

When You Write Your Own Obituary

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With the recent passing on of the much-loved and admired Bollywood actors of repute, Irrfan Khan and Rishi Kapoor, there has been much talk of “untimely death”, how unfair it is to be snatched away unexpectedly, and so on. True, but no one knows when the Grim Reaper comes knocking at one’s door. A letter that Irrfan wrote in 2018 addressing his illness and state of mind has been doing the rounds and is being described as an obituary he wrote for himself whereas he was simply expressing his feelings, at a certain point in his life when things seemed to have turned upside down all of a sudden. A quirk of fate, as some may put it. And the letter has touched our hearts, and moistened our eyes.

But yes, a famous Indian writer-editor did write his own obituary,

for a lark, when he was in the prime of his youth. That was Khushwant Singh, who, till the end, was vigorously engaged with the subject of death. He wrote an obituary for himself when he was still a young man and included the following epitaph:

*“Here lies one who spared
neither man nor God*

*Waste not your tears on
him, he was a sod*

*Writing nasty things he
regarded as great fun*

*Thank the Lord he is
dead, this son of a gun.”*

In his later years, Singh wrote a book titled *Death At My Doorstep* – he was into his 90s and every day, almost, he would say, was lived out in suspense. Would the end come today? Tomorrow? But his interest in the topic was more philosophical than morbid, even a quest to get to the bottom of the

mystery, if possible; he suggested he could be “buried at sea” as an eco-friendly alternative.

So what is it about death that its very mention makes some furious, feel humiliated, even angry and offended, while a few others turn philosophical,

accepting, even poetic? A close relative, a young girl, recently posted a question with great enthusiasm, on a family-and-friends WhatsApp group, inviting all to write in their obituary. The outcome? A deathly silence.

Writing your own obituary could be viewed as an act of vanity, or as an exercise in self-evaluation, or as one that seeks to imagine how one might be perceived. Or simply, it might just be something that one would like written about oneself, post death.

Personally, I find epitaphs far more

entertaining, thought-provoking and in some cases, quite very hilarious. When Mel Blanc, who did voice-overs for cartoon characters like Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck and Porky Pig died, his family carried out his wish expressed in his will that his gravestone should carry the words, “That’s All, Folks!” This was how episodes of Porky Pig would sign off at the end, and that’s all Mel wanted his gravestone to say. And it cannot but bring a smile to one’s face.

Coming back to Singh, he was a self-professed atheist. He didn’t believe in reincarnation and the afterlife; at other times, he would say he was agnostic, and his only religion, if he had one, was ahimsa, non-violence. He would have loved the following epitaph in a Thurmont, Maryland, cemetery:

Here lies an Atheist

All dressed up

And no place to go.

