



ILLUSTRATION: RIDWAN NOOR NAFIS

OLD MAN'S BEARD

UPOMA AZIZ

Rrrriiinggg!!

Something goes off in my left ear like an obstinate alarm clock I don't remember owning. It keeps on throbbing like a pulse, a real being with an existence, and a conscience. *"Born and bred in this old man's earhole, a native. Howdy!"* I am disturbed by my own imaginations and clamp my hand over my ear a few times. One. Two. Three. The sound stops. I do not miss going to work, but I miss being young – not like the leftover puzzle pieces from several different sets jammed into one, never quite fitting.

Now that the tenant or the native entity in my ear has fallen asleep, I steer my attention to the task at hand. The task at my boney, old hands, also comes in veiny and arthritic. Hands best suited clutching a white cane or a black umbrella, not a woman's hand who isn't family, nor spouse.

Dear Lord, I'm too old for this.

But what do I get her? Even in my youth I had minimum dating hours on me, and I have no idea what is in these days. Not that she is from these days, thankfully. Let's see, chocolates would probably be too daring, so a pack of diabetes biscuits? Oats? Old home brochures? I shake my head. Flowers seem like a safe bet.

"What if she's allergic?" says a nasty voice in my head after I've asked the florist to put together a modest bouquet of powder blue carnations. I don't know if carnations scream of funerals, I really hope they don't. Roses would have been precarious. And scandalous.

For the entire time that I am on my way I worry that I will end up circling the entire place without being able to find her, I still have enough trouble finding my own socks occasionally. But then I see her seated on a bench looking glorious, quite literally. Her peach shawl reflected the light to create a shimmery effect around her. When she smiles at me, I notice she has kind eyes. To my surprise, she does not remind me of my late wife. In fact, she does not remind me of anyone I have ever met. She must be a one-in-a-million person. As for me, I haven't even met a million people.

I give her flowers to her and she thanks me. She tells me that powder blue is a very good color choice while racking her handbag for something. I don't tell her that the colour selection was the florist's. She finally seems to have found what she was looking for.

"Here," she hands me a small, colourful model of an abacus. "This is for you."

I stare at her, unsure what to say. "You mentioned you were a banker? Isn't this what you people do, count?" she says and laughs, proud at her own little practical

joke. I join in. Such pretty little things, the abacus and her laugh. The beads on the abacus are bold, basic colours. Her smile is pastel.

"I have never been too good at counting," she confesses, and I assure her that it is a good thing, because otherwise, after a certain period of time, one started counting everything, countable or not. Uncountable things were to be converted.

Taking home the biggest fish in the market – twelve joys, dining out in one very high end restaurant – forty seven, my wife getting to brag to her sisters over the phone about our new car – that's a solid sixty three.

It is an okay story, the one of my life. She, however, has done everything and been everywhere, and maybe that is why she does not wake up to death ticking in her left ear. She wakes up to the red of her eyelids when the sun shone on them. Pleasantly enough, I like her company, and she seems to enjoy mine. I tell her of my young days, and we discover that we did live in the same city at the same time. She says it's intriguing that we never met, and tells me stories from her own youth, and I begin to see why we never crossed ways before just then.

After we say our goodbyes and head home, I pinch the piece of paper on which she scribbled the address where we could meet next after half a month, after my physiotherapy sessions and her dialysis. First impressions do matter, it occurs to me, for I actually like her, but I turn her words over in my head, about us never meeting before. Maybe we did, on the same bus, been at the park at the same time or stood in the same line to pay the electricity bills. We just never quite created the impression on each other, before today of course.

After a certain age, the heart longs not for love, just companionship of another living being. I do not wish that I had met her earlier. The younger me would have dismissed her for being too promiscuous, she would have sneered at my inertness. If we met thirty-something years earlier we would not have been the people we are. Our lives went on in their own arcs, and I don't regret one bit of it. I know sue doesn't either.

I saunter to my veranda as the afternoon breaks. The sky is a beautiful umami, the skyline is a bleak array of geometric silhouettes. But it's a beautiful setting altogether. It's a wonderful world.

Upoma Aziz is now a slouching-crouching-grouchy time bomb going off at no detonator whatsoever. Poke her at your own risk at www.fb.com/upoma.aziz