

SHORT STORY

Pain and hope

*Tonight I can write the saddest lines.
To think that I do not have her. To feel that I
have lost her.*
:
*My sight searches for her as though to go to her.
My heart looks for her, and she is not with me*
--- Pablo Neruda

ABDULLAH SHIBLI

ARUN is in mourning, but nobody who knows him or sees him every day, at work, at home, at the gym, on the subway, or the supermarket, will know or even have a clue what's going on inside his head. He is by nature a gregarious person and likes to joke, share funny anecdotes; another happy-go-lucky guy in the company of his friends, acquaintances, and sometimes even with strangers that he might have bumped into while he gets his morning coffee at Dunkin Donuts or on the Red Line on his way to work. Temperamentally he is a jolly fellow, even when he is burning inside or is in a funk, with a smile on his face even in his painful moments. And, that is true just as well now, when he is at the saddest point in his life.

His wife of 20 years passed away two weeks ago. Suzy was his soul mate and best friend for more than 25 years. There was hardly a day without their seeing or talking to each other since the day they first met—on the phone, Skype, or the chat room even when they were physically apart and particularly when he was in Bangladesh to see his parents. Suzy was his daily energy drink and even when she was away for work, she would Skype every night from the hotel. She used to joke about his habit of sitting next to her at parties, even though at Bangladeshi parties it was the practice for men and women to sit in segregated groups. As he now recalls these random events, he unknowingly lets out a sigh. He remembers that on the night their first child Vikram was born, she said in a coyish tone, “Now you have a rival, honey. He might need a little extra attention from me. Please don't get cross if you find yourself a little left out”. He looked at her, with a bit of faked amazement on his face, then shot back, “ Well, that's okay. At least, as long as I have your undivided attention at night, I don't mind!” he winked as he delivered his response. He now can clearly remember she was equally taken aback at his riposte, but then pointed with her face to the nurse who was standing nearby with the newborn.

Arun can't still believe that Suzy is no longer with him, gone forever. He now wishes that that he had spent a little more time every day with her, when they were having dinner or on weekends when they spent endless hours driving to social gatherings or community events. Suzy wasn't very fond of these “eat and chat” big gatherings that dotted their social calendar but went along for Arun's sake. She was more into backyard cookouts of family and close friends, often just for the four of them. Kanika, their daughter, enjoyed having homemade hotdogs and burgers grilled by Arun in the late afternoon sun. He wishes he got a little warning of her parting so that he could be a little better prepared, or had said all the things that were left unsaid, some that he always wanted to say, some that he now feels he should have said, words that come now from his pain and the love that now flows from the broken heart. He wishes he could tell her that he misses her, that he was the happiest when she was with him, and loved every moment they were with each other. How can you thank a person who gave you so much and took so little in return, he wonders? He says it anyway, sometime in his mind, sometimes silently as he walks from the car to the subway, sometimes as he lies down before he falls asleep: sometimes like a casual conversation, sometimes very heart-felt, others that one can say to someone who was his lover, his companion, so close to his heart, and his inspiration for more than 25 years. He wanted to thank Suzy for her love, her gentle touch, her patience with his moods, her kind and soft words in times of need, her tireless work to build up their relationship. She gave and held him from the first “hello” when he was a senior and she an incoming freshman at college, to the last day of her life when he wished him goodbye, and then added, with a little hesitation, “Drive carefully”.

He is taking the Red Line and it is busy this morning. He looks around and tries to read the mind of some of the fellow passengers. He wonders if some of them are carrying the same burden of loss as he is. He was thinking of finishing the book that he started a few weeks ago but he hasn't been able to pick it up again since Suzy's death. His mind keeps wandering off. As soon as he shuts his eyes for a second, he can see Suzy walking around the house, fixing a sandwich for his lunch, moving the furniture, or just adjusting the curtains. She liked to constantly rearrange the living room or decorate the music room where they spent endless hours gabbing, singing, or sometimes just in silence. But she was the happiest when she was with the four of them playing a board game or just talking away. They always had a riot with Jeopardy since

all four of them, including his two children felt strongly about trivia, and Arun boasted that general knowledge was his strong suit. She, on the other hand, was a college Geography Bee champion, but Vikram usually beat them on the TV's Jeopardy show. Kanika was a super genius with movie and literature questions, and consistently beat them in Trivial Pursuit.

He now wonders if Suzy knew she had a high predisposition for cerebral aneurysm. She had high blood pressure, he knew, and took Lisinopril to lower the pressure. But the stroke that felled her came out of the blue, and he doubts if Suzy could anticipate the blow. He knows she wouldn't have told him since she was very shy about these personal matters and wouldn't have wanted him to probe. Her father also died of a stroke but her mother is still healthy and active. Suzy was close to her father, a pediatrician, who instilled in her the love for family, the global view that she held, and the commitment to help others in need. After college she worked in the Peace Corps in India for one year.

Arun takes another look at the fellow passengers who are all glued to their cell phones, reading or texting away. He wants to take out his cell phone and send a text to Suzy, “Hi, on the train, missing you and wish 2 see U”. He smiles knowing how ridiculous the last wish was. Wish to see you? How ridiculous it sounds to him as he looks around. May be he can go home today and listen to an old camcorder recording of Suzy telling a joke. She knew that he liked jokes and would always find and share new ones, especially from the Internet. They always had big laughs together, even when they disagreed. And they did disagree quite a lot. Oh God, on food choices, music to play, or shops to visit. Suzy liked Thai food (a taste she picked up during her Peace Corps days) but he preferred Italian. She listened to the Beatles songs endlessly on the local Oldies radio station, he was more in tune with Rap



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and the Top Hits, a taste his son picked up. She was fond of movies from the forties and fifties, while he liked the new releases, particularly those with a good romantic story. But they both shared each others' likings. Together they found the best Italian Restaurant in the North End, and the most eclectic Pad Thai in China Town.

Once her mother was visiting them from Florida, where she moved after her father passed away, and they were having a big debate over what to have for dinner and decided to have a secret vote. There were three for Italian (his son likes Italian, and her mother probably since she is not into spicy food), and two for Thai (Kanika probably sided with her mother out of loyalty). But, they found out that all Italian places were closed and they ended up getting Thai food for all. Suzy made a rigatoni for him and her mother, who tried some Pad Thai to show her flexibility and team spirit.

As the train approaches downtown, Arun eases into random recollections from the past. When they first met he was giving a tour of campus to the incoming class and was working for the Admissions Office as a preceptor. Suzy was accepted but hadn't made up her mind about college and was visiting Union along with other colleges. Suzy was in his group and was asking a lot of questions about the International Programs, Study Abroad, International Relations Department, and he tried to answer them best, mostly to keep her interest alive in coming to Union. After the tour ended he took her aside and offered to arrange a meeting with the Professor in the International Relations Department he knew, hoping that it might sway her decision to come. He asked her which other colleges she was considering.

Suzy: Well, I have admission at Vassar, and but I like the campus here better. What's your story? How did you end up here?

Arun: Well, my parents wanted me to go to an Ivy

League School but I feel in love with the cozy environment and its Computer Science program when I came in for a campus visit.

Suzy: Well, I am not so good at computers, but I'd like to study Biology too. Can't decide whether to study medicine or just do research.

Arun: Well, 60% of our graduates are accepted to graduate school so you will have a good chance of getting into a good graduate program.

He then forgot about Suzy during summer, but he could not hide his surprise and delight when he saw her on Convocation Day in September. He followed her to the cafeteria, and pretended to bump into her in the checkout line:

Arun: Hey, aren't you the girl from my group last June? Suzy, I believe!

Suzy: I am glad you remembered my name. And, I am so bad with names I already forgot yours. Starts with an A, right? But, honestly how did you remember my name?

Arun: How could I not, Suzy?

And, soon they were chatting away like old friends. After sitting for lunch at the same table, they exchanged phone numbers and decided to stay in touch. Within a week they became friends, and she invited him during the Thanksgiving break to spend the weekend with her family. And, they had been inseparable since then. Arun found Suzy, who was only 18, very mature and very curious about his home country. But they also fought constantly too. He remembers they had a month of disagreement over choice of wedding ceremonies. She wanted a quiet and small wedding in the Caribbean, but he wanted a Bangladeshi wedding with all his family, friends, and cousins to attend. Eventually they had both!

Arun remembers the long conversations they used to have whenever he was reading a book, or she saw something interesting on Youtube. A few years ago, Suzy bought him a novel “Ines of My Soul” by Isabel Allende, for Christmas. Initially Arun wasn't too excited about reading a first-person account of a women's journey from 16th century Spain to South America with a group of conquistadors. But, after the first two hundred pages, he just could not wait to finish it and kept providing running commentaries to Suzy. One Saturday afternoon in January, in the fading light of the sun, he read a passage to Suzy, where Ines describes her relationship with Pedro de Valdivia, the soldier and conqueror, “We were lovers and friends. We often argued at the top of our lungs, because neither of us was calm by nature, but that did not drive us apart. ... We were alike: both of us strong, domineering, and ambitious. He wanted to found a kingdom, and I wanted to be part of that with him. What he felt, I felt; we shared the same illusions.” (p. 152) After he finished, they held each other in a loving embrace for what seemed like eternity.

Soon thereafter, Arun would often call out to Suzy, “Suzy del alma mía”, Suzy of my soul.

Arun gets off at Kendall Square, and walks briskly towards the Starbucks at the Corner of Ames and Main. He orders a mocha, and lingers for a few minutes as he takes long sips from the cup. Suddenly he hears a call from one corner of the café. “Hi, Arun!” He turns towards the caller, Cindy, who works in the Web Design unit of his company.

“Hey Cindy, how are you?”

“Oh, I'm fine. Are you heading towards the office?”

“Yes, I am.” Arun hesitates, not sure if he wants to finish the coffee here or in the office, but then asks, “May I join you?”

“Of course! I am waiting here since we still have a few minutes till 9”.

“Yep. So what's new with you?”

“Not much! Trying to finish the project that's due next week. I am also looking to find a place to live in the city!”

“Why, I thought you had a very nice house in Milton”.

“Well, I just got divorced, and have been staying with my brother for a month. Also, I will have a shorter commute.”

Arun takes a deep look at Cindy. He's known her for a few years and they hit off very well at office parties. She might be a few years younger than he but was a very good conversationalist. He is not sure what to say now that he knows she is single again, just as he is. He struggles for a second with the urge to share his own loss with her, but decides against it. He could tell her about it another time, or even later today if he runs into her—she might understand his pain and he in turn might offer some consolation to her. But, not right now.

“Well, good luck on your house hunting, Cindy ...

Well, I've got to run. May be we'll do lunch some day”.

As Arun gets up to leave, he hears her parting words, “That would be great, Arun!”

Story Board:

In the coming months, Arun gets busy at work. Goes to St. Louis. He moves on; meets someone.

Describe how he meets her again.

DR. ABDULLAH SHIBLI LIVES AND WORKS IN BOSTON, USA

REFLECTIONS

Always and forever

MOHSENA REZA SHOPNA

ONE of my consistent queries has always been: What is the knot that binds love so strongly? Is it beauty, brains or common interests and beliefs? To me it is a combination of all these, don't you think there is more to love than just court-ing? For all those Valentines out there...do you really fathom the true sense of love? Maybe you will not agree or like the old version of addressing your paramour but see this. The grand bard Tagore reflects thus: “Tumi robei nirobe brideye momo.” It spells out a whole lot more than the conventional “I love you”, or “duniya kisike pyar mein jannat se kum nahien/ik dilruba hae dil mein jo phoolon se kum nahien.”, Read on... “kya janu sanam hota haye kya ghum ki sham / jal uthe sau diye jab liya tera naam.”

It worries me to see 'heartbreak' these days, which is far more a rampant disease than 'heart attacks'. We all want to feel happy and throughout life. Aah! Valentines Day, everything around, colored in red, what a lovely sight for sore eyes! There is love in the air; outside in the park, on the roads, in the cafeterias and here in my home as well. There is so much of excitement celebrating this, and so stimulating too, as if it was charged with some sort of mysterious, invigorating vibes. Make this a day to discover or sometimes rediscover each other. Give it the atmosphere of waiting for the answer while thinking of the next question. This day could perhaps be a day when someone breaks the ice and an unidentifiable part of you begins to melt and some kind of magical metamorphosis starts to happen! Begin today to sail in the ocean of your heart, as if life has suddenly been fuelled back to energy or as if it has rained after a drought.



Anna Akhmatova

It often so happens that no matter how far you are, you miss each other and are always on each other's mind. This phase of longing for each other from a distance is true love, cherish it. John Keats (1795-1821) wrote to Fanny Brawne in July 1819: “I am always astounded that any absent one should have the luxurious power over my senses; you have liked me for my own sake, and for nothing else”.

You might experience a range of emotions, from shouting at each other, to not talking for a couple of days, from crying uncontrollably to finally comforting each other. Make this a day which will witness a relationship never seen before, and things will seem smoother than before. There is a slight twist here. For a successful relationship, it is of utmost importance that both be on the same page. Expectations, demands and debates should be minimized. Do not take each other for granted, it might prove dangerous! You do not always need a madly running truck on the road to kill a love story. Often you yourself are more than capable of killing your own love story. It is a wake-up call to the modern-day lovers who have made it a fashion statement to love, break up and quickly move on to find what's next!

True love is unconditional .If it is a conditional scenario, then it is not true love. It is as good as a mutual friend.

“I sang the melodies of a love, I did not yet know, but when I came to know it, the words became a muffled whisper in my mouth, the songs in my breast, a profound silence”, says Kahlil Gibran.

“Be content to discover the soul and surrender yourself to its spontaneity”, so thinks W.B.Yeats.

Love on a rather platonic level, a sort of love between two minds and feelings shrouded by poetry, carves a very special niche for itself in your mind and soul which nothing on earth can ever erase! Do you know that Anna Akhmatova and Isaiah Berlin just listened to each other? He bore into her eyes and she imagined the song in his pulsating heart. This was their togetherness!

To conclude, I must confess, “The most profound form of love comes in silence, in moments when the man and the woman share twilight moments in the swiftly gathering winter.”

MOHSENA REZA SHOPNA WRITES POETRY AND BOOK REVIEWS AND IS PRESIDENT-ELECT, INNER WHEEL CLUB OF DHAKA NORTH

POETRY

We Sell Dreams

| | |
|--|--|
| REHNUMA SIDDIQUE | Swam in the holy water And drowned there too Only waiting for your tears to be my saviour. |
| Every night has its own moon Camouflaged in a sack of diamonds But I have only a single night To devour all the stars and the moon. | Your eyes were each a land of desert craving for a drop of kindness As I drowned in the depth of blue, Screaming no sounds at the top of my lungs. |
| On that day, I was a drop of shivering clarity As I drowned in the horizon Twisted into a crepuscu- lar joy. I looked into your eyes | A drop of tear finally rolled down the crevices of your stoned face. As I lay in a vacuumed nebula. |

(TO BE CONTINUED)

LITERARY TRADITIONS

English in Malaysia and Singapore

MOHAMMAD A. QUAYUM

THERE is also the problem of confidence for young writers, who could hardly see the value of their writing even in a positive environment. The problem is greatly compounded when the threat of rejection is palpable to them, and when they cannot even properly figure out whether it would be worthwhile to write and publish in English in a country where literary activities in the language are deliberately marginalised and treated with the reduced status of “sectional literature.” Dina Zaman sums up the problem of English writing in Malaysia, especially for younger writers:

I suppose my writing in English initially unsettled a few scholars and academics. When I began writing in the 90s academics kept asking me why I wrote in English and not Malay. I'm Malay and I should write in Malay.... In general, writing in Malaysia tends to be the domain of Malay writers. I have to admit when I think of writers, I think of Pak Samadetc first, then K.S. Maniam. This has nothing to do with the quality of their writing, but because of what we were told/informed.

The pressure to write in Malay is of

course not on Malay writers alone but on all Malaysian writers, although the Malay writers feel it more acutely owing to the risk of being singled out as traitors to the culture. After all, the logic goes, Malay is the national language and there are so many personal benefits for the writer, from economic to cultural, for writing in it, so why should a Malay writer choose not to write in the language? And the extent to which writing in English involves marginalisation and invisibility is obvious from Dina's statement; a writer in English herself, she cannot help but think that a writer in Malaysia means a writer in the national language first. That is how the political and cultural machinery works against the writers in English in the country and the net result is, as I have suggested earlier, the “othering” and exclusion of writings in English and an interrupted, slow growth of the tradition.

There are many other challenges faced by writers in Malaysia, such as the censorship laws which prohibit writers from venturing into so-called politically and culturally “sensitive subjects”; social and religious taboos on topics of literary interest such as love, desire and sex; and a

general apathy towards literature in an environment that glorifies material and technological developments. But these are problems encountered by writers in general and across the spectrum and do not necessarily contribute to the subordination of English writing within the national culture. I have discussed some of these issues in a separate article published in the *CRNLE Journal* in 2001.

1. Thematic Trends in Malaysian Literature in English

Malaysian literature in English is rich and diverse in its thematic scope; it encompasses sundry social, political and cultural issues intrinsic to the local society. Malaysia is a unique country with a unique set of problems and possibilities. For one thing, it is a newly independent nation. It had never experienced nationhood before the departure of the British in 1957. Besides, Malaysia is a polyglot and pluralistic society, with many races, cultures and languages coexisting within its borders. It is an old as well as a new society; some of its population have inhabited the place for centuries, while others were brought over during the colonial period. It is also a grappling ground for tradition

and modernisation; much of its life-style is bound by tradition but there are also the new values introduced from the West by its rapid modernisation. All these issues and complexities are represented and reflected in the works of writers in English. However, the primary interest of these writers seems to be nationalism and nation formation. They often critique Malaysian culture with a view to establishing a fair and equitable society and a nation that is inclusive and accommodative in spirit. They are keen to dismantle hierarchies in caste, class, sex and race so that a harmonious, balanced and humane society could be established in Malaysia. Their overwhelming sympathies are for the subalterns and the socially disadvantaged, and they seek to dissipate all forms of prejudice, exclusivism and bigotry in their imagination of the nation. One could argue this thesis in all the genres of this tradition, but let me examine a select body of its fiction for the purpose of this discussion.

Poetry came first in the Malaysian Anglophone tradition, followed by short stories in the sixties and novels in the seventies and eighties.