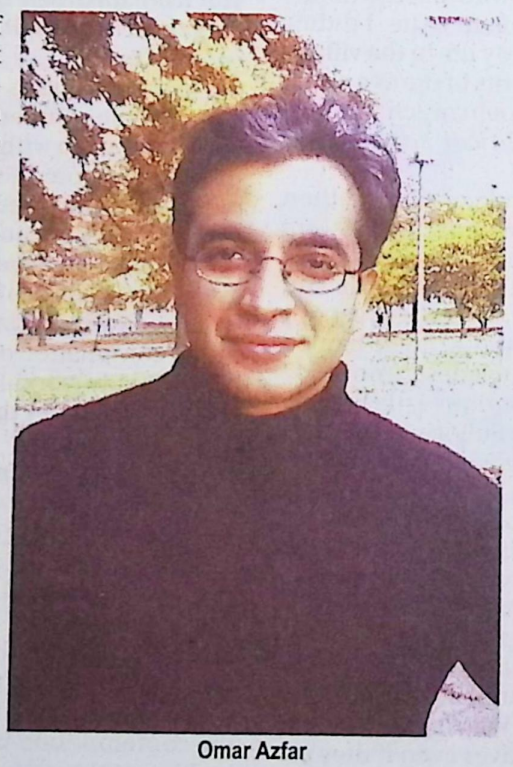
In Memory of Omar Azfar

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When despair and hopelessness seem to be the order of the day, when one fears that nothing good can ever happen again, then suddenly there is a story - a true story almost stranger than fiction-- where such sterling courage is displayed by ordinary men and women armed only with love, in the face of a foe no less than death, that one is again reassured that there is meaning and hope in life after all....

Amid the verdant expanse of Central Park in New York City, Omar Azfar, the brilliant and handsome young man from Pakistan proposed marriage to the equally brilliant and beautiful Bangladeshi woman, Mursaleena Islam (Mursi or Kakon as she's often called). This should have been one of the happiest moments of their lives; and it was. Except that, on that very day doctors had diagnosed Omar with a particularly virulent form of cancer. They were married for a year and eight months when Omar lost his final battle with his fatal illness.



Omar Azfar

Many people in Bangladesh may remember Omar's grandfather Muhammad Azfar, posted in the then- East Pakistan in the late 50's and early 60's as Chief Secretary and his father Kamaluddin Azfar, former Governor of the Province of Sind, Pakistan. Perhaps if Omar had been well, he would have come to Dhaka and during his visit he would have liked to trace his grandfather's footsteps in the old Secretariat building of Dhaka, and to visit St Gregory's School and Notre Dame College in old Dhaka, where Omar's father studied. But in life, where everything is uncertain and the only certainty is death, it is fate that has the final word.

Omar Azfar was my brother and I hardly knew him before he died. I wrote that line unthinkingly before I checked myself. Of course, in all honesty, Omar was my brother-in-law-my husband's sister's husband. But had I ever dreamt up a brother, I now like to think he might have been like Omar.

I met Omar all of four times, once when he was dating my sister-in-law in New York, next when he and his parents came to meet her and her family in London, next when we visited the happily married couple in New York, and finally that last time, less than a month before Omar died. It is incredible that such a brief connection can sear into your mind and leave you wishing for more time, for time to turn back, for time to stand still at one perfect moment -- perhaps Omar and Mursi's wedding.

Omar's biographical details, his lineage, education and career, are noteworthy and impressive, but I would rather dwell on the man himself and what he meant to the friends and family that were drawn to him. I've looked through his memorial book and am struck with the consistent portrait they draw of a man of intellect, wit and moral stature. They speak of a man with whom you could start with late night deeply felt political debate and end with heartfelt, sound advice on a personal dilemma shared in the early hours of dawn. And in between, laughter and song, as he was also mischievous, happy to make a fool of himself to entertain others and light hearted enough to share random trivia about modern day life. But above all, his closest friends and his wife Mursi speak of a man who was good, with purity of heart and mind, who was graceful and generous to the end.

My own memories of Omar are bound up in my love for Mursi and my daughter Pareesa. When Mursi first spoke to me about her feelings for this Pakistani man who was wooing her but had not yet proposed, I asked her: but does he love you? She paused and said quietly: yes. Finally, I thought, a man who knows and appreciates this "angel" as Omar would later call her. Clearly, this was a man of intelligence, good sense and good heart! I now