

I Got Busy

Karam Tabba

Shafiq was a close friend. We had a strong bond back in university days.

I remember when I first saw him in Accounting 101, I thought, “That’s one pretentious looking Mat Salleh.” He had a Scottish father, so he looked like it.

We ended up on the same assignment group and had to study together. We spent so much time together and eventually exchanged our stories. He told me about his father leaving when he was younger and how his mother raised him on her own.

Our almost similar backgrounds bonded us pretty fast.

I remember we had the bright idea of drinking while studying on the night of our accounting exam. We had a book in one hand and a glass of whiskey in the other. We thought, “Hey, we can do this...easy!” We thought, we had this exam in the bag.

The next day we went into the exam hall with a horrible hangover and forgot everything we studied. It was a miracle we passed.

It was really nice to have Shafiq around. He was the friendliest person you could ever meet. He would be the one people went to when they had trouble, the one to keep secrets, the one to smile when things were tough. To strive for a better tomorrow.

I appreciated having someone like that close to me. Like a sidekick. And just like that, through our days at the university, we stuck together.

After graduating, I had the fortune of landing a good job. I wanted people I trust to be in my team. So, I offered Shafiq and 2 other friends a job – which they gladly accepted.

We were the 4 IT musketeers. We spent the best times together.

We were professional when we needed to be and goofy when we're not working. We had unofficial job titles for each one of us. They called me the carpet salesman because well... I'm Arab, and we called Shafiq the janitor for some reason I can't remember. We used to joke around and threaten him with demotion to assistant janitor if he messed up our lunch orders.

We grew together, we became as close as a family.

Eventually we all left that job. It wasn't easy, to be honest. I felt strange, like I wasn't only going to miss the people I love but I'll miss the person I was at the time, knowing too well that I'll never be that way ever again.

But we were ready for the next chapter in our lives. We didn't want to be in our comfort zones for too long. And if the adventure took us on different paths, we had faith in our friendship to keep us connected, somehow.

I later joined a company in Penang, and Syafiq joined a remote firm working in crypto currency. I watched as he grew and worked his way to becoming a partner. He worked hard, made a difference and provided jobs to over 50 staff members world-wide. His employees loved and respected him... and he was making a lot of money...

I remember I had mixed feelings of jealousy and pride, here was our janitor making the rest of us proud earning more than all of us.

(Short pause)

Shafiq took his life a few months ago—

I knew there were signs of depression. They were subtle but I could see them. When we spoke, he was so good at hiding his depression behind a smile. But deep down, he was hurting. The pandemic locked him up with these thoughts and made them grow and fester like a cancer.

When he finally opened up to me, I knew something needed to be done. So, me and the rest of the IT musketeers planned a trip to Langkawi to bring him out of his state of mind. To make him see that life is so much more. To guide him towards a better alternative.

The trip never happened.

We all got busy once the lockdown was lifted. We all forgot about it and moved on with life...

And I'm left wondering what I could have done to save him.

There are a million things I could have done; I should have done but instead... I just "Got busy".

I keep thinking and re-thinking, was I really busy? I mean being busy is often seen as a badge of honour and a marker of self-worth. Being busy makes us feel needed, in demand, and important. So, was I really busy, did I really have so much on my plate that I could not even afford a time off for a friend in need?

Or maybe I just didn't care enough?

If Shafiq was a priority, I would have made the time—

It is hard knowing that you've failed a friend. It's hard knowing that you may never forgive yourself. But it's harder knowing that the person you've used to be would have never let it happen.

It makes you look closer at your own reflection, thinking "Who have I grown into?"

It's too late now. All my reflections can't bring Shafiq back from the dead. The only things I could do, is to keep our memories close, and to tell people his story – hoping that others would do better than me...

[END]

A Short Interview with Karam Tabba

What led you to write this piece?

At the time, I had recently lost a close friend and felt a great deal of guilt. When he was with us, he would always inspire me to do good. I wanted to find a way to immortalise his memory and hopefully write a script that could save another lost soul.

How much of the text changed in the course of the performance?

Since it was written, the script was slightly altered for the performance to emphasise the "I got busy" excuse delving more into the question of are we really too busy for the people who are important to us? Or are we prioritizing the wrong things?

What is your main takeaway from this whole experience?

When I first watched the actor performing the script I was bombarded with emotions of anger and regret as hearing someone else say the lines really put things into perspective... but ultimately, it helped me come to terms with the facts and gave me a level of closure I never gotten before.

The biggest reward from the experience was after the second show when a lady told me the script made her want to call her loved ones, be closer to them, and put more effort into her relationships. That made me feel that my friend is still doing good even beyond the grave.

Do you think you will continue writing plays?

I would probably need a short mental break but once I'm ready, I definitely will.