

RIP, DINSHAWJI!

Zarin Virji
Principal
Universal High School
Mumbai, India

Why did Dinshaw have to die today? Neela got up abstractedly from her yoga mat wondering what to do. She had an appointment with her hair stylist at four– if she cancelled, she wouldn't get one for another month. Her hair was dry with the white roots showing. She couldn't possibly show up at a public event with her hair in that state. Dinshaw, having been a retired High Court lawyer, knew a lot of people. His funeral would attract high profile mourners. And that wife of his, Sonya, always looking her best and putting others to shame! And yet, Vikram would be very upset if Neela missed the funeral. Vikram and Dinshaw often shared a drink or two as they discussed stocks and shares. Even she was fond of Dinshaw of course, but she gave up socializing with them when he married the bimbo who was half his age. If only Vikram were here, he would have thought of a solution to this problem...She decided to paint her nails anyway in case she did go for the funeral. Better to be prepared. Which colour goes best for a funeral? Ash grey probably. That would go well with her pearls.

Free and boundless. That's how I felt. This dying was divine, if you ask me. One moment I was a mortal and now I'm superhuman! Actually I didn't even know I had died because I was asleep. But Ganpat's screams woke me. Ganpat was my man Friday who had brought me my morning tea at 7 am for the past 30 years. He screamed loudly when his attempts to wake me didn't work. I tried to tell him that I was fine but I soon understood that even though I sat up and held his hand he couldn't see the new me or hear my words. All he saw was the still figure of Dinshaw Vachha lying on his side in the king sized bed. Even though I could see through people when I was alive I realized that this state gave me a new kind of power over others! Thrilling, to say the least. Ganpat ran to Sonya's bedroom and knocked on it for quite a while. Too early for my poor darling. Every morning she would wake at about 10 as she suffered from insomnia. Finally Sonya opened the door and came to see me. Sonya, my wife, looked beautiful even in her half asleep state. She stared at me for a long time. Ganpat pinched me and shook me and did all sorts of things to convince Sonya that I was dead. She nodded and left the room. I followed her as I was curious to see how she would take my death. I even went through her but she couldn't feel a thing. She lit her cigarette with shaky fingers, asked Ganpat for a strong cup of coffee and deftly put up her long hair. Then she got onto the phone and called Dr. Mehta, my trusted family physician. If only she could hear me, I would have told her that Dr. Mehta was away on vacation. When she didn't get any reply, she asked Ganpat what to do. My poor baby, she couldn't handle all these situations. I wish I could have helped her out but Ganpat was sharp enough to know what to do. He asked her to call Dr. Jayesh, the heart surgeon who had moved into the 26th floor pent house recently. Sonya called his number thrice before there was any response. When he had heard her out, he replied that he would be able to come after an hour or so as he was getting ready to leave for a conference in the Bahamas. Sonya then called Delna to

ask for her advice. Delna was a helpful and generous soul who lived on the 6th floor. Delna arranged for Dr. Deshpande to come and take a look. By now Sonya was on her 3rd cup of coffee, trying her best to cope with what the morning had brought her. I wanted to hold her close, comfort her but of course I couldn't; I mean I did but she could not feel a thing. Deshpande did the needful and pronounced me dead. Ganpat now began to wail uncontrollably while Sonya sat upright on the rocking chair staring fixedly at nothing in particular. Dr. Deshpande cleared his throat several times in anticipation of his fees. Thank god for Delna – the moment she entered she took stock of the situation. She paid Deshpande, thanked him and sent him packing. Then she reprimanded Ganpat to stop being a baby. She told Sonya that we must be grateful for such a peaceful death; Dinshaw had lived a full life and everyone has to go one day. She was right. I agreed with her totally. She told Sonya to go and change into something suitable. Then she called the Tower of Silence to send a hearse. She made a few quick phone calls to inform people about my sad demise.

At last she sat beside me and chanted 'ashem vohu' in my ear as she made sure the scarf did not fall off her head. She also bowed towards Meher's photograph several times as her prayers picked up momentum. Meher, my first wife, who was very close to Delna. That's when it struck me that I would be reunited with my jaanu, my Meher. She would probably be getting ready to receive me even now as I think of her.

Kersi was on his fourth cup of tea without results. In spite of squirming and contorting his body in all possible ways, nothing. He remembered what Aloomai had taught him about the effect of butter on the bowels. So he went to the dining table and swallowed a generous dollop of butter. Now it would be a matter of time, he hoped. As he picked up 'the Times of India', the doorbell and landline phone rang simultaneously. That was a bad omen. He got up to answer the door first. Who else could it be but Rukmini, the ganga who had cleaned and cooked for him after his mother died. By this time the phone had stopped ringing. But now the mobile started its beep beep. Who was this impatient fool troubling a poor constipated guy? Of course when he put the phone down, he was quite excited. It was the news of his cousin Dinshaw's death. Delna had asked him to manage the funeral. The prospect of calling the shots at today's funeral would make him out to be an influential person! At last people would see Kersi as something more than a bank officer.

He did feel sad for Dinshaw but really Dinshaw had been a lucky dog all through his life. A high court lawyer living in one of Mumbai's toniest neighbourhoods - Breach Candy. Married not once but twice to women who fawned over him! Kersi had not succeeded in procuring even one bride in spite of his mother poring over the Jame matrimonial columns every Sunday. And today was Meher roj and Meher mahino – a lucky day to die. Now his soul's journey onward would also be easy! First he called the bank and informed them that he would not be going in to work. Then he called the Tower of Silence with details about the ceremony. He almost forgot to tell Rukmini not to cook mutton for his dinner. Only on the fourth day he would be able to resume eating mutton. After all he was related to Dinshaw and that was the custom. Ganpat was an incredible cook – he was already looking forward to the 4th day's lunch...dhansak made of succulent chunks of mutton. He hurried to the cupboard to look for his starched white shirt and trousers that were especially reserved for these occasions. And the red velvet prayer cap. That's when the uneasiness returned. Why had the butter not done what it's supposed to? He couldn't possibly face the funeral without relieving himself.

My jaanu, my Meher and my Sonya, my darling! I can say in all honesty that I loved them both equally.

Meher was my youthful bride, her rosy pink lips and almond shaped eyes full of invitation from the moment I saw her! Her petite frame and bobbed hair added to her charm. I was thirty five, well past my prime as everyone said. Meher's uncle knew my father and that's how the match was done. Meher's playfulness and complete trust in me drew me to her instantly and we soon came to be known as the perfect couple. We drew stares of envy at concerts and other social dos. Meher liked to spend her time gardening and baking. Rich aromas greeted me whenever I got home in the evenings. She conceived twice and miscarried. People considered us unfortunate but I was happy in my private world with Meher. We travelled the world, we contributed to charity and we lived contentedly in each other's company. Meher was everyone's best friend, especially Delna's and she cared for Delna's boys as her own. Then came the cancer and it took my Meher away from me in six months. The best of doctors and hospitals could do nothing. I had just turned sixty and didn't know what to do with myself. Work kept me occupied but the rest of my life was a deep hollow. I refused to go to any concerts or attend any function. I would sit by myself all evening, recalling our times together and have a drink or two. For the first year I couldn't fall asleep on that empty bed. I would walk around the house and then finally collapse on the living room couch or at the foot of her beloved plants on our terrace.

After two years of self-exile, I returned to the social world much to Ganpat's and Delna's delight with a vengeance. I began to accept any and every invitation to various events. I took a liking for horse racing. It was at one of these racecourse events that I was introduced to Sonya. Tall and lissome, she moved with a feline grace as she chatted gaily about this and that. The conversation revealed that she was a model who had moved to Mumbai from a village in Punjab. She was accompanying Prakash Khandelwal, a much married textile magnate even older than I was. She laughed at his every joke as they both smoked cigarette after cigarette. Every now and then she would whisper something into his ear and he would pat her on the rump sending her into ecstasy. This public display continued throughout the evening; it made me aware of instincts that had long been suppressed after Meher's death. She had a habit of playing with her long and lustrous hair, sometimes drawing it to the front and letting it tumble over her bosom and then pushing it away. At one point the wind blew it across my face and I smelt a fruity fresh fragrance that drove me insane. That did it for me, I think. There and then I determined to possess her even though she was half my age and already in a relationship.

After that I ran into Sonya often sometimes by chance and sometimes by design but Prakash was always around. I began to wonder how I could steal her away from Prakash but thankfully the problem resolved itself. Prakash dumped her as was his habit and Sonya instinctively moved towards me. I told her I would like to marry her and she agreed almost immediately. That's how she became my second wife. In the beginning everyone looked at me with disgust. How could the respectable Dinshaw marry a woman half his age, was the question uppermost in their eyes. Slowly the gossip died down and Sonya and I began to settle down to our matrimonial life. My passion and generosity surprised her and her hunger for everything new and expensive amused me. Solitaires, silks and cigarettes consumed her. Recently she had developed a love for photography. She was unlike Meher in every way but that suited me better. A carbon copy of Meher would not have let me begin anew...Much to everyone's surprise, we stayed married for the next twenty years, I mean until now. What would happen to her now, I wondered. Of course I had provided well for her so there were no financial worries.

Vikram who was known to be fair in his decisions coaxed Neela to go for the funeral. Neela agreed very reluctantly; as soon as she ended the phone conversation with Vikram, she dialed the neighbourhood parlour and set up an earlier appointment for her hair. Even if that wasn't her

preferred parlour, it would have to do for today. Then she called the Goswamis to join her for cocktails at the club. Funerals were not her thing. If she had to go for this one she had to ensure she was doing something fun later in the evening. Usha and Purab Goswami were the perfect pair to hang out with after a sombre afternoon. Purab with his bagful of Sardar jokes and Usha who had the latest gossip about the high and the mighty of Mumbai, would help to lift her spirits. The only thing that Vikram disliked about the Goswamis was their reluctance to pick up the tab whenever they ate out. Neela really didn't think it mattered but for Vikram it was always the principle of the thing. Vikram, whom she loved with all her heart and soul, was more of a professor and less of a businessman in his thinking. As she chewed her breakfast daliya, she thought she should resume her half-finished painting. Spending the morning in her studio would help to relax her nerves. She got up and put on her favourite Ravi Shankar music as she immersed herself in her paints.

The liftman, Rakesh, didn't see what all the fuss was about. The old man who lived on the 19th floor had died. High time he did, thought Rakesh. He must be close to a 100 years old. People in the building kept him on his toes going to the apartment to pay their respects. That is expected of course. But he knew enough English to understand that they kept saying 'very sad'. What was so sad, he couldn't understand. When he had a brief respite he asked one of the security guards, Tiwari, why the residents looked so shocked. Tiwari himself looked quite woebegone. He explained that Dinshaw had been a long time resident of the apartment. Everyone knew him well. Tiwari further explained that Dinshaw had always been very generous to the staff. Rakesh had experienced Dinshaw's largesse; he always received gifts for Diwali and Holi from the old man. But was all the fuss because he had no heir, no one to light the funeral pyre? Tiwari shook his head and twirled his bushy moustache. He was a Parsi, he explained as one would to a half-witted child. The Parsis were not burnt or buried after death. Were they thrown into the sea, asked Rakesh. Tiwari gave him a 'watch your mouth' look and explained that Parsis were taken to the Tower of Silence to be consumed by vultures. Rakesh laughed and even punched Tiwari playfully in the belly for his great sense of humour. Tiwari wasn't at all amused. He told Rakesh that he wasn't joking; that was the system of disposal of the body followed by Parsis. Then he walked away as if to indicate he could no longer talk to this imbecile. Rakesh couldn't make much of it so he let it be. Before he could ask someone else, the foreigner who lived as a paying guest with the Varmas, returned home to take the lift up. 'How are you, Rakesh?' she asked as she always did with a big smile. 'How are you, Madam?' said Rakesh in return as he had been taught to. Of course, he didn't understand the point of asking that each time she took the lift. It's not as though he was ill or something. Her response would be wasted on him as he couldn't make head or tail of it. But he had learnt to smile and nod vigorously which he did this time as well. When the lift reached the 6th floor, it was Delna again making yet another trip to the old man's apartment. She instructed Rakesh that the hearse would be here anytime now and he should not stop for any other resident but come directly to the 19th floor. Then she turned to Maria to inform her about Dinshaw's death. Rakesh was stunned to hear the exchange between the two ladies. Maria Madam kept saying 'sorry' and Delna Madam shed a few tears. They hugged each other before Maria Madam got off on the 15th floor.

As soon as Maria reached her apartment, she informed Mrs. Varma gaily that she would be going for the funeral. Mrs. Varma didn't even know about Dinshaw's death. However Mrs. Varma's mobility was restricted due to her hip fracture, so she would not be able to join her. But that didn't dampen Maria's spirits one bit. As a travel writer, she was always looking for something unusual to write about. What could be more unusual than a Parsi funeral? She was full of

questions for Mrs. Varma. Should she wear black, she asked. Would dinner be held at Dinshaw's home after the ceremony? Would it be appropriate to take pictures? Mrs. Varma replied in the negative to all her questions and suggested that she should wear something white. As a matter of fact she did have a white sun dress, so white it would be. She wondered if the white floppy hat would be appropriate too. Maria blew a kiss to Mrs. Varma, made herself a cup of tea and proceeded to her room to google for information on Parsi rituals. She believed in doing her research thoroughly. So when she was there witnessing everything happening in front of her, she needn't offend anyone's sensibilities. And most importantly she would be able to grasp the significance of the ceremony. To her horror she realized that only Parsis would be able to participate in the actual ceremony. She would have to remain on the sidelines. Well, to each his own, she thought.

The Kejriwal household was shaken up with the news of Dinshaw's death. They lived directly below Dinshaw and Sonia's apartment. Manoj and Kanta were arguing about attending the funeral. The Maharani of Jaipur was holding an exclusive 'by invitation only' event showcasing jadau jewellery at 4 o'clock today. How could Kanta give that up for Dinshawji's funeral? Manoj had to catch a flight to Bhubaneswar so it was out of the question for him. Manoj had tried his best to convince her to go but she thought there was no need as she had already been to the apartment. She had even offered to send all their meals for the four days of mourning. But Delna refused saying the Parsis did not have any custom where they had to close the kitchen for the mourning period. When she went into the kitchen to check if her mixed vegetable pickle was ready to be served, she had a change of heart. It was Sonu whose reasoning was responsible for the decision to miss the jadau show. Sonu, her house help was busy frying bhindi with one eye on whatever was going on in the house. He explained to her why she had better go. The Parsis had a strange system of disposal where the birds would feast on the body. During this period Dinshawji's ghost would be lurking around and could harm anyone who did not pay their last respects. No, she said at first, I don't believe these things. But already she was beginning to feel uneasy. What about the bhootni, continued Sonu. The bhootni who was married to Dinshawji might do some black magic. Will you be able to counter that, he asked, waving the spatula at her. Why risk it, she thought. She already had an unmarried 28 year old daughter who gave her sleepless nights. No need to invite more bad luck. But why should she give Sonu the satisfaction of knowing that he was right? She just said, you will always be on bhaiyya's side; no one in this house understands me, and stormed out of the kitchen.

At last my so called final journey was happening! It was only my body that made its way to the hearse, of course. But I hovered around as I was worried about my Sonya. She sat stiffly and looked away from my body at nothing in particular. Delna kept the conversation going which was largely one-sided as my poor darling refused to say anything other than nodding or the occasional 'yes'.

Delna was cross with the driver for being late. It was already 12 noon she said. Why couldn't he have come earlier, she wanted to know. The sooner they reached Doongerwadi, the sooner the pre-funeral prayers could begin. The driver justified his late coming by saying that they had only two hearses available. One had to go to Bandra while he had to fetch another dead body from Byculla before this trip. His explanation kind of mollified Delna – like every Parsi she knew that more people were dying than being born. Delna did feel sorry for this state of affairs of her beloved community that she was justly proud of. She had done her bit by giving birth to two boys who had each gone on to produce two more children. The thought of her grandchildren made her ache for them – if only she could travel to Canada to see them! But she couldn't leave

her father in law alone. Before Manek succumbed to his last and final heart attack, that's the only promise he had extracted from her: look after Papa. And that's what she had been doing valiantly these last five years. Delna kept herself busy – she volunteered at the Parsi General Hospital besides her work with the Rotary Club. Her evenings were also planned to a T. Once a week, dinner at the club with Papa. Sometimes Dinshaw and Sonya joined them and sometimes Manek's cousins. Other evenings were spent walking in the Priyadarshini park or attending social events.

This was the only journey where I didn't feel the bumps of Mumbai roads! While Delna and Sonya kept swaying and rocking as the driver braked violently, I could see it all without feeling the motion. As soon as we reached the Tower of Silence, I saw Kersi getting off the cab with Aloomai, his nosy neighbour. He looked even more miserable than he normally did. I doubt he felt sad about my going, we were never that close. With my newly discovered free floating status, I thought I should roam over the vast grounds of the Tower of Silence rather than being confined to the bungli where all the rituals would happen.

The moment she saw him she felt the same sort of repulsion that she always felt at his presence! Kersi started giving Delna a long and convoluted explanation about the priests who would officiate at the funeral, the sandalwood that he had brought and the wads of small notes that he had brought to give out as tips even though Delna did not ask for them. As he spoke he kept shifting from one foot to the other and grunted after a couple of sentences. Why do I have to suffer the company of this fool, thought Delna. She thanked him for all that he had done and busied herself with more pressing matters after instructing Sonya to sit in the enclosure for non Parsis. She told Kersi to hang around with Sonya until Ganpat and others would arrive. She hoped Neela would come early so that Delna would have some company. She knew well that Neela didn't exactly care for Sonya but at such times even the worst of enemies did come together.

Finally everything was set and the funeral commenced. The bungli was filled with important Parsis, even a couple of trustees of the Parsi Punchayet and the enclosure outside was overflowing with non Parsis. Delna was happy that she could do this for her beloved Meher. If not for her, who would have handled this delicate task? Certainly not the nincompoop Kersi who sat fidgeting even during the prayer. What's wrong with him, she thought. Just as the dasturji's sonorous voice filled the bungli, Kersi felt it coming. The whole long day he had suffered and the urge to empty his bowels had to come now? He was sweating profusely and kept mopping his face as he shifted the weight from one leg to another. He was upset with Delna – she had done all the important stuff and used him as a mere errand boy. Then why had she raised his hopes that he would be in charge of today's funeral?

I didn't see the need to be inside the bungli. It was a 'been there done that' feeling as I recalled my stoic silence at the time of Meher's death. I wanted to weep like a child but being aware of my position in society, I had to maintain a dignified exterior.

I did see the need to be with my darling. She was overwhelmed by the sea of people which kept growing. I felt grateful to all those who had come to bid me adieu. So many who had decided to spend the afternoon in honour of me.

Neela patted her hair approvingly as she was happy with the salon's efforts. She was also pleased that she was the most attractive woman present today. The grey silk blouse and the white pants looked just perfect for this occasion. For once Sonya didn't look good at all. She was in a mauve chikankari tunic with matching leggings. The hair was piled on top of her head and she was in her bathroom slippers. What an act she was putting on, thought Neela. The sunglasses hid her

eyes, so no one could see what she felt. Yes, the Kejriwals were close to Dinshaw but why was Kanta sobbing so hard? Only Kanta knew the answer to that – she was sobbing partly out of fear and partly because she had to miss the jewellery show. Maria did draw some curious glances but still it was advantage Neela, she thought as she fingered her pearls. She was getting fed up of Maria's questions too. Why did she come and sit next to her? She didn't let it spoil her mood as she thought of the evening with the Goswamis that would follow...

As soon as Kersi returned from depositing Dinshaw at his final resting place, he ignored Delna's frantic gestures and rushed into the bathroom. Relief, at last! Just like him to disappear when he's most required, thought Delna. While I have to be with Sonya and receive the condolences, Kersi should have been here to make the necessary payments so that they could wind up quickly but the useless fellow was nowhere to be seen! As people queued up, she patted Sonya on her back and murmured thanks to all.

Suddenly I felt a wrench and could hardly see what's going on around me. I felt as though I was being propelled by an invisible force. The Parsi prayers are truly potent, I thought. Already my link with the living world is coming to an end. The fourth day's prayers would ensure complete withdrawal from this world.

Delna felt a great sense of satisfaction as she got up to leave. Her mother had taught her that nothing's better than helping people in times of difficulty. And she had done just that! Yes, she was tired after four days of rituals but she felt so pure and holy. She wondered how Sonya would cope with life after Dinshawji. So far she hadn't done well at all. After the funeral she had fainted! They had to call Dr. Deshpande and give her a mild sedative. Delna had been by her side at all times except when she had to attend the prayers. She didn't seem to have a faith so it would be harder for her to reconcile with this loss.

Sonya hugged Delna and thanked her profusely as she saw her to the door. After four days of a dazed existence, Sonya felt the overwhelming emptiness. She sat on the balcony staring out at the Arabian Sea. And soon the tears came, slowly at first and then in torrents. She sobbed, she wailed, she moaned till she collapsed with exhaustion. When Ganpat called her for dinner, she refused.

She continued sitting there. She knew what people thought of her – a fortune digger who had bewitched Dinshawji. Perhaps they were right. In the beginning she was attracted to him because of the luxurious life he had to offer her. But that was before she got to know him and learn about life from him. She had stayed married to him because she had truly fallen in love with him. He was a good man, unlike any other that she had known in her life.

And now that he was gone, she had no plans to continue living here. She had decided – she would sell everything and give nearly all to charity, perhaps a little to Kersi and keep just enough for herself. She would go and live in Himachal Pradesh and use her skills as a photographer to shoot the endangered hangul, the red stag that was endemic to Himachal and Jammu and Kashmir. In her efforts to save this animal, she would perhaps find meaning and purpose for her life. With something between a smile and a sigh, she got up and shut the French windows. Her feet moved resolutely towards her room. When her eyes fell on their wedding photo, the tears returned in full force. As she wiped them away, she thanked Dinshaw for the best twenty years of her life. RIP, Dinshawji!