstairs that Tall Ganga had exacted the sum of two thousand rupees from Vishnu to designate him as the official replacement.

Within a week, it had become clear that Vishnu was not cut out to perform the duties of a ganga. The milk bottles, if delivered, would arrive late in the afternoon, their blue foil caps bulging from the pressure of the curdled milk inside. The dishwashing was a disaster, with pots dented, cups chipped, and plates covered with grease stacked up in the kitchen cupboards. Once, Mrs. Asrani had screamed upon finding a giant green cockroach with white innards squished between two dishes in the cupboard – they'd had okra the

night before, and Vishnu had left an entire pod stuck to a plate. And almost every day, Vishnu would 'borrow' a tumbler for his evening drink and Mr. Pathak or Mr. Asrani would have to go down to the landing to retrieve it. ('Gláss affects the alcohol, sahib, gives it more of a kick.')

They'd tried, without much hope, to dislodge Vishnu from the landing. But all the shopkeepers on the ground floor, from the electrician to the tailor, from the paanwalla to the cigarettewalla, knew about Vishnu's contract with the ganga. Since nobody actually *owned* the landing, it was clear that all inhabitation rights to it now belonged to Vishnu; it would have been ridiculous to usurp this order. Vishnu was perfectly entitled to store his meager belongings there, to eat, drink, and sleep there, even to spit paan juice on its crumbling walls if he wanted. (He did.) And at night, the occupants of the building were expected to carefully feel their way past the thin edge of his blanket in the dark, just as they did for the inhabitants of landings higher up along the stairway, even though Mrs. Asrani could not help prodding his reposing form accidentally a few times, such was her frustration with the situation.

They did, of course, cut Vishnu off, both from his duties and the tea and chapatis. In his place, they hired Short Ganga, who while not particularly short was called that to differentiate her from her predecessor. Short Ganga wanted neither a place to sleep nor stale chapatis to eat; in lieu of these perks, she insisted on a higher salary, and this caused both Mrs. Pathak and Mrs. Asrani some agony.

It was Mrs. Pathak who finally integrated Vishnu back into the scheme of things. Noting that her stale chapatis (which she had started giving to the woman who begged next to the paanwalla shop) were not really getting her

anything (except, she supposed, peace of mind), she brought the topic up with Mr. Pathak one day. 'It's impossible to starve him out, you know – all he does is drink, anyway – he doesn't care about food. Why don't you tell him we will start feeding him again – even pay him once in a while – he can help in return – stand in the ration line, take the wheat to the mill, that kind of thing. We might as well make some use of him, if he's here to stay.' Mr. Pathak, who had not been aware that they had been trying to starve Vishnu out, or even that they had cut off his chapatis, dutifully talked to him later that afternoon. Vishnu started performing chores for the Pathaks, then the Asranis, then the Muslim Jalal family on the second floor, and then for Vinod Taneja, the widower who lived alone in the large third-floor flat at the top of the building. Within a month Vishnu had been able to pay back the first installment of the two thousand rupees he had borrowed from the cigarettewalla.

This was Vishnu rescued from starvation, and, more importantly, from the rigors of sobriety.

The light shines through the landing window. It plays on Vishnu's face. It passes through his closed eyelids and whispers to him in red.

The red is everywhere, blanketing the ground, coloring the breeze. It must be the red of Holi. He is nine, hiding behind a tree, fistfuls of red powder in each hand. He has been waiting for the festival for so many weeks. All morning he has played Holi – his hair is purple, his clothes blue, bright red and yellow streaks run across his face. He can taste the color on his lips – it is gritty, like mud, but more metallic.

His father sits with friends on the other side of the tree. They have been drinking bhang since morning, the milky liquid in the earthenware pots is almost gone. They are all quite intoxicated by now; some of them are weeping, some are laughing. His father lifts a pot to his mouth, drinks deeply, then lets it smash at his feet.

Vishnu has been saving the powder for his father. He emerges from behind the tree and runs to the squatting men. He opens one fist and hurls the powder at them, then goes over to his father and rubs the powder from the other fist on his face. He tries to run away, but someone catches his foot. He trips, his lip splits open on the ground. He feels himself being dragged back by his leg. The men are all over him, laughing and weeping, holding him down to the ground. He sees his father's face, all round and bloated, there is a pot in his hand. 'Open his mouth!' his father says, and someone pulls his jaws apart. Fingers press into his torn lip, the blood trickles out into his mouth. His father tilts the pot and a stream of bhang splashes against the inside of his throat. He gags and tries to swallow; the liquid burns down to his stomach. The hands are pulling his mouth open wider, he feels the bones in his jaws will break. The liquid is spilling from his mouth, gushing through his nose, washing the color from his face. Finally the stream stops, he sees his father look down at him. Laughing, his father lets the pot go – it descends, and bursts on his forehead.

When Mrs. Pathak opened her front door, the first thing she noticed was the smell. 'I think their toilet is backed up again,' she announced to Mr. Pathak, sitting in the living room. 'I'll

bet she tries to take some water from the kitchen, you just wait and see!’

The Pathaks were involved in a long-running battle with the Asranis over the first-floor kitchen, which the two families shared. It was the wives who did most of the fighting, except when things got so heated that spousal reserves had to be deployed. The main problem seemed to be the rusty green tank in the kitchen, water from which was supposed to be used for cooking purposes only, but which each side was tempted to raid on days that the terrace cistern allotted to each flat ran out. Coupled with this were the perennial skirmishes over counter and cupboard space – although several formulas had been suggested over the years, at least one (sometimes both) of the wives was always simmering under the suspicion she had been cheated of her rightful share. Frequently this simmer, stoked as it was by the fumes and the heat of the four kerosene stoves in the cramped kitchen, would come to a boil, and then the fight would erupt – charges of stoves being tampered with and dinners burnt, countercharges of utensils being pilfered and spices misappropriated, and accusations of meals being given the ‘evil eye,’ or even, on some occasions, poisoned.

‘She’s going to take the water, you wait and see!’ Mrs. Pathak said again, sliding the gold bangles up her arms and licking her lips. Her thin frame twitched. The kitchen had been very hot lately, and almost three weeks had elapsed since the last fight.

‘If she wants it, let her have it,’ Mr. Pathak suggested, without hope. He knew what was coming, this was going to be a big one. Possibly, he and Mr. Asrani would be required to serve as well.

Mrs. Pathak stood at the door and wrinkled her nose. ‘It

seems to be coming from downstairs, though . . .’ There was disappointment in her voice. ‘I wonder . . .’

Mr. Pathak heard her shuffle into her slippers and descend the steps. There was no sound for a few seconds, then Mrs. Pathak gasped, and he heard her running back up the steps. He looked up from his paper, just in time to see his wife burst through the door, her face red. ‘Are you listening?’ she shouted. ‘It’s Vishnu. He’s gone to the toilet, all over our stairway!’ Mrs. Pathak’s eyes flashed ferociously. ‘I told you not to let him come back here.’

When Vishnu had fallen ill some months ago, he had come to Mr. Pathak and asked him for money to go back to Nagpur. ‘My brother said he will look after me, sahib – all I need is train fare – my brother said he can get me into the hospital there. Free.’ After he had given him the money, and Vishnu had gone, Mr. Asrani had informed Mr. Pathak that he, too, had given Vishnu ‘train fare.’ There had been no sign of Vishnu for some weeks, and both the cigarettewalla and the paanwalla had been eyeing the vacant landing. Then one day, Vishnu reappeared at Mr. Pathak’s door. ‘Salaam, sahib!’ he had said, saluting Mr. Pathak and giving him his toothy grin. ‘They said I didn’t need to be in the hospital after all.’

Both Mrs. Pathak and Mrs. Asrani had been most unhappy at this return. They had just completed negotiations with Short Ganga, promising her the first-floor landing if she agreed to lower wages. (Short Ganga had, in turn, paid off the paanwalla and the cigarettewalla to quell potential claims, and rented the landing to Man Who Slept on the Lowest Step, at a profitable rate.) However, neither Mrs. Pathak nor Mrs. Asrani had been willing to tell Vishnu he could not return; they had nagged their husbands to do it. The plan



hadn't worked: Vishnu had been reinstated, much to their chagrin.

He had fallen extremely ill almost immediately.

'He was coughing quite badly this morning,' Mr. Asrani said to Mrs. Asrani one day.

'TB,' Mrs. Asrani whispered to Mrs. Pathak that afternoon. 'He was coughing blood when I took him his tea.'

'We're all going to be infected!' Mrs. Pathak screamed at her husband that evening. 'Blood all over my sari when I went to feed him!'

But the doctor Mr. Pathak had called in, at Mrs. Pathak's hysterical urging, had said there was no sign of tuberculosis, and further tests would be needed to diagnose what it was — tests that cost money, and which Mrs. Pathak quickly declared out of the question, it being bad enough that the doctor had charged his full fee and didn't these doctors have any heart, even for people who slept on the landings?

And now that Vishnu had soiled himself on their steps, on the very day that she was hosting her kitty party, what was Mr. Pathak going to do, and hadn't she warned him?

Mr. Pathak thought about continuing reading his paper, but he knew this would only infuriate his wife further. He put on his glasses to better appraise her anger. 'I could call an ambulance . . .' he ventured.

At this, Mrs. Pathak got very excited. 'An ambulance! An ambulance! We don't have money to send Rajan to a boarding school, and you're going to order an ambulance! For *Vishnu!*' For a second, Mr. Pathak wondered if he had provoked his wife into her occasional ritual of removing the gold bangles from her arms and telling him he might as well sell off her dowry. Fortunately, his infraction had not been serious enough, for Mrs. Pathak's anger seemed to quickly