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Fell Sergeant

Lloyd Fernando

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Fell Sergeant

Abstract

Kassim called Partha to say that Kevin had died. 'An accident in the Belidau railway station. Part of the train was shunting very slowly,' Kassim said. 'Kevin on the platform thought it was leaving, ran after it and missed his footing jumping on.' 'His withered arm didn't help,' Kassim said, 'Can you imagine? I found Lillian on the platform screaming without ceasing, going from one bystander to another until I came back.' Pressing the receiver to his ear Partha said, 'Came back?' 'I was seeing them off to Penang. Kevin and Lillian. I had gone to a stall to get a bottle of mineral water for Lillian. Only a few minutes. It happened then. When I came back, he was gone and she was screaming like a mad woman.' 'Is he dead?'
Kassim called Partha to say that Kevin had died. ‘An accident in the Belidau railway station. Part of the train was shunting very slowly,’ Kassim said. ‘Kevin on the platform thought it was leaving, ran after it and missed his footing jumping on.’

‘His withered arm didn’t help,’ Kassim said, ‘Can you imagine? I found Lillian on the platform screaming without ceasing, going from one bystander to another until I came back.’

Pressing the receiver to his ear Partha said, ‘Came back?’

‘I was seeing them off to Penang. Kevin and Lillian. I had gone to a stall to get a bottle of mineral water for Lillian. Only a few minutes. It happened then. When I came back, he was gone and she was screaming like a mad woman.’

‘Is he dead?’

‘He’s dead, man. Dead. That’s why I’m calling. You did some work for him once, didn’t you? Drew up some agreements or something? Partha?’

‘Yah, I’m here. Yes, a long time ago.’

Kassim said, ‘That whole day he kept saying, “I must get Partha. Where’s Partha? His old number isn’t working. Partha can do it for me.” He was planning another big condo project, you see, and he wanted you in on it. Where were you? Well he’s gone now, it doesn’t matter anymore, there’s nothing we can do. Okay, we’ll meet up some time.’

No, wait, he’s an old school chum. I haven’t seen him for twenty years, Partha thought. Or you, Kassim. We quarrelled about something didn’t we? Something someone said I said you said. You called me the real kafir. Not the others, you said, only me. I called you a Pharisee. Something like that. We didn’t talk to each other for some time after that.

In school, they would tug at Kevin’s limp left arm to annoy him. He would glare at them through his thick-rimmed spectacles that gave him an owlish look, but he hung around. When as twelve-year olds, they rode up and down hills over fifteen miles in scorching heat, he stuck with them, withered arm and all. In the end Kevin was the millionaire, chairman of several trading companies, and friend of Ministers.

Kassim was the chairman of a multinational corporation who, despite the changing times, kept his old friends though they didn’t meet often. Now with Kevin’s death those old times were briefly revived. Partha was still a journeyman lawyer who had never appeared higher than the Sessions Courts, except occasionally. Was this why he couldn’t weep?
The rest of the story as Kassim told it made him recoil as if from something obscene.

Lillian was shouting, ‘Please help him. Please do something.’ Her voice rasped, hoarse from shouting. ‘We already had plane tickets, what for to go by train, I said. But no, he suddenly remembered his boyhood love of trains and said we must do it. Now see what happened.’ She pointed.

A crowd was standing with folded arms looking at a mound on the railway platform, roughly covered with newspapers. ‘My stomach caved in,’ Kassim told Partha.

Kassim led her to the Station Master’s office and sat her down, waiting for the shudders to subside. Then he raced back to the platform. A ten-metre space was between the two halves of the truncated train. Someone was taking measurements. Where a shoe had fallen off. His thick-rimmed glasses.

A man thrust a handphone out. ‘You want to make a telephone call? Here, use mine. No problem.’

Kassim said to Partha, ‘I tried calling you again. No answer.’

That man said to Kassim, ‘I can look after everything for you. You have to make a Police Report. Get a lawyer. I know a good one. Guarantee within two years the wife can get the money. Permit — hah, permit also you need. This one uh, sure case one. They had no controls, nothing. Here, I give you my card. And this one, lawyer’s card. You want I deduct five percent. Twenty-five percent only.’

Kassim gave him back his phone.

The man said, ‘You have a lot to do, you know. Patch him up. Get the postmortem. See, blood still coming out of his body, still draining out. Brain splashed all over. I don’t think I even can move it. How to put him in a suit?’

Kassim turned away. The man called out, ‘I can help you with everything. A casket. For cremation not expensive. Five thousand only.’

Kassim went back to Lillian. He said, ‘I’m so sorry.’

She said, ‘Why don’t you go and help him.’

‘Lillian, you’ve got to pull yourself together. He’s dead.’

‘Now what, now what.’ She broke down again.

The ambulance arrived late. To the Station Master’s reproof, the driver said, ‘Ya la, traffic jam, that’s why.’

The strings of small lighted bulbs draped in the branches of the trees lining the road illuminated the centre of the dark town like a deserted fairground as they drove to the hospital, following the ambulance. Lillian was weeping again, quietly this time.

In the casualty ward two more touts came up. To the first who put a card in Kassim’s hand, he said, ‘Come on, man, not now.’ To the second, a small Indian with a trimmed beard and an ingratiating smile, he said, ‘Get out,’ and then called him back. These things had to be done, if not by one, then another.

At the Police Station at two-thirty in the morning, the Corporal’s routine questions grated on Lillian. She said, balefully, ‘What for you all want to know so much. No point la. What’s the matter with you all uh? I simply want to take him back, that’s all. Can you give me the permit?’
Kassim stepped up to the counter and spoke to the Corporal whose face was a wooden mask.

The Corporal said, ‘Ta’ada repot mana boleh kasi permit?’

Kassim said, ‘Ya la, saya faham.’ He led Lillian to a low wooden bench along a wall of the reception area of the Station. The lines of dried sweat on her face and the twisted strands of her hair made her look witch-like in the shadow.

The Corporal told Kassim to go into the Sergeant’s room. When Kassim came back he sat beside Lillian on the bench and took a deep breath. He said, ‘They’re saying if you want, the Inspector will look after everything for you. They have their people, you don’t have to worry. They will do everything. They can do things fast.’

‘Oh my god, even these people — and they — these — even they —’

‘Not so loud. They only want to help, they say.’

She shouted, ‘What is this?’

Kassim said, ‘I don’t know what to say. You must decide.’

‘What about him?’ She turned unseeing towards the small figure of the Indian man with the trimmed beard who smiled eagerly and came forward nodding his head. ‘Did you agree with him?’

‘I don’t know. Yes, I think so.’

‘And that fixed us,’ Kassim told Partha. They didn’t get the papers until 2pm the next day.

Partha said, ‘Bloody shits.’

Kassim said, ‘I’ll catch up with you some time,’ and rang off.

So that was the end, it could not be the end, Partha thought. First it was Raymond, down with a stroke. Then it was Hairil, chain-smoker. Cancer. After that Heng Sim. Killed himself. After that, yesterday, now, Kevin. Kevin’s time, their times, were slowly dying. Who was left from those old school days twenty-five years ago? Kassim and him. All memories would gradually fade off until there was nothing left. Would they persist a little longer if he saw where Kevin faded off?

Several nights later he stood near the same night train before it left for Penang. The crowd on the platform was simply a bunch of people on film with the sound turned off. He looked only at the train, gleaming silver grey, its curving sides giving it a snub-nosed, obscene look. The step at the entrance to each coach was level with the platform, and you could step smartly across. But there was a catch. Step and platform were not flush. There was a gap of about one foot between the two. If you were in your sixties and had one withered arm and you missed your footing and your leg went through, what would happen? The train had only to move at snail’s pace during shunting. You would crash to the platform as the train took you gently with it crying out, ‘Help me, help me.’ In the thirty seconds or more that it would take for the signalmen to realize something was amiss and stop the engine, your leg would have been crushed as if you had been slowly fed into a meat-grinder. You would inexorably reach the end of the carriage, and you would now fall askew on the rails, ready for the solid, three-ton iron wheels of the next carriage to do what solid three-ton iron
wheels do. You would end in the dark, gristle stuck on the wheels, legs severed, jaw crushed, your skull a smashed egg when the wheels stopped.

Partha continued to sit on the bench long after the train had departed and the platform was empty. He drove back, trembling. He got Lillian’s number in Penang from Kassim and called her. Although it was a month later, he had to speak to her.

The loud sound of rock music hit his ear as the receiver was picked up and a woman’s voice shouted, ‘Ay, put down the volume, people want to telephone. Hallo, yes?’

He said, ‘You don’t know me. I’m Parthasarathy, a friend of Kevin’s.’

‘Who?’

‘Partha.’

‘Oh yes. Partha. I’ve heard about you. Just a minute. I’ll turn down the music some more. We have a party going on. Yes?’

‘I heard too late of Kevin’s death. I just wanted to offer my sympathies. I didn’t know until —’

‘Thank you.’

‘If there’s anything I can do —’

‘It’s all right. Thank you.’

He didn’t know what else to say. ‘Kassim mentioned that Kevin wanted me to do some work for him. If I can help —’

‘Oh, the Taman Beng Lim project. We’ve already got lawyers. You know, so many lawyers asking to do the work. But we have already chosen. Sorry uh. Maybe next time we can give you something.’

‘I didn’t mean that.’

‘I know. It’s all right. We’re okay now. My son Paul is the new manager. He’s doing fine, everything is fine.’

He had expected, unfairly, he knew, a grieving widow.

Partha saw again Kevin on the track in pieces and the grief he sought finally overwhelmed him, strange tears mixing with stranger laughter. He felt desperate that the only real memory he had of Kevin was of the schoolboy bicycle ride with him, withered arm and all, up and down the hills so long ago over fifteen miles in scorching heat. That was all Partha could salvage from the past. The images of that piece of time had become fainter as each one passed away, Raymond, Hairil, Heng Sim, flickering more weakly with each death.

With Kevin’s death the only persons who knew of the existence of those times were himself and Kassim. When we, too, go, Partha thought, no one will ever know of the existence of those times. That piece of time would also be dead. It will be as if those times never existed. As if Kevin had never existed. That piece of time would never have existed. Finally there would truly be only nothingness left. He knew now there wouldn’t be a death second time round.

In a panic he called Kassim. ‘Ay, Kassim. Remember that quarrel we had so many years ago? I don’t know. Some stupid thing. You can’t remember? Never mind. Want to go out for a drink?’