DID YOU SAY IT?

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Did you tell her that you love her?

I know, it's personal. I'm crossing the line. But I've had this thing happen to me and it changed my life. I think it changed the way I think too. OK, I'm explaining.

Nine years ago, when I first met Aisha, I did not have the faintest idea of who she was as a person, let alone know that she would be changing my world. Our first date was nothing out of the ordinary. We had lunch, we talked, and then we walked together for some time before returning to our respective homes. As you can imagine, we were not a popular pair in our school. People used to be like, "Oh, them," as if they had expected this all along. We went on anyway.

I was not particularly attracted to Aisha, I admit. She was not the hottest chick with her puffy lips and dark skin tone. She looked like a weird cross between Angelina Jolie and Beyoncé, if you can imagine.

But I liked talking to her. Scratch that. I loved it. She was not a phony, like a lot of people were in our school, and she never judged people, no matter what background they came from. I remember one weekend I woke up early and had nothing to do, I called her up. She promptly picked up and replied she had nothing good to do either.

I went to her place – you can imagine how friendly her parents were – and went straight to the rooftop where she was tending to her plants. We talked, we worked; her mom came up and got us fed while we kept talking until we noticed it was getting dark. That was how much we used to talk.

We were inseparable after that. The only time I didn't talk with her was at night, when I'd be at home. Even then I kept thinking of all those things I would tell her the next time we would meet, which I knew wouldn't be long.

But soon, it was time to choose universities. I decided to go abroad while she stayed behind. She didn't cry when I told her my plans, she just sat there and listened, with a distant look on her face. Both of us knew longdistance relations never worked, so we decided, like mature adults, to end it.

But here's what I didn't realize: we were not mature then; at least I wasn't. I did not even ask her if she'd like me to stay back. So much would've changed if I did. Looking back, above all, that was the most unthoughtful thing for me to do to her.

I will spare you the melodrama after the break-up and the short, meaningless dates following that. Let's jump five years ahead when I come back home with a big Engineering Degree and a potentially lustrous future ahead.

Despite our history, I was looking ahead to meeting Aisha. She had gotten her own degree in Botany and was quite content with the way of life as it was. When we met, again at her old rooftop, it was as if nothing had changed and we got lost in talking again. But we found ourselves quite happily surprised when it became dark.

The sun had just gone down and although it had been a humid day, there was a slight breeze. It swayed her hair, as she laughed the most carefree laugh, unaware of me gaping at her and gently tucked a flying strand behind her ear. The clocks seemed to stop ticking as the memory branded itself in my mind. I couldn't take my eyes off. It was the most beautiful sight I'd ever seen.

That was when I realized she was the one. She was my one.

I came home, tensed and worried. The realization was having its toll inside my head. I couldn't think straight, and that had never happened to me before. I tried to resolve with myself. It was complicated. We had already separated once. What if we have to do that again? What if she did that to me? I would die. Plain and simple.

And then my phone rang.

It was a friend, a school friend. I could barely make out what she was saying amidst her helpless cries. Aisha



has had an accident. The doctors had declared her dead before she was even admitted.

I don't remember much after that. It was mostly a haze. People came in and went. Some asked if I was OK, if everything was taken care of. I don't remember clearly my replies. They say I was silent the entire time; I *could-n't* talk. Someone made me go home.

I did not go home. But I went to hers. Her parents had been there, expectably grieving for their loss. I remember her mother telling me her last wish, a bare whisper in her dying moment: "Look after my flowers." That was when crude reality hit me. And I responded in full force.

It took three police officers and her father to stop me from breaking down everything in the house. A long and unbreakable period of haze followed again. My once promising future is in tatters. I had my world flourish and then shrivel within a night. I've no aim to live. Except maybe to see her flowers before I die.

As you can imagine, I have a lot of regrets. But none is

as great as the one of not being able to tell her I loved her. I've fretted, to no avail, of her response. I know now, after losing so much that had never really mattered. Her knowing would have been enough for me to live on. It would've been enough for me to go to paradise and snatch her right back to earth with me.

I see couples, crazed by lust or property but not for each other. Then I saw two teenagers today seated under a tree, almost hidden by it. They were so intently talking they did not notice that it was starting to rain. The boy observed first, when a drop of rain water fell on the girl's brow. They started to laugh ecstatically. I was touched and nostalgic at their simplicity. And then it struck me. Did he tell her how much she meant to her? Does any man ever do that? Do they not know that this moment will never be back? Right now, when she's so beautiful and you could hold her, why linger? Tomorrow everything is going to change. Her. You. Time, Everything.

So let me ask you again: did you tell her yet?