

## With Unseemly Haste

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At a certain late stage of life I suspect you know more dead people than live ones. My beloved mother in law was a great funeral-goer and I was her designated driver. There was hardly a person who passed away in Nasinu 9 miles for whom we failed to attend the final rites.

Final is a bit of an exaggeration. There was no departure in unseemly haste. First we would hear of the death by an osmotic system that let the information seep almost instantaneously through the community. It began with a loud cry by the eldest female in the household, heard by a neighbor and soon spread into the village and abroad, including family overseas. Back a few years it was using the landline on one expensive call to ask someone to relay the news to everyone else in Auckland or Sydney or Sacramento. Now it's just a matter of whipping out the mobile and hitting the speed dial for *Mausi* and *Jiji*, *Bhauji* and *Aaji*, *Kaka* and *Bhaiya*.

While the immediate family got on with ordering the coffin box, sorting the wood for the cremation and making arrangements for transporting the body to and from the morgue, others would be calculating just how long it would take for the married daughter to fly from Vancouver. This is important because neighbours and more extended parts of the family would have the responsibility of feeding the bereaved, for however many days until the funeral. No cooking fire could be lit, no food prepared in the household except for the endless cups of tea (made in the electric jug by nieces and daughters in law) and served with donated shop biscuits.

There would be great turning out of kitchen cupboards and running to the shops to find suitable ingredients for vegetarian fare. Inevitably it meant many, many meals of *dhal bhat*, the nourishing dish of lentils and rice beloved of good mothers and worthy women on a stringent household budget, and produced in wildly varying degrees of tastiness. I often wondered how many pots of *dhal* were accepted with genuine gratitude

for the gesture, but a great deal less enthusiasm for the food as the days wore on. Although it wasn't strictly the donething, a fresh, hot, long loaf from the bakery with \$1 butter and a kettle of masala chai for early morning was often welcomed by the bereaved.

One of the first funeral tasks was to erect the shed, a temporary shelter with a roof of corrugated iron sheets supported on mangrove poles. This was because most homes were humble, not to say poor, and of no size to accommodate the number of people who would gather in coming days. Shed seating was constructed from narrow planks laid across concrete blocks, grievously uncomfortable, especially for the more developed middle-aged buttocks. In the days running up to the funeral, men would sit there, grog-swiping round after round of kava made with minimal ceremony and often served in small enamel *piala* bowls rather than the traditional half coconut shells.

Most houses were built of wood and corrugated iron, often with an outdoor kitchen and frequently with an outdoor squat-style lavatory with its attendant bucket of water. However small the living-room, ladies would be expected to squeeze inside to comfort female family members. The tattered three piece 'suit' disguised with bright cotton crochet doyleys would have been shoved into other corners of the house, although the laminex sideboard with its teddybears and dollies gifted to children at birth and still wrapped in their cellophane, on display next to the souvenir of Auckland china mug and sparkly picture of San Francisco bridge, would be too difficult to shift. What floor space there was would be laid with mats. Crammed with visitors during hot weather it was a foretaste of hell.

New arrivals first embraced the widow and wailed on her shoulder for a polite length of time, depending on the closeness of the relationship. This was the most difficult moment for me, especially if I didn't actually know the bereaved. I would try to say something encouraging in English (usually not well received and often not understood) and then exhort her with the few words of funeral Hindi I had: '*Ro nehi*, auntie, don't cry.'

Then I was free to find a spot on the mat to sit down, and fat chance of getting a wall to lean on. All the old aunties would have long since snaffled those places and weren't going to give an inch. Someone would come around with a tray of sickly sweet orange cordial which I would sip at politely until some child came past and kicked it over.

My child would be playing outside with other little girls and ignoring the mothers who were calling them to come in and sit down properly, '*achhaa se baithe*', with their frilly dresses pulled modestly over their skinny legs. I would be hoping my child stayed out of my sight, so I

wouldn't have to call her in. I can't erase from my mind the scene at one funeral when the widow, a comparatively young and truly bereft woman, chose to come and talk to my daughter as she lolled on my lap. The widow asked her name. The child look vague and finally answered to my great surprise: 'Clock'. The widow looked confused and asked if she had another name. 'Yes,' said the child. 'Miss Clock.' The poor woman burst into quite inappropriate and possibly hysterical laughter and rushed into the other room.

After forever, my mother in law, known to all as *Aaji*, grandmother, would signal me to leave. I would lurch to my aching knees, trying to achieve upright without waving my backside in other people's faces or standing on my flimsy *dupatta* scarf and half strangling myself. At least I could wear *salwar kameez*, India's answer to the pants suit, and didn't have to worry about handling miles of sari and petticoat and wondering where the bit that's supposed to go over the shoulder had gone...usually around my ankles, where the rest of the sari would be heading if I wasn't careful. Sometimes it would have been raining and especially if those who put up the shed hadn't paid proper attention to digging some drainage, there would be mud deep enough to squish over our sandals and dirty our hems. But at least we were out of that crowded room where the sweat rolled down your face and the skin under your bra elastic itched frightfully.

Finally the day of the funeral would arrive and we would all go, us respectfully dressed in white or pale colours, the men in white shirts at least, even if they wore western style dark trousers. No matter what time it was due to start, we always seemed to be there way before the deceased was brought home and the pundit began the *puja* rituals. A woven leaf fan was worth remembering to have with you, and certainly a handkerchief. Paper tissues may be the go in most places, but many Fiji people still cling to their hankies like safety blankets. They mop sweat from the brow, dry damp hands and are put to weeping eyes...or conceal eyes that can't squeeze out an appropriate tear. At a family funeral a few years ago, an elderly, apparently vision impaired sister in law of the deceased suddenly burst into sobs after gazing at a Gauguin print on the wall. It showed a young Tahitian woman in a chair who was clutching a large white handkerchief. The sister in law wailed to the picture: 'Such a wonderful likeness of you *bhaini*, my sister, holding your hanky as you sit in your rocking chair, just like you always did.' The other sisters in law tittered and jiggled their sari bound tummies with ill-concealed mirth, finally explaining to the mortified old one that it was not her *bhaini*, nor anything

like her.

Older aunties often provided some moments of mirth on these solemn occasions. At one funeral we had arrived rather late and amazingly the pundit was already in full swing. He noted the arrival of a *memiya* and dropped in an occasional English phrase for my benefit. I was adept at drowning out the pundit's drone with my own interior monologue, but soon became aware of another loud conversation going on. Two old ones sitting on the bench in front were discussing their various woes and ailments. It was all how this one's head ached perpetually, now the pain had spread to her shoulder and her daughter in law couldn't give a decent massage if she tried, just a waste of good coconut oil. The other one's leg never stopped hurting, especially trying to sit on these skinny benches, and the good for nothing fellow at the temple never doing proper rituals to make it better, might as well keep taking the rubbish 'two panadol' the health centre doled out.

There was an ominous pause from the pundit, who broke into a lecture about how he was speaking to us for our own good, not just for the deceased, and we should have the manners to listen. The two old ones were deaf as well as loud, and only fell silent after a small girl was sent to tap them on the shoulder and pass on the message. After saying even more loudly '*Konchi? What? What?*' they finally quietened, except for a bit of muttering about some people being headaches and not being worth listening to.

Relatives are sometimes a dubious blessing at funerals, even when doing their best as supporters and comforters. Sisters are known to happily pass on medical advice, vile home cures and prescribed medications to each other for all manner of ailments and aches brought on by the stress of lengthy funeral rites. Like the time the widow complained of a terrible headache and a younger sister insisted she take some of the new pills her doctor had given her. One may have helped, but if one was good, more was considered better. How many I don't know, but the weeping widow was soon nodding over her husband's coffin, giving gentle snores while her sisters sitting either side propped her up for the final rites. Later, after a good rest, she discovered her husband was long gone to the cemetery. She stormed at her sisters, incensed that after a lifetime of looking after her rather difficult spouse, she didn't remember a thing about doing her final duty of placing a floral mala around the neck of the dear departed. 'Don't worry', a giggling younger sister said, 'we helped you do it all properly. But it was a bit tricky when you nearly fell into the coffin with him.'

When it came to relatives I usually knew whose funeral it was, but

half the time I didn't have a clue about the deceased and would follow some vague and complicated directions to get there. 'Go over the first bridge after the shop, then the second bridge and turn at the big mango tree and it's just up there.' Many kilometres later and much stopping to ask people who appeared to be struck dumb by the idea of someone in their neighbourhood being dead, we'd be reduced to driving up and down all the muddy, rutted byways that pass for rural roads looking for some sort of gathering. Which is how we came to be at the wrong funeral.

We had got lost several times, finally found the correct road, spotted the shed and pushed quietly through the coconut leaves curtaining the gathering from the road. We were so far at the back we couldn't see the pundit or hear what was going on. But we could see the mourners and neither of us recognized anybody. They were not obviously Hindu. To put a finer point on it, nobody in the crowd was Indo-Fijian. It seemed a bit rude to ask one of them what the name of the deceased was. When they stood up to sing a Methodist hymn, we rustled our way back through the coconut leaves and scurried to the car. After that when *Aaji* said she wanted to go to a funeral I used to ask: 'Anybody we know?'

The point finally came at all funerals when the coffin was lifted by sons or other male relatives, put into the flower-laden hearse and taken to the cemetery where the sons or their representatives lit the pyre. Due to Fiji's frequently sodden weather, the standard crematorium is a high-roofed corrugated iron shed with three open sides to shelter the fire, not the mourners. The people stand under a baka tree or on a rise that gives a cooling view of the sea and distant reef to where the next rain squall is approaching. A few stand vigil until all that is left are ashes while the rest can drift off home.

But it's not over, not nearly. Now begins up to 15 days of ceremony starting with head shaving of male relatives and throwing the cremation ashes into the sea. Then the family can cook, first boiled food only that everyone declares they relish, and certainly it's different. Then finally what the household was waiting for, a meat meal. There are the nightly readings of the *Bhagavad Gita*, the rituals, the smears of sandalwood paste on foreheads, the too sweet cups of tea or juice and the *bhajans* sung with devotion and varying degrees of excellence while the *dholak* drum pounds and the cymbals jingle. Then the melodious *kirtans*, songs of praise, accompanied by harmonium and tabla.

On the last day, another meal. But that's still not it. There's the six months anniversary, another two day affair, and after a year, the lifting of the mourning. Each time, the family gets together, connecting with those

they hadn't seen for yonks or at least for the past six months, exchanging news or merely purveying hot gossip, checking who'd put on weight, who had more gold jewellery and whose children had done what, which ones had got married – or were ready to be – and most importantly, what the food was like.

When *Bhaini* got sick we knew from what people weren't saying that she wasn't going to make it. She gave it her best shot, all sorts of herbal, medical and spiritual treatments, and then travelled to visit her wide-spread family for what was to be a last time, although nobody was admitting. Back home, transparently thin and frail, she still denied her mortality, remaining with us, organizing the neighbourhood Mothers' Club as she always had done. Under her long term tutelage they ran a credit union, went on tour to places of scenic and religious interest, and raised enough money by all sorts of means including guilted wealthier relatives and acquaintances overseas into substantial contributions, to build a community hall and *mandir*. At this temple they arranged and subsidized weddings for brides from poor families and ran a kindergarten as well as holding religious ceremonies and celebrating festivals.

The last day we visited *Bhaini* she was being nursed by a fervently Christian woman who, though devoted to Jesus, was a deeply comforting caregiver for this dedicated Hindu. It didn't matter by what route, she was going to God. *Bhaini* was clearly struggling, too weak to leave her bed now and unable to eat, but even so we were surprised at the news of her passing the following day. It seemed too soon, surely she hadn't been at death's very door the last time she spoke to us, faint of voice but with the same penetrating questions about what we were doing, when was the eldest getting married, had the young ones passed their exams.

It was only much later, considering other deaths, I realized the end is always a shock, even when completely expected. It is impossible to think of a person being present in one second and then just not in the next. How can they no longer be, in a flash, a process so quick it seems such unseemly haste.

A year on, again sitting and sweating in a crowded shed, electric fans blowing everywhere but where I am, skin irritable with prickly heat beneath a respectfully white but hot synthetic *dupatta*, her death becomes final. She is not just on another jaunt to the Nag stone in Labasa with its growing cobra head or doing a round of the extended family in Canada, she is gone, finish. It seems to bring home the reality of other deaths. I am listening to the *kirtans* and can no longer bear it, and depart with what my sister in law later comments was unseemly haste.