

Fireworks*

Feroz Faisal Dawson

People were standing, not moving, outlines etched in sharp relief by the clear, clean orange light. Murmurs. Everybody, then nobody, murmuring, murmuring, "He was very dejected, very dejected", said with an exasperated sigh, the eyes pleading, the voice wavering and dying. His friend doesn't look at him. In the background, high above and far away from the house, a tower stands black and unlit. Birds sit on the roof uncannily spaced; perfectly, symmetrically, apart. I thought they were pieces of wood sticking out from the roof. Then one flew off.

The sun was creeping out of view behind the tower, as if to say, "I can't help you, I'd like to but my time is up, you'll have to make do." There are two ladies leaning on Mike's car; one has tissue in hand, and a pathetic, quizzical frown on her face, she is silent but her head bobs slowly from side to side.

No car can pass. We are standing all over the road. Standing in a silent, distorted, mutated horse-shoe shape, with the open end being the front gate of Sunitra's house; most faces are looking towards it, towards the house. Suddenly a shriek, followed by a long low moan. Sunitra's mother grieves for her son. Other voices join in, soon there is a monotonous, chanted, wail.

So many people are standing outside Sunitra's house motionless, powerless, like pigeons stupidly, silently looking this way and that. That woman leaning on Mike's car feels on her cheek my stare, she turns sideways, but doesn't see me. She dabs the right eye and murmurs to the woman at her side, who makes no sign, save a very slight nod. She speaks again, the other woman finally looks at her and says something. They are both old and experienced. They've probably seen a lot of funerals and their looks and gestures are practised to perfection. A man next to them actually smiles as he relates information that has been passed round and round, uprooted, churned out, dug up and regurgitated, from early that morning when they first heard about it, to probably when the body comes back from the airport, and probably still when his coffin goes up in flames and it will continue on tomorrow and the day after, day and night, unceasing, uncaring, relentless, unstoppable, for the next 45 days, which is the decent minimum

* "Fireworks" was first published in *Skoob Pacifica Anthology No 2: The Pen Is Mightier Than the Sword* (1994). It was republished in *Ladder in the Water* (2012).

specified for mourning, expected by society, with prayers every day in the evenings. Every day for 45 days while stocks last.

And probably then still after.

The light on white walls was a thin, transparent amber. Faces looked more thoughtful, pensive, dignified. The strong blacks of sunless, sheltered spaces softened to damp, deep blue. The sky on my right was pursuing lilac.

And still the people stood, and still we blocked the road. Waiting for the body, waiting for showtime. One Japanese man comes through the crowd. Yvonne turns to us, "that's his boss, I think..." she whispered, not looking, "he worked in Singapore. Japanese boss, I think..." He is quite young, with hair touching collar; he wears a dark blue suit and strides into the house towards the wailing throng, looking only ahead of him. A fair Indian woman blows her nose; the birds have left the rooftop; the bottom of light grey clouds is painted softly red.

The Japanese man comes out, talks to someone, hesitates, then is off. Back to Singapore; to the office where he is boss; where Sunitra's brother used to work. For him, it is a death in the office; for others, that of a friend, for others still, death of all hope and meaning.

And still the people stand; the body is not back yet, "Sunitra has gone to the airport to pick her brother up", said Jessie, a friend, "you're still in shock, I see," for I made no sound, "Bullshit", thought I, "wrong again...so much for bloody woman's intuition"... "Selamat Hari Raya, huh?" she continued. I tried not to, but grinned anyway, while replying, "hmmph," which I do often, for it says a lot and is usually, though not often enough, fatal to unwanted and unnecessary conversation. "Yeah, yeah," I thought, "It happens on holidays too," as I remembered a certain Christmas and a certain coffin. She always sounds so earnest and definite but unfortunately, her speech reverberates with twangs of Strine, on account of living in Brisbane. She is tall and graceful and has beautiful brown eyes. She is the kind of woman that I would gladly kiss to make her shut up.

The neighbours, a Chinese family, crane their necks and look like beakless penguins staring over the red brick wall. The mother of the family is cradling a young child; she grips him fast. He is curious and apprehensive, struggling, wriggling, trying to get free. She begins to hold him tighter and then decides to bounce him in her arms. As she does that rapidly, he doesn't bounce so much as shake and nod while she also moves him from side to side on her hips, slowly, gradually, comfortably. And the van arrives, carrying Sunitra and her dead brother's body.

A few days later, it was April Fool's Day.

A firework just exploded, and another. A car horn at some distance beeped twice; then another bangclap. Silence. The air-conditioner hums, softly halting, thrumming, apologetically endless. A low dark roar and a car has swept away. Impossible you say? no, but really, it was ten, I think, ten little tablets. Eight was supposedly lethal. "What was that?" "Sunitra tried to commit suicide last night," was what the telephone voice said. "Commit suicide?" I said, "My foot," I thought. No, no that wasn't "trying to commit suicide", no sir, she tried to kill herself maybe, but commit suicide? No, not classy enough, not clever or serious or gutsy enough. Plain fucking stupid. Swallowing 10 pills.

"Oooooohhh...I want to leave this world, I want to die and go to him! I want to join my breder!! I want to be with my breder!! (Her brother burnt to death in a car wreck in Singabloodypore 7 days ago) I want to leave my horrible, terrible parents and join my breder; I'll go to him right now! Waaaaaaaahhhhh...!!!"

Fucking weak, selfish, thoughtless,

But she told me things later, after everything.

When she left for the airport to retrieve her brother's remains, one of her cousins, who travelled with her in the hearse, said, "Hey, Sunitra, you got the car number, ah? your brother's car number, do you know it? do you remember it? huh, Sunitra, hey...the number, girl, the number..."

When the all-white hearse finally came back from the airport, she was sitting in front, wearing big aviator sunglasses and as soon as the van stopped, she flew at once to her father, who had been called out of the house; her voice was raised and garbled. She said something over and over again to her father, hugging him, holding tight, but I couldn't make out the words. When the coffin was slowly dragged out of the back of the van, the father let out a soft sob and cried, crying like a small stream bubbling; Sunitra rending the air with a crumbling, shattering cry, back to repeating, over and over again, a chant, a phrase, a prayer.

Because of the way he died, the coffin was closed. "Let me see my son, I want to see my son", screamed the mother, each time louder and more resolute, supported and held at each arm by friends of her son, saying in turn, whispering in fact, "Auntie please, please auntie, don't, don't auntie, you cannot auntie, please understand, please calm down, please auntie...", "My son! I want to see my son, he's my only..." But the coffin was closed and not to be opened.

"He was her only son. He took her side, he looked out for her and he was angry with me and my father for being dismissive of and indifferent to her," said Sunitra before she took the pills the next day. After her son's death, Sunitra's mother's state of mind was such that she accused Sunitra of the most heinous crime, of causing the greatest wrong, that of being responsible for her own brother's death. Sunitra's crime was that of bringing bad luck to the family. She'd always been bad luck, she was told. God was punishing them for Sunitra's sins. She was always a bad girl. She never listened. She wasn't married. No one wanted her, she wasn't good, no, she wasn't good like her brother. Sunitra listened in stupefaction. What was there to say in reply? To think...and what do you know, here comes auntie and grandma, sister and mother, sarees trailing, eyes narrowing, hissing between teeth, "yes, yes, she was always a bad girl, she never listened to her poor, dear mother, she always thought she knew everything, showing off, being clever, answering back, always answering back, she caused her poor, dear mother so much pain, that girl..."

And still they continued, (remember, everyday they were there at Sunitra's house and everyday they talked and talked, with stern and sour faces, all the while completely ignoring Sunitra's mother herself, who at this time was given to pacing around the house, talking aloud to walls and pictures and herself), Grandma imparting pearls of wisdom, "look at her...look at her hair...I never see her in a saree...and she acts as though there's nothing wrong with her, at this age, twenty-five and still not married, not even engaged. She's very dark, not fair at all like her mother, not fair like us, you can see why she's not married, of course...no one wants her..."

When Sunitra's mother snapped out of her reverie, she would start on Sunitra again, and auntie and grandmother would reload and fire point blank shots at Sunitra's face; revelling in her abject misery as they did so.

She could not put up with it any longer, her father, her only hope, was not equipped to deal with the knives, barbs and venom of the three women. Indeed, he was not even inclined to stop them. He was not inclined to do anything at all; and so she felt the situation hopeless, she really truly absolutely thought the situation hopeless.

The family doctor was livid. They are not supposed to give out more than eight pills, how could they give her 10 pills! even 8 is too many, why, for heaven's sake 8 pills are lethal! What was that doctor thinking? a doctor like him should be reported and dealt with...harshly dealt with... oh dear, oh dear, oh dear..."

I don't think they ever got round to busting him or suing him, it was just talk for the moment, performance for the day, hot air from the weak and the middle-aged, with more, more reason to play one's part, to belong to the circle of sorrow wrung dry.

For 45 days, everybody and his mother would have a shot. A lightning flash, it's going to rain, the sky shows itself to be mother of pearl and dark blue at the sides, and then darker still opposite the set sun. An Indian man with a prodigious, if predictable, paunch steps forth and begins to direct the proceedings. Several rings of flowers are thrust into the hearse. These are yellow, white, pink, peach, salmon and they stand on rickety, fragile, cane legs. The driver of the hearse puts the flowers in with not a trace of solemnity, much less reverence, he is doing his job, and would like to be on his way. A wreath of flowers gets caught in the side door that he has shut impatiently. It sticks out of the white van/hearse choking, entangled, hideously strangled. No one thinks to put that bit of the wreath in and shut the door proper and tight. All of us stand there and ignore it, leaning now on one leg, now on the other, some with gaping mouths, some digging noses.

Sunitra wants to ride in front. She wants to go in the hearse, she wants to go with her brother. For some reason, they won't let her, too many in front. "Please girl, go with uncle, he'll take you there, he'll take you there, you'll be right behind us, go in the car girl, please girl, it's all right you'll be right be — OK, OK, put her in the back, you can go in the back, OK girl? you go in the back, there, there, that's all right, now that's all right, you'll be with your brother." So she sat there amidst the flowers, holding on tight to the coffin.

It starts to drizzle; because of the rain, people sway and shift, things are acting up, the body is going soon, time to get ready, time to hitch rides, "are you going?", "are you going?"

"No priests are coming here because it is an unnatural death. They won't come", said Jessie. Unnatural death? a car crash? for this, priests make themselves scarce? "Spare me...", "No, it's true", said Jessie, "the parents have to do everything themselves, do you suppose the crematorium is open?", "Of course, it's open...isn't it?"

No, no she was wrong again, that stupid ..., I don't know why I get so worked up, listening to these people; she wasn't wrong about the priests, though. The rain splashed onto the road splintering, shattering into brilliant points and circles of light, shinely mocking. People were beginning to go. I had decided not to. Mike was going, because he knew the guy, then again maybe he didn't. None of us, Kelvin, Sunny, Yvonne nor me ever met Sunitra's brother. We were there because she was our friend, and at funerals they never refuse anyone admittance,

everyone is invited. Unlike weddings. Labels, strings, ties, they mean little or less than usual at death's appearance. Family ties, what an abominable lie in most cases. They've known us from the day we were born, but remain resolute, complete, total, absolute and utter strangers. Oblivious, indifferent, exhausted.

Thank God for friends.

Else I would have gladly died long ago.

Kelvin and Yvonne didn't want to go to the cremation either. Sunny, dependable and right and loyal as ever, thought he should go, at least to save Mike the experience of having to go alone; he would go with Mike.

I walked down the road to Kelvin's car. Kelvin and Yvonne were ahead of me, hurriedly trying to get out of the still strengthening rain. After I had walked 10 or so steps I turned back. I would go also. When I got to Mike's car, Mike was there and ready to go and Sunny was missing. We waited for Sunny; then these Singaporeans came hurtling into our car, "could you give us a lift, could you, there are three of us, are you going? could you give us, you're going aren't you, could you please, three of us, give us a lift? could you, could you, hello..." We said, "no, no, I'm sorry, sorry, We're waiting for someone, there's someone else coming, our friend, waiting for our friend, sorry, no, we're waiting for a friend, no..." Then we said, "OK, I guess, yeah we could take, we could yeah, could take, I guess we could take two of you, could take two of you, but only two...there's someone else, yeah ok..."

Then Sunny came running, "I go in Kelvin's car, la, we follow you", while the rain poured down around him and the black turbulent sky paralysed all with the sound of chilling, hostile thunder. "OK, you sure, ah!", I said as he ran away through the crisscrossing and disappearing headlights.

And then the Singaporeans erupted, "Aaah, we can take three, we can take three, we can take, we can take, ...Kenneth, Kenneth, Ken, Ken, HERE, over here, Hey, KEN, this car, this car, come on, come on...", the car door is pushed out, a wet body thumps into the back seat, bringing with it a stinging breeze, the door thuds shut and there are three Singaporeans sitting in the back seat. The whole way, they didn't even bother to fucking introduce themselves. They might have mumbled thanks for something or other. Mike and I remained silent, we were not exactly chatty, we listened to the music through his blown-out speakers, as the Singaporeans whispered amongst each other, carrying themselves and their world with them wherever they go.

We made it to the crematorium but Sunny, Kelvin and Yvonne never did. In the rain and the glare apparently they followed the wrong car and got lost.

I was surprised when they set fire to the coffin. I hadn't expected it. When we got there the coffin was already in place. The enclosure was long and high, with white surfaces long since etched by grey, open to the elements, supported by pillars surrounded by a low, thick concrete wall; rounded and softened by the desperate, fevered, unconscious, cold hands of mourners through the years. It was still raining — it wasn't raining, it was roaring. The coffin was placed on dark, wooden logs, several of them, larger ones below, smaller and shorter ones on top. As before, all the people remained standing, this time all eyes facing the coffin, the men of the family around the father, a handful of friends, around Sunitra. Her mother had not come, or rather, she was in no position to attend, perhaps she was advised not to, in any case, she was left behind, taken care of and comforted by other middle-aged ladies, sedated by a doctor more than likely.

He must have been a priest, he was responsible for starting things; first this, then that, then the other. Nothing could be heard save the crashing rain and amidst the standing people and the cold, hurrying wind and the bent over, sobbing human that was Sunitra that man began to sing. He sang alone and quickly. The song sounded old (very old) and sad and weary. The voice sliced through the rain not booming nor low nor ominous and neither shrill nor persistent, nor damning. Just higher than usual, rising, falling, quavering, patient, matter of fact, irrevocable.

And then the rice. A mound of rice grain, uncooked, was heaped upon a large, flat, tin dish. It was placed at the side of the coffin, next to the head with the priest standing next to it. You had to climb three steps up to the coffin where the dish and the priest were, then you would release a handful of grains of rice on the coffin. For some reason when they began to implore people to go up the steps, to start it off, as it were, most were slow to react and I found myself the third person in line to sprinkle rice onto his coffin. I had never met Sunitra's brother, didn't even know what he looked like. Slowly a queue formed, waddling, swaying forward with more and more coming out from shadows, treading lightly over steps, glancing eyes flung all over, bouncing off, bouncing back. Cupped hands, cradling rice, would slowly pull themselves apart while moving in a slow arc over the head of the coffin, over the face of a man burnt to death in a car wreck on the way to Changi Airport, Singapore. The rice rained down softly, from under faces of calm, faces of indifference, of patience, of self-righteousness, of tiredness, of shallowness, of dedication and never-ending remembrance, of turbulence; faces of turbulence

akin to molten lava boiling, a bridge about to buckle, perhaps it was only a pair of eyes — a still and stunned deer, lastly, the shattered, crystal eyes under a wrinkled brow and then Sunitra.

She had to be led up there, she was the last to go. No need to describe her face, suffice to say — grief. She raised her cupped hands over her head, speaking to the gods, before releasing the rice, and she took another handful, caressing her brother's coffin this time, and she took another, and another, until there was nothing left. She did not want to go, she had to be led down slowly but forcefully by the silent and understanding priest.

Large, yellow slabs of ghee, the length of a large loaf of bread, were heaped, onto and around the coffin. They torched it from all sides. As the ghee melted and burned, it left shiny, silvery streaks criss-crossing over the top and sides of the coffin. It slid and dropped onto the logs, shrinking, reducing, disappearing. Thus the sound of the crashing rain was overcome and swallowed whole by the crackling flames which threw themselves up, higher, further towards the roof of the enclosure; not reaching it but seemingly determined to lick and catch something, anything, so that it might not burn alone.

It was not the thing to do to hang around until the fire died out, I would've liked to, but the crowd containing friends, co-workers, family and perhaps one or two lovers slipped away, having their last look, stare, glance at the chanting whispers of the ever-circling, eradicating, annihilating flames. The coffin was bright red from the yellow glare, black edges trimming the evanescent, transitory flames, thick grey smoke climbing the eaves, set free into the wet, the dark, the rain. The light danced on the pillars and floors and on the back of heads and on faces, but it was over, it was done.

Sunitra was surrounded and led away, through the corridor, through the wide concrete circle. Stopping, turning around, slowing down, turning round, stopping again, just for another look, another look, and yet another, then again being pulled gently away, whispered words frantically trying to reach from all sides, all directions. Jessie and the other girl had one arm each across her back, and one each near her elbows, not daring to think what would happen if one were to let go. I stopped and turned around, for my last look. The flames must have been nine feet tall, at least. "Let me see...!!," she screamed, "he's my own...brother...why won't you...I must..." she was almost at the car, Jessie and the other girl holding tight, whispering, whispering, Mike was there too, the car door was opened, she said his name over and over, she said goodbye, was gently pushed in and the car door slammed.

I asked Mike what he thought about waiting for the Singaporeans, "Fuck 'em", replied Mike. So we climbed into his dark grey Mazda 323 with the shitty sound system, and drove away, and all of a sudden, I saw my own funeral in my mind, surrounded by a language I do not understand (Arabic — on account of learning the Quran parrot-like when young), surrounded by people I do not know and will never comprehend (my relatives) and I thought of my friends who would not be able to read any eulogy for me, much less act as pallbearers for me (as I had acted once, for my father). As that thought seared through my head, I unfastened the seat belt, wound down the window, could hear the wind in my ears as I pushed my head out, and I screamed.