

The Beloved

(for Pratima and Sudhir)

Kavita Nandan¹

University of the South Pacific in Suva, Fiji

“Dearly Beloved, we are gathered here today to remember the life of...”

We, the beloved, are left behind sitting like dead weight on wooden pews.

“Yes, we are the beloved of the dead,” I think morosely.

In another place and time... his beloved could be seen from a passing car on its way to the ritual of havan. She walked away from the airport for all to see, dragging her dark suitcase on wheels along the side of the sticky bitumen road. The face weighed down by an old pain, and unwashed grey hair glistened in the simmering Nadi heat.

How many times had she made this solitary journey?

On that fateful Sunday she had gone to the airport to receive her betrothed. But he had never arrived, failing to make the flight after suffering a heart attack, so the story goes...

Perhaps in the beginning, in the first four trips or so, she was able to recreate that sense of expectancy, but then, when exactly did a sense of dullness creep in, as well as a resoluteness to maintain the ritual?

The doctors say to let her be, otherwise she will go mad for true.

They arrive at the havan late. The teacher and her daughter, heads lowered, sidle next to the other women sitting on used sugar sacks placed horizontally on the ground; the professor finds his place among the men. I look up tentatively to see a row of faces staring blankly at the backs in front of them.

Any distraction is welcome, I suppose, as the priest's throaty mantras rise, encircle and strike, trying their best to penetrate into our slumbering consciousnesses. Teacher twists and turns her feet making squeaky noises on the mat. There is a low din coming from the sugarcane field surrounding the make-shift shed.

Only the circle of relatives sitting around the dug-out havan do not notice the noises and the fidgeting. They are lost in their devotion to their mother, mother-in-law and grandmother. The rituals culminate in an anointment of haldi.

¹Kavita Ivy Nandan is a Lecturer in literature at the University of the South Pacific in Suva, Fiji, where she teaches postcolonial, modernist and women's literature at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Most recently she has co-edited *Writing the Pacific: An Anthology of Short Fiction and Poetry*. She is also the editor of two books: *Stolen Worlds: Fijiindian Fragments* (2005) and *Unfinished Journeys* (1998). Kavita completed her Ph.D. at the Australian National University on "Negotiating Histories and Homelands: The Diasporic Narratives of V.S. Naipaul and Salman Rushdie," in 2000. Her ongoing research is on the Fijiindian Diaspora.

It is exactly six months since my aunt passed away. The havan is being performed, I believe, as a prayer to the gods to further her soul's progress into the spiritual realm.

She is at peace. We are not. The mosquitoes are biting our arms, the sun is burning our faces and our legs are contorting to conform.

The professor is called to join the inner circle. He moves from his chair to the ground. There is something humble in his measured movements. His belt presses into his stomach as he sits crosslegged; his dapper white shirt contrasting with the casual, dusty clothes of the villagers.

When the pundit has finished the mantras, he grinningly accepts his container filled with an assortment of items: a few potatoes, a container of oil, a packet of rice, a chequered shirt and some dollar notes placed on top. An old man and a young boy are called forward, individually, to accept their containers.

The old man is finding it difficult to hold onto his – the gift swiftly becoming a burden. My uncle scolds his nephew into action. The old man and the young one accept these alms for the poor openly, without embarrassment.

The daughter-in-law begins to cry for the ceremony is over. My aunt hugs her smiling, light dancing across her face; she weeps into my mother's chest – her nylon sari hangs clumsily on her now. The pundit makes a remark in Hindi and she laughs. The mood is almost jovial – my cousin, the eldest son, jokes about how he dropped larger portions into the fire so that the pundit's murmurings would come to an end sooner.

But the point is that the rites have been observed, their mother is at peace and my uncle can go back to reading his newspaper.

There is one ritual left to be performed before we can eat. The men, and only the men, take the various foods prepared by the daughters and daughter-in-law in the early hours of the morning into the backyard. In procession they place the dishes on the grass. I am watching, hardly concealed behind a bedroom curtain. I am not the only one; the chickens, ducks and rooster are watching and waiting too.

My cousin says that sometimes a sick person will steal some of this food laid out to the gods and be cured. What a wonderfully provocative ritual; forbidding and yet challenging: "Do I dare?" and, "Do I dare?"

The women dart back and forth serving impossibly small spoons of at least 15 different types of vegetable curries: my inadequate paper plate is piling high with choraya baji, dalo baji, khuda, khattar, dahai bara, peanut and tamarind chutney and dhal puri.

There is a spiritedness invading the room fast: inside, women are chattering about the next wedding; outside the men are debating about the coming elections and the children are being scolded by both parties as they spill in and out of the house.

The daughter-in-law pausing for a moment sits down in the corner of the living room. There are dark circles around her eyes; there is that dull pain around the corners of her mouth – the type that arrives months after death has lost its sting and a weary acceptance takes up residence.

Perhaps she is finding it hard to come to terms with her mother-in-law's absence amongst such life or perhaps she is thinking that her mother-in-law lives on in all this functional chaos.

Mother earth gives and takes away life so casually. As human beings we struggle for meaningfulness; always tunnelling deep into the earth, only to get to the other side, disappointed, that there is no unveiling of secrets.

For a brief hour or so our breaths mingled with the flames of the havan before they were extinguished. But we continued to breathe and the flame of memory continues to burn in the heart of the beloved. And that image of my cousin walking into the sea by the Wailoaloa crematorium carrying his mother's ashes and bones has begun to fade already.

Only the sea, the beloved sea stretches beyond the five-star hotel shining confidently next to the crematorium....

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