

Grumpy Old Men by *Lolita Chakrabarti*

Archie Price and Ranju Talukdar hated each other. Their wives had been best friends for years, so the husbands were committed to spending hours of agonising irritation in each other's company. Salt was rubbed vigorously into that wound when both wives joyously announced joint holidays and now Archie and Ranju were forced into simmering compromise as they travelled Europe together every summer. This year they were going to Greece and as usual Archie, a tall, dark Antigua, complained to Bea, his short patient wife.

'Why do we have to go to Greece with THEM. Why can't we got on our own?'
'Because,' Bea said calmly, 'Reema is such a laugh. You don't begrudge me a good laugh do you?' She stroked his face and he found it difficult to stay cross.
'Besides,' said Bea, 'Reema and I have decided to break this grumpy old men act once and for all.'
'It's not an act. Ranju is boring and opinionated. He's insufferable I tell you.' He paused and considered a moment. 'What do you mean you're going to break this act?' He looked at Bea who was beaming, he didn't trust her when she looked so happy. 'You'll find out,' she said, 'all in good time'.

They all met up at the airport. Bea and Reema, both women in their sixties, squealed like school girls. How could either husband ever deny them such pleasure? Ranju looked extremely tight-lipped as he nodded at Archie. Archie mumbled something – a greeting, profanity, who knew? Reema insisted on sitting with Bea at the front of the plane, which left Archie and Ranju together at the back.

'Why can't I sit with you, is that too much to ask?' Ranju whispered to Reema.
'Darling,' coaxed Reema, 'I have had the pleasure of sitting next to you for forty years now. I think it is time to share my good fortune with others, don't you?' She pinched his cheek and before he could reply she and Reema walked off arm in arm towards duty free. Archie sat next to Ranju on the plane in silence.

Samos was a beautiful island. The Mediterranean glittered aquamarine and the sun shone sharply on the squat white buildings. There was a small fishing port a short walk from their villa and restaurants lined the marina. It was idyllic. Even Archie looked impressed. The couples separated in order to unpack. Ranju took this opportunity to talk to his wife.

'Bea looks well,' he said as Reema hung up their clothes.
'Doesn't she? I think she looks younger, now how is that possible?'
'Archie's put on weight though,' muttered Ranju.
'D'you think so?' asked Reema knowing where this was heading.
'So rude he is. You'd think in banking you'd need manners.'
'My darling husband,' sighed Reema, 'you know I am a devoted Hindu don't you?'
'Of course,' said Ranju a little confused.
'Then do not judge me if I look to the Bible for a little inspiration. Do not be pointing out the splinter in Archie's eyes without seeing the log cabin in your own!' Reema paused for effect and then laughed, 'Log cabin! Funny eh?' Ranju said nothing.

That night at dinner, Bea and Reema divulged their plan. 'Reema and I have known each other for almost forty years,' said Bea. 'We love each other and we love you but...you are driving us both mad. So we have come up with a plan...'

The two men nodded, nervous of what was to come.
'Tomorrow we are going on a little island hopping trip,' said Bea decisively.
'So?' asked Archie relieved, 'we always go on excursions.'
'No,' said Reema grinning, 'I don't think you follow us. Bea and I are going away for a few days together and you and Ranju are going to get on....alone.'
Ranju's face froze and Archie's frown became deeper. Bea laughed and Reema continued, 'if you don't get on better then we have Plan B all ready. This will go on for as long as it takes. Because we can't stand it anymore, you're driving us crazy.'
Both Archie and Ranju tried to persuade the women to reconsider but they were decided and next morning, with a kiss and a wave they were gone.

As soon as they were alone, both men were tempted to breathe a sigh of relief and make the best of their solitude. But Archie had concerns to discuss with Ranju.
'If we don't do something they mentioned Plan B and this could go on forever!'
Ranju nodded gravely.
'We both know friendship is impossible but why don't we have a go at faking it. Pretending. What d'you think?'
Ranju considered long and hard and at last nodded his head. 'I think you're right. We need to make a token adjustment and they'll forget Plan B.'
They shook hands on it and made plans.

They decided to spend buddy time together, something they could tell their wives about, so that very afternoon they went to an ancient amphitheatre. The ruins were magnificent and they walked until they were exhausted. The ground was uneven in places, Ranju was tired and irritable. 'I should have worn my pumps,' he grumbled.
'Well that's not my fault,' returned Archie.
'I didn't say it was your fault,' jabbed Ranju.
But Archie didn't reply because he wasn't looking where he was going and his ankle twisted in an unexpected dip in the ground. Archie, being a big man, fell hard.
'Aarrgh', he cried as he rolled over in pain.
'Are you okay?' asked Ranju.
'Of course I'm bloody not,' spat Archie.
'Don't be so rude!' said Ranju indignant. 'I was being polite....'
'For god's sake,' shouted Archie, 'I'm hurt.'

Ranju saw that Archie's leg was awkwardly twisted. He looked around for help but realised that there was no one else around. The afternoon sun was baking hot and the ground where Archie lay was exposed and dry. 'I'll go and get help', said Ranju.
'No, if you help me back to the villa,' pleaded Archie, 'I just need to rest. I've done this before. It's a weak spot. I broke it in a motorbike accident years ago.'
Ranju looked startled and a little impressed, 'You had a motorbike?'
'Yes, I had to give it up when we had the kids.'
'I always wanted one but Reema wouldn't let me. Was it fun?' asked Ranju more animated than Archie had ever seen him.
'When you're on the open road and the wind hits your face and it's just you and the bike, it's like nothing else,' said Archie.
Ranju looked envious.
'Do you think you'd be willing to help me?' asked Archie seriously doubting if Ranju would be willing to help him at all.
'Would you have helped me if the boot was on the other foot?' asked Ranju.

Archie couldn't say he would have. The sun was getting hotter and Archie began to feel short of breath.

'What's wrong?' asked Ranju, 'why are you looking so strange?'

'I'm f...f...fine,' slurred Archie and then everything went black.

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When Archie opened his eyes, everything was white, the walls, the furniture, the bed in which he lay, the sheets. I've died and gone to Heaven he thought but then he saw Ranju sitting hunched in the corner asleep in the chair. A nurse entered and was pleased to find Archie awake.

'So you've arrived entirely,' she said with a wry smile.

'What...?' muttered Archie.

'You broke your leg and passed out. Your friend here walked a long way to get help. He came in with you yesterday. I told him to go home but he wouldn't budge.' She stuck a thermometer in his mouth and walked out.

Archie looked at the crumpled Ranju still in the same clothes and obviously uncomfortable in the straight backed chair. 'How bizarre,' he thought, 'I have spent so long hating this man and I don't really know why.' Just then Ranju woke up, saw Archie and grinned. 'You scared me there my friend,' said Ranju, 'thought you were going to extraordinary lengths to avoid Plan B.'

'Thank you,' said Archie sincerely.

Ranju shrugged it off with an impish grin. 'D'you think those women will finally leave us alone?' he asked cheekily.

Archie burst out laughing at the thought of Bea and Reema returning to find them both in hospital. Ranju giggled and Archie said, 'I think Plan A worked beautifully.'