

## Cold Fire

Nabarun Bhattacharya

I'll come and give you a brochure and other literatures too. But if you watch this videocassette for ten minutes, things will become absolutely clear to you. I really like this model of the Akai VCR you have here. This is the one we usually use in our office as well. Coffee will do for me...had to be awake for most of the night...in the village burning ghat, with the help of NGOs, there is a new arrangement being made for elevated chullis<sup>1</sup>...the body will be placed on a platform with the logs and stuff, like on a stretcher, over the metallic chulli...ashes at the bottom and bones on top. All of that is collected in due course. I have seen it near Labhpur<sup>2</sup>, where Tarashankar lives. They offer training courses on this in Gujarat<sup>3</sup>. This concept works quite well in the villages. Let me switch on the VCR now.

There's a soft fall of snowflakes to begin with. Then the name appears—"Cold Fire...you have waited for this so long. You had to wait eighty-four years for the fall of communism. And now you get Cold Fire only in six years. The classy softness and the miraculous company of Cold Fire live up to you and others who are truly special like you."

K.C. Sircar, the owner of three tea gardens, watched the work of Cold Fire on his VCR. Clad in dhoti and kurta<sup>4</sup>, with chandan dots on forehead, the body was placed on the box which looked like a coffin. The lids opened and the body went in. The lids closed and the digital lights came on. The caption said: "After ten minutes." The red lights went off and the blue ones came on. Two small doors opened towards the fag end of the box and two shining bowls came out. One had a label: "Ashes" and the other: "Navel." The lids opened soon after and it was all magically empty; spick and span inside, like it had been, before the body had entered.

Mr. Nagarwala had told Mr. Sircar in the club yesterday evening.

—K.C, I will send a boy to you tomorrow morning. Fascinating! I have already booked my machine. Even the name is spot on—Cold Fire!

—I once had a Czechoslovakian brand of Vodka. It was back in the good old communist era—now the Czechs and Slovaks belong to two different countries—it was called 'Liquid Fire.' Is this some new hard liquor?

—No sir, this is the finale of all liquor—the final flicker.

—Right! Let me see then. Send him along.

—I'll have a glass of cold beer. You want one?

—Beer after sundown?

The boy is very bright. His spotlessly well shaven cheeks always have a dimple in the right place.

—How did this unique project come to your mind all of a sudden? I mean what prompted you?

The boy started to mix a spoon full of sugar into his coffee.

—I am explaining to you sir. In this post-communist world, the differences between the higher and the lower strata have assumed a logically absurd dimension. In the various spheres of life—be it education, childbirth or transport—everything is completely different. If a rich senior citizen like you wants to travel to the seaside, he will go for Maldives or Seychelles and not Digha or Puri<sup>5</sup>. If you have an eye problem, you will prefer Geneva. This larger-than-life, free and elevated life style of yours doesn't speak to your funeral. The same old dirty Keoratala, Nimtala, Kashi Mittir, Shiriti<sup>6</sup> —house of horrors. It's a complete mismatch, a travesty of death in fact. If there's a high life style, why not have some panache in death? Did you have to visit a burning ghat of late, sir?

— Not very recently. Last year when my in-law's brother...

— If you go now, you'll see things are even worse. We have to make official visits to burning ghats quite frequently. About five days back, what a horrible scene it was at Keoratala! Only three chullis were working. There's no one at the pyres but a group of anti-socials, high on ganja<sup>7</sup>. On the other hand, there were six bodies waiting on the top and another four below. And then as if all this wasn't bad enough, there were regular showers from time to time. Every corpse was accompanied by a group of lumpens. You can't even imagine what a nightmare it was.

— Sounds like hell!

— I haven't seen hell sir, but let me tell you, there's nothing more hellish than that. A drowned body started to decompose. One killed by Alpha bullets and one BSF soldier. All others from slums or from lower middle class background, old men and women, a middle-aged man who's a party worker perhaps; a group voicing typical communist slogans; and in the middle of all that, the purohit's mantras<sup>8</sup>, malsha<sup>9</sup>, flowers, paper containers and what not...in the distance the cot with its mattress and

quilts on fire. And a horde of street urchins wandering around for this and that. Dogs, drunkards, people screaming and crying, corpse-fluids, incense, enchantments...

— Ah! Mere description makes me feel like puking!

— That's how it is sir. It doesn't matter whether you book Cold Fire or not, I can't possibly imagine you in that hell! Sorry sir, I think I am getting a bit too emotional...

—No, no, you are alright. If all I do is exclusive stuff, why won't my funeral be exclusive too? This frail cloak of a body; it will burn once and for all. Let it burn well then. Moreover, this isn't just a gadget; it's a family asset, so to speak.

— Right sir. One can even buy Cold Fire for commercial reasons. The whole concept of cremation will change.

— Have you read *Gita*?

— Yes sir. We had to take a special training on Thanatology. For the theory of it, we had read *Gita* and the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Sir, may I ask you something?

— Yes. Go ahead.

— Do you believe in rebirth sir?

— Can't say that but looking at Cold Fire, it seems, 'redeath' will be better than rebirth.

— Your observation is profoundly philosophical, sir. Should I book a machine for you?

— Of course. Let me come back with the checkbook. I think I'll be able to refer you to at least another seven clients.

— Thank you sir. I am so grateful for that!

The very next day a big car came and delivered Cold Fire at Mr. Sircar's place. All his friends and relations came over to see how it worked. Appreciable indeed! The only bizarre thing was two of the oldest servants in the house, the old gardener and darwan<sup>10</sup> quitting their jobs.

The man who set the rare record of becoming the first consumer of Cold Fire in Kolkata was the gynecologist Chandramadhab or Chandu Chattujje<sup>10</sup>. The night before, he had thrown a huge party at Taj Bengal<sup>11</sup> to celebrate his granddaughter's first birthday. There were fountains of scotch everywhere. The very next day the shocked and bereaved friends saw how Cold Fire began its work at eleven in the morning and the blue lights flashed exactly at 11-10. The lower doors opened and the

two shining bowls came out. One had the ashes while the other, the navel. The whole process was captured on videotape.

Till date, two-thirty Cold Fires have been sold in Kolkata!

-----Translated by Arka Chattopadhyay

**Glossary:**

1. The Indian name for an electrically operated crematorium.
2. Town in the Birbhum district of India.
3. One of the states in India.
4. A typical Bengali and Indian dress.
5. Famous tourist spots for Bengali travellers.
6. Names of burning ghats in and around Kolkata, India.
7. The Indian name for Hashish.
8. The priest's enchanted words read out during a ritual
9. A container made of clay.
10. The doorkeeper
11. A native Bengali way of pronouncing and spelling the Anglicized brahminical surname 'Chatterjee'.
12. A posh hotel in Kolkata.