

Last Words

Jameela Siddiqi¹
London, UK

The funeral directors had been instructed to bring his body home, from where it would be driven to the cemetery. She thinks it will be nice for him “to go from here.”

“Go where?” I’d like to ask her, but on this occasion, some sixth sense warns me, such awkward questions would not be welcome. I am only allowed to repeat what they want me to say – and to repeat their words *exactly* as they want. Questions are not allowed. Unless they have been fed to me.

After all these years of general grumblings and long silences there will now be even fewer words in this house. It will be just her and me. And she’ll walk up to me and want me to say this, or say that. And I’ll say it. Just as she wants. And then she’ll want me to say it again, and again. And I will say it again. Then she’ll get bored with the game and waddle off to sit in front of that living room contraption that makes light flicker on her face.

They never did talk much – not having that much in common – but whenever they fought, I had new words coming at me so hard and so fast that I could have written volumes and volumes of stories. If I knew how to write, that is.

I know she married him because she thought she couldn’t do any better. She had reached that age where people tell you “It’s now or never!” and the word “never” has such finality about it. Human beings hate not having a choice. Somehow, she persuaded herself that although this man was far from ideal, she’d better just do the decent thing and settle down, because she might never get another chance – or a better offer. So, even though she was only 28 at that time, everybody had already convinced her that she was headed for spinsterhood, shameful and damnable. So, she married the man with whom she could never have a meaningful conversation.

That was over 40 years ago. The one good thing she did was to insist that I too accompany her to her new home. Perhaps she sensed I would fill the void in conversation. He was not happy about her wanting me to move in with them. It took some persuasion and finally he gave in. Believe it or not, she made it the one and only condition of the marriage! So, I moved to her new home with her, and I became the silent – sometimes not-too-silent – witness of all their embarrassing moments in those early days of marriage. Those early years were OK. There was a baby girl, quickly followed by another baby girl. And then, five years later – a complete surprise to both

¹ Jameela Siddiqi was born in East Africa and is a London based novelist, journalist, and broadcaster specialising in the history of North Indian classical music for which she is also a part-time lecturer on a degree course in conjunction with Trinity (Laban). She is a regular contributor and reviewer for *Songlines*, a leading journal of World Music. Her first novel, *The Feast of the Nine Virgins* was published by Bogle L’Overture, London, 2001, and her latest novel, *Bomaby Gardens*, was published by Lulu Inc., USA, 2006.

of them – yet another baby girl. Between tending to the children and keeping house for him, she never had a moment in which to reflect on life. That is good. It is good to keep too busy to sit and think what is wrong with life. If you have too much time on your hands, then, sooner or later, you become disgruntled with your lot. Between waking, feeding and dressing the children for school and tending to his meals and the washing, her days cascaded away in a mechanical outpouring of robotic activity.

Every so often – and even as recently as just six months ago – she was reminding herself that she was, at least, still married to the same person she married forty years ago. How many people can say that these days? I often overheard her – on the phone – sanctimoniously pontificating to her (two divorced and one single) daughters: “He’s not perfect, but we’ve had all these years together. Marriage is another word for compromise. You girls these days are just looking for perfection. And you will keep looking forever. And that thing you call chemistry. When I was young, chemistry was a subject boys studied in school. It wasn’t a quality one looked for in a happy marriage. But my mother taught me that if he doesn’t come home drunk and beat you up every night then you’re doing OK.”

That’s what she thinks, really. And I’ve seen him and her, night after night, sitting in near silence mesmerised by that box with a screen that is the central most feature of their living room. I can’t actually see this device from where I am placed, but I can see their faces, and the light flickering across their unblinking eyes. Sometimes they make some mundane observation: “Isn’t that the same one who...? Hasn’t he put on weight? He used to be...? Is this programme a repeat...? Didn’t we see it...?”

She never finishes her sentences. He finishes them for her. That’s the way it is with people whose conversations are seriously limited. Given that there is so little to talk about, they must “share” whatever there is, so that one person starts a sentence and the other finishes it. They have developed a very sophisticated coded language between them. In this aspect at least they are far superior to many human beings. Humans waste so much time talking: words, words, words. A simple nod of the head, or a gesture of the hand can suffice just as well. *Words* are responsible for more human misery than almost anything else. Human beings developed language – and then everything went downhill. They pour forth a torrent of words and then retract: “But I didn’t say that... and when I said *that* I actually meant *this*... you misinterpreted my words... you quoted me out of context... *when* did I say that?”

And then they would try to teach *me* their stupid words – the same words that became the undoing of their own lives! Whatever they couldn’t say directly to one another, they would teach *me* to say! Not content with ruining their lives with words, humans are always keen to teach their language to those of us who are doing perfectly well without it. But I would just have to say the words they wanted me to say, because I knew it made them happy. In the very old days, they would bring their guests and visitors to meet me, and make me say their silly words: “Hey good-lookin,’ whattya got cookin?” “Who’s a pretty boy then?” Yes, in those days they treated me like a circus clown. Their visitors would coo “Aah! How sweet...” and then they would all trundle off to do other things – like I didn’t exist. One minute everybody’s

around me. As soon as I've performed my act, and they've finished cooing their appreciation, off they go. Not one person asks what I feel! They only want to hear me talk. That's what gets me. They can hear one another talk till the cows come home. Why then are they so amazed to hear a couple of words from me? It's not as though the words mean anything. I've just been told to say them. And I repeat them exactly – in exactly the same tone – exactly the way they want.

But, on the whole, these two haven't done too badly. I think they have evolved to a much higher state than most human beings in this respect. That's because they've been together for such a long time. (I think they're even beginning to look like one another.) Words have become less important in their lives. In the old days their disagreements were signalled by copious verbosity. She would babble on and he would "ah-ah and uhm" and then, when she was sulking, he would ramble on and on about how hard he works to keep her in the style to which she is accustomed. But of late, their disagreements have become much more civilised. They no longer rake up every single past incident to reinforce a new quarrel. Some of their most contentious past issues are reawakened merely through the mention of *one* key word. It's a kind of shorthand for those who have fought a lot in the past and have now, by mutual consent, agreed to enact a truce – just to have a quiet life. Like that instance some years ago when they had a disastrous two-week holiday in a boarding house in some English seaside town. I'm not sure what happened because they didn't take me with them, but when they came back, they didn't talk for a week. It was great for me. Such peace and quiet! But something terrible must have happened on that trip, because, even now, whenever he seems to get too big for his boots, all she has to say is: "Remember Blackpool?" and he shuts up at once. And then, for the next few hours – sometimes even a whole day – he's nothing but sweetness and light to her: makes the nightly cocoa, fills up her hot water bottle, warms her slippers by the fake fireplace and starts calling her "Darling" again. Before retiring for the night, she usually looks in on me and says "Goodnight sweetie-pie" expecting me to say it back to her. Sometimes I do, and sometimes I don't – on purpose!

"What's good about it?" I've often wanted to ask her. But, as I said, questions are not allowed.

Now, as his coffin is carried in, the undertakers having to take some awkward corners to fit through the narrow doors to place it in the small sitting room, she's sobbing again. She hasn't cried for two days – not since it first happened – but on seeing the coffin, she's off again. It must be really important, because even the flickering box has been moved from its central position to make room for the coffin. It will lie here for a few minutes and then be carried out again. There are a few people murmuring a few things. But nobody has walked up to me, or shown any interest in me. It's like I don't exist.

No, I spoke too soon! She has come over to me, tissue over her nose and her eyes streaming. She picks up my cage and walks towards the coffin.

"Come on, Pretty Polly. Say goodbye to Daddy!" she urges.

Even in death, they want words. Again, I want to ask her: "But will he be able to hear me?"

But I'm not allowed to ask questions. And this final goodbye is not for him, but for her. *She* wants to hear me say it. So that her guests can all say "What a lovely parrot! He knows, he *knows!*"

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