

CRIMSON AND CADMIUM

Valakya vividly remembered a dream that he had the night of his twenty-fifth birthday.

The ebony casket he carved is on display. From afar, Valakya watches as Mahadevi, the Great Goddess, appraises, admires, scrutinizes. Valakya moves a few steps closer. In the cusp of her hands, she holds a blue sphere the size of a peach. He notices a white crane painted on its surface. She extends her arms toward the sky. It starts to rain. First a pitter-patter, then it pours. The crane slowly spreads its wings and soars upward. The rainwater makes the blue of the sphere run. Underneath, the blue shimmering glass ball reflects rainbow colors. In the distance, a gong thunders.

Valakya looks down and sees his feet turn blue. The earth splits, he on the one side and Mahadevi on the other. Amazed, he watches as an ivory cradle materializes from the depth of the earth. It is a smaller version of the ebony casket. Lying comfortably in it is a newborn. Valakya feels his heart pulsate in unison with the babe in the cradle. From nowhere, crimson and cadmium butterflies appear and then disappear into the ebony casket.

That dream had startled him awake. Straight backed and cross-legged, he had sat on his wooden bed and tied his long, thick braids behind his head. He breathed deeply and focused on his belly, rising and falling, rising and falling. He breathed until the inhalations and exhalations calmed him down. For a moment he had felt an inner peace.

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Now in his seventies, Valakya had found solace in the thought that the way one lives is the way one dies. It had taken him many decades to understand that, in that

dream of long ago, he was graced with an understanding of the rapture of being alive and the cycles of birth and death.

He lived at the edge of the town in a mud hut roofed with cornhusk. People knew him simply as the “sage.” Each morning, he strolled to his workplace on an unpaved path flanked with mango trees. Sounds of a waterfall and the rustling of leaves, sap green on one side and copper on the other, greeted him as he entered a clearing sheltered by woven palm leaves supported on four banana trunks. Here, he had arranged his workbench, a storage trunk, and an earthenware vessel with a few cups on the floor. Two wooden stools flanked the trunk.

A piece of mahogany awaited the sage on this summer morning. He closed his eyes, praying to *Mahadevi*, the source of vigor and vitality. He thanked her for his intuitive abilities and prayed for her guidance for making the image that he had yet to begin. An impression of a figure emerged. He cut, carved, and shaped. His hands and arms, still strong and one with his mind and heart, worked until the sun was at its zenith. He was thirsty. He drank cool water from the earthenware vessel and returned to his work. As he examined what he had done so far, from the corner of his eye, he sensed someone standing nearby. He turned his head and saw Shankara standing several feet away, waiting for his attention.

“Ah, dear Shankara, what a surprise to see you here! Have you been waiting long?” Valakya placed his chisel and hammer to the side of the roughly shaped mahogany piece. The visitor’s crisp cotton *kurta* was stained with sweat at the armpits.

“No, sir, not long.” Shankara wiped sweat from his forehead and stood with his hands folded. “If you could please spare a few moments, I would like to talk to you about something.”

Valakya poured water for his guest and pointed to the stool. "Come, sit here. Tell me, what's on your mind?"

"I don't know if you are aware that I'm very sick." Shankara walked closer and sat down.

Valakya put the cup of water in front of his guest before sitting down. Shankara drank the water at once and thanked him. The sage's face dissolved into the sweetest, most loving smile. "Yes, I know, son," he said, his heart filled with compassion. "I was sad when I heard."

"Sir, I have started to make preparations for my final farewell."

"That is a wise thing to do, but have you consulted with the medicine man yet?"

"Yes, I have."

"What does he say?"

"He is not sure, one year or five. 'Only God knows' he says."

"May your body remain free of pain!" Valakya tenderly patted Shankara's head.

The gesture of blessing emboldened Shankara.

"Sir, I have come to ask you for something."

"What is that?"

"I wish to be cremated in a casket."

"Why do you want to be cremated in a casket rather than wrapped in a plain white cotton shroud?"

"I want to leave with pomp and show." Shankara grinned sheepishly. "Would you carve a casket for me?" He looked expectantly at the old sculptor.

Valakya closed his eyes. An image of the ebony casket that he had dreamed of years ago flashed in his mind.

When he opened his eyes, Shankara repeated, "Would you?"

"Yes, son, I will carve a casket for you."

Shankara's perfect row of teeth gleamed against his dark complexion. "Thank you, venerable sir! And there is something else I want to tell you."

"What?"

"I have also asked Bhushan to build me a casket. You know how famous he is and how fond the townspeople are of him. I want to get two caskets made so that I can choose one." He waited for Valakya to object, but the sage did not.

"Would you still make one for me?" Shankara asked anxiously.

"What has my carving a casket for you to do with whether Bhushan makes one or not? Besides, I admire your honesty."

Valakya had not seen Bhushan's work in years. He mused over his own work, comparing his new carvings with the old ones, considering how his style had changed and ripened, and how his work, in turn, had shaped him.

Shankara took a long breath and reverently looked up at the sage. He saw his own reflection in Valakya's tender eyes. His heart seemed to open up.

"I'm afraid, sir, I am very afraid."

"What of?"

"Of dying." His eyes welled.

"You are human, Shankara. Fear of dying is human, more so in your case."

"Why? Because I am sick?"

"No, because you are young. Most humans are afraid to die, afraid of becoming nothing, afraid of the unknown. But an old person who has been awake in life is better prepared to die than a young person is."

“Are you not afraid to die?”

“I don’t know how I will feel when my time comes. Until then, I try to hone the practice of dying through the little deaths so that I am graceful and openhearted in the face of my own—the Big Death.” Valakya put his arm around Shankara’s shoulders and gently rubbed his back.

“Little deaths?”

“Yes, the little deaths, children leaving home, separating from people and places we love . . . letting go of unfulfilled desires . . . and the hardest of them all, the death of a loved one . . . all of these are transitions. Transitions are the little deaths, and we must learn to befriend them. They are the stepping stones; they are our teachers.”

“Teaching us what?”

“That nothing remains the same. Change, loss, transitions are little deaths between our coming into and leaving this world. We must learn to let go, Shankara. Everything is in flux, including our physical selves. The only thing eternal is the spark of wisdom and love in the depths of our being.”

“Why don’t I feel it?” Shankara said.

“Most people don’t. We arrive empty-handed and leave barefooted. As we grow, we get so busy searching without that we forget to look within.”

Shankara was listening carefully. He gazed at his feet, mulling over what the sage had said.

After a few minutes of silence, Shankara turned to Valakya and said, “Venerable sage, I don’t have time to experience little deaths and nurture the glow in my heart. What should I do?”

For a while, Valakya let the silence surround them. He took in a long breath,

exhaled, and felt at ease. His repose also relaxed Shankara.

Valakya said, “Shankara, I know you do not have much time. But I strongly suggest you set some time aside for meditation. Constantly focus on a sacred name, an image or on the power within as you breathe in and breathe out. If you learn breathing control, that will alleviate your fears.”

“I will do anything you suggest to help reduce my anxiety.”

“Find time to sit still in silence every day, preferably first thing in the morning. Do you think you can do that?”

“I will do everything you tell me to do.”

“Listen! For at least twenty minutes, sit in solitude and focus on your breath, watch your belly expand as you inhale and subside as you exhale. In time, you will learn to go within. It will be some time before you feel a difference, son. Have patience. Pay heed. Listen to what it has to say, and you will begin to understand that fear and courage, good and bad, happiness and sadness originate from the same space. When that happens, your own death will not feel as fearful as it feels to you right now. You will feel safe in this space. May you rest in the comfort of that safety!”

“I will follow your instructions. I will take time out daily to sit in silence.”

“Promise?”

“Yes, I promise, venerable sir!” Shankara thanked the teacher with folded palms and bent head. Then they just sat for a time. Valakya watched the late afternoon sun sieving through the waving palms and the edges of the mango trees. The birds slept. The waterfall gurgled. The sleeve of his robe rustled in the wind. He seemed to have all the time in the world. Nowhere to go. Nothing to do.

“I hesitate to ask you . . . but may I?” Shankara broke the silence.

“Go ahead!”

“Have you experienced *moksha*, the inner bliss?”

Valakya had lived a contemplative life for years. Under the tutelage of masters, he had diligently practiced the discipline of meditation. He lived in the light of inner silence, the source of all existence.

With twinkle in his clear eyes he asked, “What do you think?”

“I believe you have,” Shankara said, head bowed and hands folded. “I must leave now. Thank you so much for being generous with your time.”

Valakya took out a miniature ivory crane from his storage trunk and handed it to Shankara. “Focus on this when you sit still in silence and solitude.”

Shankara placed the gift in his pocket, thanked the sage again, and Valakya blessed him. They bid farewell and the sage went back to his carving.

Bhushan, Valakya’s younger competitor, worked in a lavish atelier adjacent to his palatial manor. Townspeople brought their guests to visit the grounds around his workplace. Here, Bhushan displayed a few of his latest works, changing the exhibits frequently. People not only enjoyed his larger-than-life-size works but also liked him for his muscular physique and handsome face. He charmed them with his almond-shaped eyes and glossy black hair. Underneath his chin, and invisible to most, was a black mole, a blemish in Bhushan’s own mind. He scratched it frequently, making it worse as he constantly tried to prove to the world that he was more talented, more productive, and richer than Valakya.

Bhushan could not understand why the townspeople believed that the work of his senior contemporary embodied spirit. *Wasn’t his work spirited?* He hungered for the

repose and peace Valakya naturally exuded. The only way he could outdo Valakya was to try to make more art works than him.

When Shankara went to Bhushan's atelier and asked him to sculpt a casket for him, Bhushan was pleased.

"It will be my pleasure to carve a casket for you, Shankara," he said. "You are my friend and patron. Why wouldn't I?" He needed to know that he was the only one who Shankara had commissioned to carve the casket. He wanted to make sure that his patron had not asked Valakya as well. When Shankara said he had, Bhushan snapped,

"Why did you ask him?"

"It would not have been prudent of me to ignore him for a commission such as this. Besides, townspeople respect him, Bhushan."

"You know I will carve such a magnificent casket for you that it will glorify you after death—my work will keep your name alive. That's why I see no reason why you needed to ask Valakya."

Shankara cleared his throat. "I asked him, Bhushan . . . I asked him because he is wise and compassionate, and I respect the sage."

Shankara's unexpected answer quieted Bhushan.

As soon as Shankara left, ideas began to flood Bhushan's mind. Day in and day out, he sketched different kinds of caskets from different angles. The more he drew, the more he wanted to draw. He grew ravenous. Some nights, he could not sleep because his best ideas wanted to be expressed. One night, he ran a low fever. He got out of his bed, went to his studio, and frantically drew the creatures swarming in his head. The

following day, making sketches and then creating three-dimensional models in clay and wood made him feel better. Finally, he selected five designs that could be constructed into magnificent burial boxes. Choosing just one was hard for him to do.

Bhushan could not decide by himself. He summoned his craftsmen and explained his dilemma. “Why not make all five?” his chief craftsman suggested. “Who knows? Shankara might set a trend in the city that could develop into a lucrative business.” Bhushan was thrilled with the idea.

The construction began. Each burial box took the shape of a mythological animal: the cosmic guardian’s hunting dog, the ether god’s bull, the storm god’s horse, the wind god’s deer, and the fire god’s ram. The heavenly animals were to be made in the form of winged creatures, ready to soar toward the blue sky.

Bhushan ordered a variety of woods, ivory, marble, schist, gems, and gold and silver pieces. Based on his drawings, craftsmen began to construct, carve, and stud. Bhushan’s other patrons were restless. He had other commissions to attend to. He did, however, check in daily to supervise his best craftsmen working on the five caskets.

Valakya pondered, *what sort of earthly vessel would Shankara want to take his final journey? Which casket shape would comfort him, put his mind to rest? Sickness had made Shankara fearful. He had become tender to life. What would a person in such an emotional condition like to be cradled in? By whom?*

Valakya tried to imagine an appropriate design. He could no longer work on his mahogany piece. He kept that aside to work on it later and contemplated a befitting composition for Shankara’s casket. One day in meditation, an image of the cosmic egg emerged, golden in color, followed by the idea of a maternal womb. These were good

designs but not entirely satisfactory.

The sage remained focused, imagining, picturing, remembering from the storehouse of his memories. A form, suggesting *Mahadevi's* womb, emerged. It was a casket with curved corners, concave walls and concave lid. Valakya's decision was made. In his imagination, he let its lines refine, its shape define, and its form develop. He was to carve a casket in the form of *Mahadevi's* womb, a womb chamber.

He began carving the exterior with a beautiful piece of six-foot ebony until he could hear nothing but the sound of cutting and carving. One by one, his senses withdrew inward. His hands worked in unison with his heart-mind. As the womb casket began to emerge from the block of wood, his face was flushed and his ears pink.

Valakya worked for months on this one piece. As days dissolved into nights and nights reemerged as days, animals and vegetative motifs began to appear on the exterior. On the outer walls, lions and elephants were roaming a jungle—animal power. On the interior of the lid, visible only to the one lying in the casket, was a white crane, the bird that swims as efficiently as it flies, the celestial bird that links terrestrial and celestial realms.

While the two artists sculpted caskets in two distinct styles and materials, Shankara made an announcement to the townspeople. He said that he wanted to be cremated in a casket either carved by Bhushan or by Valakya as he had commissioned both to carve one for him. When the caskets were completed they would be displayed upon his residential grounds. They would be open to the public to judge and vote for their favorite. He said he wanted to be cremated in the casket of the people's choice. The cremation ceremony itself, however, would be a family affair. The announcement fanned

a wave of excitement through the town.

The sun shone brightly on the morning of the show and selection. Champak, mango, and pipal trees adorned the vast grounds surrounding Shankara's mansion. A mixed bouquet of bougainvillea vines, chrysanthemums, and roses lay on the breeze. Valakya wheeled his casket into the mansion's back lawn preferring it to the front. Two young men helped him place the womb chamber on the display platform.

Valakya strolled toward the freshly mowed and manicured front lawn. He was surprised to see not one but five ostentatious caskets by Bhushan already in place. Shimmering in the morning sun, painted in rainbow colors, their eyes and wings were studded with jewels and gold and silver pieces.

At around ten, the front gate opened. A river of red, yellow, blue, orange, purple, and white flooded in. Conversing, excited and sprightly, the men and women flowed toward the five different displays and surrounded the winged animals, their gazes lost in the blazing colors and structured intricacies. The longer the crowd looked at the winged animals, the louder and more excited they became.

"So many . . . Bhushan has made . . . one . . . two . . . five caskets!" a plump wife in a sari printed with sunflowers said to her lean husband in a white kurta-pajama.

"He needs only one! Is this the time to show off wealth?" the husband whispered. "Look at this red one; it looks like your bridal palanquin!"

"Yes, yes! And look at that one!" The wife pointed at another box and pulled her husband to the next display. They stood in front of the one the wife had pointed out.

"It's mustard yellow! Doesn't it resemble the lacquer cradle we got for our Munna?"

“Yes, it does!” the husband said and turned his head around as if searching for something.

“What are you looking for?”

“Something authentic. Where is Valakya’s casket?”

“Someone said his was at the back of the mansion.”

“Let’s go look at his—the one that expresses sage’s wisdom, not just opulence!” the husband exclaimed.

The couple followed a group of people walking to the back of the house. A crowd surrounded Valakya’s womb-coffin. The couple pushed through the people to take a look. People were whispering. With their lips closed the couple looked at the display. A lull had overcome the group. No one talked. But looked intently. Some looked somber, some others a bit disappointed.

“This one gives me the creeps!” the wife whispered in her husband’s ear. She said she wanted to leave. The couple turned back and walked away. Many more followed to return once again to enjoy Bhushan’s boxes in the front lawn.

Bhushan’s phantasmagoric burial boxes had mesmerized the crowd. The townspeople had walked around the exhibits for an hour and settled on the chairs that faced a makeshift stage. On the stage in a semicircle facing the crowd sat Shankara, his family, and close friends.

Shankara’s assistant got up and greeted the guests. Some people still standing hurried and sat on the remaining chairs. The assistant, on Shankara’s behalf, thanked the crowd for coming and repeated what they already knew: that their vote, although informal, was important to his boss. That their choice would be his choice. People cheered. It was pertinent that they let their choice heard. Then he said, “Okay, good

people, cheer if you liked Bhushan's caskets!" There was a thunderous applause.

Then, one by one, he asked the audience to cheer for Bhushan's five caskets so that he would know which one to pick. When he mentioned the ram, the fire god's casket, people could not stop clapping.

Once the applause subsided, the assistant cleared his throat and said, "Now it is time to applaud for Valakya's casket. Cheer if you liked his work." This time, the applause was feeble, hesitant. People exchanged glances. A few continued to cheer, hoping some more would join. But they hoped in vain.

Shankara's assistant announced the ram casket as the winner. Bhushan's team of workers shouted and jumped up and down. The masses stood up and clapped louder than before. The assistant sat down.

Bhushan stood and said, "Attention! Attention, please! I would like to heartily thank venerable Valakya for his creation and also for his personal guidance. Where is he?"

People shouted, "Valakya! Valakya!" Valakya was nowhere to be seen. He was seated on a rock nestled in a wooded area, watching the spectacle from a distance.

Between the cheering and applause, the assistant invited Bhushan to the stage. Bhushan walked up to the stage. People stopped shouting. Shankara bowed down to Bhushan in appreciation. Bhushan hugged his patron. Once again, people cheered.

Within a few months of that memorable day, Bhushan was inundated with work. People from his and neighboring towns not only commissioned caskets but also floats, chests, and display pieces. Money poured in.

Winter was about to set in. The next gala day of festivities was to be on New Year's Day. A wealthy patron from a neighboring town commissioned Bhushan to make

him a float using the same material he had used for Shankara's winning casket. He wanted Bhushan to construct the biggest New Year's float anyone had ever seen. Bhushan was no longer young, and the work was challenging. But it gladdened him to know that Valakya was not even asked.

Even though he had to temporarily move his studio to his patron's town, Bhushan accepted the commission. The work was elaborate and intricate. Bhushan worked nonstop. It took him and his team a month to complete the project. On the last day of work, Bhushan was standing on the highest platform examining the float and the land around it from a bird's-eye view when he fell to the ground and fractured his pelvic bone. He remained in bed under the care of the medicine man for several months until he recuperated and returned to creating sculptures.

A year after Bhushan's tragic accident, Shankara was cremated in the ram casket. At the time of his death he was in peace.

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Almost two decades passed. The lush green and copper leaves of the mango trees danced under the setting orange sun that shimmered on the cornhusk roof of Valakya's mud hut. The "sage-sculptor" had gained people's reverence, but he could no longer hear the waterfall or the birds chirp or the leaves rustle.

Valakya bent his head and stepped out the door. His silver braids and the collar of his long white robe flanked his bearded face. He walked out to fetch flowers for his daily offerings to *Mahadevi*. When he extended his long-sleeved arm to pluck blossoms from the jasmine tree, a few white butterflies fluttered. He gathered a bunch of flowers in a small bamboo basket and returned to his hut.

Once inside, he noticed that the white silk covering of the womb-casket he had

carved years ago had slipped to the floor. He placed the flower basket on a stool and tried to cover the casket with the covering now yellowed. Suddenly, he felt an urge to sit at its edge. With his wrinkled fingers he touched its textured surface, felt its chiseled grooves and crevices, and remembered the dream of decades ago that had inspired him to carve the casket at Shankara's request. The expression of his dream in ebony and ivory had eased the dread of his own death.

Valakya was physically tired, yet he felt an ecstasy within. A feeling of joy infused his whole being so much so that he had to sit still. He had a glimpse of himself prostrate in the casket, the crane waiting, welcoming, wooing. Slowly, he opened the lid and stepped into it. He laid down and made himself comfortable. He closed the lid on himself and crossed the arms against his chest. The celestial bird gently unfolded his wings and rose toward paradise. Valakya's eyes were closed as it soared beyond the blue sky.

The townspeople, including Bhushan and his wife, came in the evening to pay their daily respects with fruit and flowers. But the hut was empty. They searched for the sage in the hut, around the hut, and in the grove, but he was nowhere to be found.

Bhushan returned to the hut. He noticed the yellowed covering of the womb casket lying on the floor. He picked it up, and as he was about to spread it back over the casket, a pull at his heart nudged him to open it. At first, he hesitated. But he paid heed to the nudge and slightly opened the lid. From the narrow opening crimson and cadmium butterflies fluttered out and flew through the windows and the door toward the spacious blue sky. When he opened the entire lid he found the chest empty.