

The warm place in me

By Chen Shaua Fui

1.

Dear Stone,

It has become more difficult to stay awake in the day now that you are gone. I wish only to lie on our huge bed and stay in slumber for as long as I can in order to meet you in a dream.

But you never come.

Hugging your pillow to my chest and sinking my face into its softness, I can smell you. But you are faint and fast disappearing.

One moment you were there, the next moment you weren't.

I can still hear your scream, echoing in the mountain; echoing in my soul. You told me to be extremely careful when we walked on the narrow slippery trek that day.

"Be extremely careful. You go first, I will be behind you."

When I heard the low sound of hiking boots slipping on the mud, your scream, and I turned back, you were not behind me anymore. Not anymore. Forever.

Tamil and Laili, who were closed to me at the time, grabbed me from the edge immediately.

I wanted to throw myself to the mountain to search for you. Like a sacrificial lamb, I wanted to claim you back. I struggled madly to break free until I tasted blood in my mouth.

I had lost my mind; an atomic bomb had claimed it. My heart was broken and shattered into million pieces.

I had lost you: my love, my soul mate and my best friend.

I had taken for granted that you would be behind me forever. Your low and caring voice calling my name, "Jane, Jane, O, Jane," telling me to do whatever makes me happy, that our marriage is not a cage, but a free sky for me to fly in.

You are no longer watching my back, are you, Stone?

You always like me calling you Stone. You love how the sound of the word shapes in my mouth, "S-tone, S-tone, o Stone," a whisper that expresses my yearning for you.

But you didn't like it at first.

"So, tell me why am I a Stone?" you confronted me when you found out that I secretly nicknamed you "Stone" after we had dated for a few months.

I looked at you with a smile; I was almost tempted to trifle with you. But I resisted the temptation.

“You are strong and round.”

“Strong yes, but round?” You sounded slightly irritated.

“Not “round” round, but round in a sense that you are a well-rounded person, you are witty and funny and you don’t take yourself so seriously and are always there for me, like a huge rock that anchors the center of my life. And you are my Stone, and only mine.”

But my Stone has fallen from the hill where we went for our weekly hike.

I have re-lived that day over and over again for the past few months, trying to figure out any hints I might have missed, or anything I could have done differently to save you. I should’ve let you go before me instead of behind me, or I should have insisted that we did not go for the hike that day...

But all this storm in my head will not bring you back to me. How do I go on from here?

2.

Dear Stone,

I might have killed you, unintentionally.

I do not deserve you, so I had to lose you. That is what it is.

I am the reason we couldn’t build a family. Your face was ashen when the doctor told us that we wouldn’t be able to have baby because of my damaged womb and there was nothing he could do about it. I was quiet during the consultation. I knew how much you love children. The miscarriage I had in my past abusive relationship was excruciatingly painful, but I never knew that I couldn’t be a mother for the rest of my life.

I couldn’t bring myself to say sorry, I was running out of apologies to offer. I am also a victim of my past. I thought I had put the past behind me when I decided to leave my abusive partner eight years before I met you. But the past has never really passed, has it?

We didn’t talk for eight days after the consultation. We carefully avoided each other; we pretended that we were suddenly caught up by the whirlwind of our busy life. I knew you were trying hard not to blame me, while I was trying to delay our confrontation.

The fear paralyzed me. I was counting the days, as if I were a death row inmate waiting for the day of execution.

On the ninth day, I came home expecting another day of “cold war” between us. But you were waiting for me in the dining room with my favorite matcha cake.

Your face brightened up when you saw me, a big warm smile on your face, and you gestured for me to come to the table. I walked hesitantly, unsure if I should feel happy or worried that this would be you showing your kindness to me for the last time before we parted.

You even had your coffee making tools spread out on the table. "I am making dancing coffee tonight," you said with a delightful smile. You began to boil the water, grind the coffee beans and warm the milk. The fragrance of the freshly ground coffee filled the air; I inhaled it and felt relaxed.

You made the coffee and frothed the milk. You had two warm glasses ready, poured half the milk into the cup first, then used a glass rod to slowly let the coffee flow down and then added the milk froth. The milk and coffee formed three layers, and they were dancing like waves of the ocean.

"Remember the first time I made you this coffee?"

"Of course, I remember. It was our first date. I almost wanted to say 'No'. Nobody asks a girl to go to his house for the first date! But I recalled that you promised to make me this mysterious 'dancing coffee' when I told you I love coffee during the Mount Kinabalu hike. That was my first serious hike, and I was almost always over-excited by almost everything! All the people I met were just so fascinating for me, and you are one of them. Although you remained mysterious about the program of the night, I decided to take a leap of faith. And I think that was the best decision I have ever made in my life."

I looked into your gaze and suddenly everything seemed so clear. My fear evaporated.

"Jane, I owed you an apology for not speaking to you for days. I admitted I was disappointed that we can't have a family of our own. As the days go by, it became hard to speak to you again; I was ashamed of my reaction as I secretly blamed you for it. I can sense that you are slowly preparing yourself to leave me. Yesterday morning, I woke up abruptly from sleep with a fear that you were gone. As I found you lying next to me, in your sleep, tears streamed out from my eyes. That's when I realized that I had forgotten the most important lesson I learned from the mountain: *carpe diem*, seize the day. We have not lived our life to the fullest for the past few days. All I was thinking about was what we have lost when we have yet to own it, but I have been neglecting the fact that what is more important is you in the present, not a distant future."

That night, we cried and we laughed until we were out of our breath, with tears still in our eyes. The dancing coffee you made was the best dancing coffee you've ever made.

I remember you liked to say *carpe diem* a lot--the quote of your life. You would do things spontaneously and urge me not to waste my time on things that are not fulfilling.

It struck me now what you were trying to tell me then was that we must not blame ourselves for what we cannot change; instead, we must do our best to transform our misfortunes into happiness by living through the magical moments in our life, one moment at a time.

Dear Stone, I will try. I want to try.

3.

Dear Stone,

I am back to hiking again. It was tough to do long-hour hikes as my fitness level had dropped so much since you left.

Above all, I was afraid of the mountains. The mountains remind me of all our memories together: we met during the Mount Kinabalu hike; we trekked the Annapurna Circuit for our honeymoon; we did our Everest Base Camp hike together on our fifth anniversary. We spent almost all our savings on these trekking trips and on hiking gear. The mountains are the witness of our relationship and our growth throughout all these years.

We reached Poon Hill this morning to catch the sun rise just as we did ten years ago; it was bitter cold to start the hike at 4 a.m. It was still dark, and the starry sky was beautiful. I used a small torch light to guide my steps. We walked gingerly as there were too many people on the narrow trek.

If not for you, I would be too afraid to make this trip alone. After I stayed under the radar for five months, shutting myself out from the world, indulging in my grief, Tamil finally came knocking on my closed door. Tamil was your best hiking buddy; he organized most of our trips. He is our closest friend.

He told me you had paid for this Annapurna circuit trekking trip to celebrate our tenth anniversary a year before, and this was supposed to be a surprise. But we can only plan so much, isn't that so, Stone?

I had two choices; either to make the trip or let it burn as you have already paid for it. I was so unfit; to be precise, I was frail. I had wanted to let it burn and go back to my slumber, but a low and firm voice whispered to me, "Do it, Jane."

I spent another three months training every day. It was difficult to start again, but I wanted to go and see the scenery for both of us. I wanted to carry you in the warm place in me to see the mountains together.

I was retracing our steps from ten years before. The villages we walked past on that cold November morning on the Diwali, the festival of light; the strings of tiny yellow wild flowers hung in the air on the wooden poles along the village. The offerings, fruit and bread, laid along the trek were put on plates made of leaves.

The weather was just nice, sunny and blue sky but cold. I wore layers of clothes just as you taught me. I brought your black walking sticks with me. It was so tough to trek for long hours again, but I felt I was close to you.

The panorama view of the Annapurna and Dhaulagiri mountains from Poon Hill was majestic, Stone. As the sun rose, the golden sunlight was cast on the snow-capped Annapurna mountain range. Slowly, the mountains woke up in front of me, stretching their strong body and reaching out to the clear sky.

All the noises and people around me disappeared and it was only me and the mountains, and you inside me. I broke down and cried uncontrollably. I had forgotten how beautiful the mountain is, and why we love the mountains and Nature so much.

Nature always give us her best without asking for our affections and in return wins our heart effortlessly. But she gave us the worst day too, like the day she claimed you from me.

But all I felt this morning was gratitude, Stone, for all the years we were together, for all the breathtaking mountain views we experienced together, for all the memories we shaped together.

I smile for the first time since you left, a flower blooming from the bottom of my heart. I am wide open, exposed, vulnerable, yet liberated.

After all these years with you and all these months without you, I finally understand your carpe diem. I made a vow to the mountain: I will cherish every moment in my life, as if it were the last, until I meet you again, Stone. Until I meet you again.

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