

Crossing the Line



Friends and Benefits



Saumya Singh

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Crossing the Line

Sometimes, reality is stranger than fiction. I keep thinking back to the day when I first saw him. He was a black man, with grim features and a face so stern, he would've scared the Devil. My years have taught me not to judge by appearances, that looks are deceptive, but some looks... have the ability to horrify.

Only, he couldn't have scared the Devil. He was It.

Five years ago, while crossing the busy streets of Lucknow, I met with an accident. I can't remember much of the incident – doctors said it's an aftereffect – but I do recall a numbing pain in my head and a lot of blood. When I woke up seven days later, he was the first person I saw.

"You can call me Viram," he had said, "Do you feel better now?"

My instant reaction had been to scream. Dressed in a white dhoti, while his upper body was wrapped around by a black shawl, his mere face had made me hyperventilate. Who was this man? Why was he in my room? Where was I?

He smiled. It looked vicious.

"Viram," he said calmly again, "My name is Viram."

"H-Hello..." I had croaked.

“You’re at the hospital right now. Your wife is out to get your medicines and your daughter is at home, resting since she stayed the night here. Your son is with the doctor.”

I don’t remember much of how I had reacted, except that my head had spun. The words, coming from Viram’s mouth, had sounded like a threat.

“Who – Who are you?”

“Your Death.”

I had believed him. Any man would have. After all, he was telling the truth.

With him, that was my first encounter.



A year went by. After a few initial nightmares where I had dreamt of Viram dragging me off the hospital bed and pulling me away with him, I had slowly forgotten about him. After all, after declaring himself as my Death, he had simply walked out of my hospital room. Although now that I think about it, I can vividly recall the slight sway of his shawl as he had hurled it across his shoulder while closing the door. While him leaving had made me relieved, I had also felt a sense of foreboding.

One night, I was out on a walk. It was a hot day, with the sun scorching and only the cool night breeze could have given solace to any Lucknow man. After a few strolls, I had taken a seat on a public bench.

“She’s doing well.”

He had taken me by surprise. He was seated beside me this time, on the other edge of the bench. He had smiled again, making me yelp.

“So you remember me.”

I hadn't. But his wasn't a face that needed a lot of recollection. With him before me, the events from last year flashed before my eyes. This time, however, I reacted better.

“Who – Who are you? Seriously, are you following me?”

I was almost angry at the thought. Viram looked away.

“I came to tell you your mother is doing fine. She's a good soul, not without flaw, but as good as a soul can be in a human lifetime.”

My heart had beaten faster. My mouth had gone dry.

How did he know? Was it a mere coincidence that I had been missing my mother a lot for the past few weeks? She had passed away twenty years ago.

“It isn't a coincidence. I came because you were worried.”

He – He was reading my mind!

“I can hear you, yes.”

“Why are you here?” my reaction had been in reflex, “What do you want from me?”

I was standing now – furious, scared. Was he here for me? Was I dying?

He didn't get up. He didn't look at me either. While I stood there fuming, my fists clenched and my heart in my mouth, he stared at the moon. I remember his face. In the black of the night, he had seemed like parchment – expressionless, still.

“You are,” he said, “I am your Death. But not today. You're not dying today.”

His words relieved me.

“E-Everyone's dying,” I forced, “What do you want from me?”

“To tell you, your mother is fine.”

He stood up. Again, hurling the shawl over his shoulder that swayed in the slightest of the wind, he walked away.

I would have followed him, but my courage said no.



I didn't forget Viram for the rest of my life.

He had scared me enough to always be cautious of my surroundings. I would look for him in every horrific looking man, I would try to find him in every person who put me in awe. In time, I also regretted not being able to talk to him more. That day, I should have asked him more questions. After all, he had never denied me an answer. I should have asked him more about my mother. I should have asked him why he came to see me twice.

Would he come again?

A year later, I found him again. This time, on a much horrible day when I had caught my daughter smoking. After hollering at her for hours, I had come into my office. He was sitting on the visitor's seat.

Maybe it was because I had spent quite some time thinking about him, my reaction to him was a lot better. This time, his face didn't alarm me. Nor did his presence stun me.

I simply blurted out, "Viram!"

He smiled. There were dimples in his cheeks when he smiled, his black eyes lighting up. He didn't look that bad when he smiled, I noticed for the first time.

"Thank you."

I frowned – then remembered he could hear my mind. I took my seat, trying to keep fear at bay. He had arrived after a long, long time.

"How are you?" I asked.

He smiled again, "I don't know if your daughter is going to turn out to be a smoker or not."

I was startled.

"You don't really like small talk, huh?" I smiled in realization. I had indeed wanted to ask him – a divine being – what would happen to my daughter in the future.

"I don't know the future," Viram said calmly, "I can only tell what has passed. And whose time has come to an end."

I nodded. It made sense.

“Coffee?” I offered.

“You’ve come around sooner than I expected. Usually, people resist my existence to the very end.”

Without thought, I blurted out, “But you’ve been kind to me. Your f-face... that’s scary. But you’ve never been harsh to me.”

“I’ve never been harsh to anybody.”

I flinched from the words I didn’t say. But he must’ve heard them. Many deaths were painful. Many deaths were undeserved. If Viram was Death, how could he so easily say he had never been harsh?

He didn’t respond.

“Why can I see you?”

“Because your end is close.”

I panicked.

“But not today,” Viram reassured.

“Everybody’s end is close, in that case,” I said more to myself than to defy him, “But — how come you’re here with me?”

“I come often to the people who are about to die. So when it finally happens, they can see me as a friend.”

I doubted that was possible. I also squirmed at his words. It felt like unnecessary intrusion – being told that I was going to die soon. How soon? At least I could be prepared beforehand.

“Soon.”

“So you visit the people who’re dying *soon*. Is that why it is said most people know when they’re approaching death?” I tried to change the subject, yet stick to it at the same time.

“Not most. *All* people know.”

“Can I tell my family that I’m dying soon? So they can be prepared.” It was more a prod than an actual suggestion. I wanted to coax Viram into saying something – anything related to when my time was coming to a close – if it was ending at all.

“You can. But they won’t believe you.”

“Why?”

“Would you believe them if they told you the same?”

No. Most people didn’t like hearing those words. My family would overreact too. I knew that.

It was time. Viram stood up. Offering me a handshake, with a hand as rough and as black as a stormy night, he flipped his shawl across his shoulder and walked out the door again.

I didn’t know if I had learnt anything meaningful at all. But I did feel a sense of longing as I saw him leave. Would he come again? Soon?

Why did I want to wait?



I tried to wrap things up. Life had been hard to me very many times, but I couldn't really say I was unhappy. I was still afraid that Viram would show up someday and not say "Not today" anymore. But I won't lie – the more I thought about him, the more comfortable he seemed. In memory, his voice was soft too, like soft velvet caressing against your skin. He was good natured from what I knew, although I do admit I didn't know much.

Every now and then, I did wonder how I would die. I was perfectly healthy – a lot of checkups confirmed and reconfirmed that. When accessible factors could not give me an answer, I waited for Viram again.

He found me in the basement of my house, sorting through some discarded stuff. By this time I had near about figured out that he visited me once every year. The intervals were never fixed, but it was once a year.

"I was thinking about you," I greeted.

"I heard. Have you been well?"

I chuckled – surprising myself. "You must know then," I said cheekily.

Is it now? My Death.

"Not today," Viram smiled.

Those words relieved me, but I dared to ask again, "When?"

"Very soon."

Oh. He said *very*.

“How?”

“You’ll know.”

“What’s the point of you coming to me then?”

“So you wouldn’t scream like you did, the first time you saw me.”

“Viram?”

“Yes.”

“What happens when a person dies? Is it true that you’re accounted according to your sins and sent to heaven or hell?”

He grinned. I really liked his smile.

“No,” he said, “You account for all of that in your life itself. When you die, you’re faced with different choices.”

He looked like he wanted to say something more – but he stopped. I knew it would be fruitless to ask, but somewhere I had a hunch. He wanted to say what nobody ever believes – he was kind. Death, was kind.

Even I wouldn’t believe. Viram was kind, yes. But the fact that he was Death, slowly seemed to be fading from me.

“Is there a particular way?” I asked, “In how you choose your victims?”

Viram eyed me, and I realized I had said the wrong word. *Victim* made him a predator. Which he wasn’t, even if he had the face.

“I don’t. Every person has limited time, and its upto them, how much and when they use it. Accordingly, their time comes to an end.”

I frowned, “Like cash?”

He chuckled. The sound was soft, deep... soothing.

“Like cash,” he repeated.

“And is everybody given the same amount of time when they’re born?”

“Yes. Some of their choices use up more of their time, drain them more and cause them to meet me early. Some never use up that much.”

“How would a person know?”

“They won’t. That’s life.”

I swallowed. What had I done that had used up so much of my time early? I didn’t want to know.

“Viram... why are people born unequal then?”

“Because everybody wants a child. And the world was not all made by me.”

“You’re really being patient with me today.”

“I’m always patient.”

A lot of thoughts flooded through my mind. Time, which was given to man like a dump of cash to use. Nobody knew what task in life required how much of this time, and slowly, we drained it all away, never knowing that Viram was waiting for us.

Strangely, I found it funny. It was like playing a video game. Where health points decided how long I'd live. And I didn't know which mission would use how many points. Only, here there were no cheat codes. And the health points were our time.

Viram smiled, "That is why I really enjoyed that invention... these video games of yours on flat little screens. They're much like life."

I laughed.

I knew it was Viram's time to go. I stood up and offered him my hand. He took it, shaking it with familiar brusque. I smiled at that. He hurled his shawl across his shoulder again and left quietly. This time, he waved me a goodbye.

"Come again!" I called back.

Then I stood there stunned, amazed by what I had just said.



He didn't come back until the very last day of the next year. I had begun to wait for him. Much like a person waits for Eid, Diwali and Christmas, I waited for him. I liked the way he said, "Not today." I also liked how he never refused to give me an answer. I hoped Viram would come soon.

He did.

This time, in a way I had never imagined.

Isn't it strange, that whenever in life I thought nothing could ever go wrong, something always did? It shouldn't have surprised me. When my health reports said I was alright, I

felt invincible. I happily waited for Viram, knowing that he would say, “Not today” again. I didn’t think that he had finally come... for me.

I was walking down the street one day. I don’t remember what I had bought, or what had been important enough for me to step out in the cold that day, but I had gone anyway. I remember looking into my phone. I also remember the traffic light turning red. I had stopped near a footpath to wait for the light to change.

For a few seconds, the world had stopped on two sides of the same road. And in that world, a child ran into the middle of the street, while a truck approached her from the opposite side in full speed. I heard a few gasps, I also heard a woman scream. It made me look up from my phone.

My heart beat in my mouth.

While I saw the child and the approaching truck, on the other side of the road, standing silently – still, like a silent storm – was Viram.

“Viram!” I called out instinctively, “The girl!”

Time turned. And life stopped.

Viram crossed the line separating us – the road that was barrier between us two – and I don’t think I had ever seen anyone more magnanimous. His shawl swayed with the wind, his dark hair ruffled by the softest of breeze. For the first time in my life, I conformed my opinion to his Godlike appearance.

He was Death, alright. He was God. And he looked like it.

I was stunned. I didn't notice that everything in that moment, since Viram had started to walk, had stopped. The truck had stopped midway, so had the child. The screaming people stood frozen beside me, their mouth open in gasps. Time itself, had stopped.

Only I moved, with the strange shudder, dread and wonder in my heart. And he did, in all his glorious magnanimity.

I walked to him. Met him halfway, in the middle of the street.

"T-The child..." I fumbled, looking into his eyes.

He smiled, "Greetings, old friend."

Despite the situation, my heart knew. I looked at him helplessly and ended up smiling anyway.

"Not today Viram," I whispered, "Please say not today."

He didn't say a word.

"Please."

He smiled wistfully. "That child," he said, "Is going to save your grandson's life. Your daughter is pregnant. When your grandchild is born, he'll have a failing heart. That little girl there is going to give up her life to save his."

I swallowed. It was difficult to process.

"You're asking me to save that little girl right now. You're asking me to die." I said.

"For your child's child. Yes."

My heart hurt. “What if I refuse?”

“You’ll live for a long time. Your daughter’s child will be stillborn. You’ll never be a grandfather. But you will forget all about today, and all about ever meeting me.”

I breathed hard. This was so unfair.

“You’re not really giving me a choice here,” I said through gritted teeth, “I can’t be responsible for my grandchild’s death.”

“You’ll never remember.”

“That doesn’t make it right!”

“The choice,” he said kindly, “Is yours.”

“I don’t want to die!” I said exasperatedly, “Why are you doing this to me?”

He didn’t say a word. But the look on Viram’s face said it all. He was looking beyond me, his eyes fixated on the little girl. I was standing two steps away from the child... This little girl who was destined to die for my child’s child, if I died for her right now. Who was it more unfair on? Me or her?

Viram spoke gently, “She’s a brave little soul. She already made her choice. Do not look at her with pity, you don’t know her circumstances. It does her injustice.”

“You liar,” I breathed hard, “You said you didn’t know the future.”

“I only know the future that a death holds.”

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