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Sain Sucha

SHORT STORIES

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Dedicated
to the memories of
Saeed Anjum
(1946 - 2000)
and
Bukhsh Lyallpuri
(1931 - 2002)

—

two torchbearers
who devoted their lives
to fight against the darkness of
oppression and dictatorship

ZAFRAN SAFFRON

It has been a nice summer. No, not just nice, but a wonderful summer. Actually, it had arrived late by almost three weeks; still, once it came it had stayed on. The sun shone brilliantly, the wind had been easy-going, and with an increment of rain at almost regular intervals, the vegetation lavishly flaunted about a dozen nuances of the green in nature. And now, September had come. The days no longer dwarfed the nights the way they had done during the June to August stretch, but the sun still showed its muscles to the encroaching darkness that lay in waiting for the arrival of October to start its yearly assault.

Had Mrs Aina Petterson looked out of her window she would have seen at least three gangs of children engaged in play in the abundant greenery that hid behind the Yellow Houses at Smedjevägen and Häggviksvägen junction. Three gangs because they were formed after their ages. The youngest children in the sandbox were accompanied by their parents; the under-ten group had occupied the swings and

slides, while the over-ten gang played their own version of hide and seek.

But Mrs Petterson seldom looked out of her window, nor had she observed the late arrival and now the slow departure of the summer. In her flat on the fifth floor, the curtains were always drawn because the light hurt the eyes of Mr Lars Petterson who was confined to his bed for the last eight years. Although she and her husband were about the same age, Mr Petterson's body, as a result of the load that he had carried at the railway shed, had given in long before her and now she had to bear the burden of both of their lives. She was a frail lady, who had just crossed the eighty-border. Mr Petterson had arrived in this world two years earlier. Neither of them was certain who would be the first to abandon the other, but odds were slightly against Mr Petterson that he would be the one to suffer loneliness.

Behind the drawn curtains, other than the two faint lights, the only thing that shone in the big room was the television screen. Actually, their participation in the virtual reality far exceeded the contact they had with the reality that existed in the world outside their flat. Mr Petterson, and subsequently Mrs Petterson, missed no film that nine different channels offered them. His favourite movies were all those with James

Bond, and those in which Bruce Willis, Arnold Schwarzenegger or Will Smith always saved the world or USA in the last few minutes of the film. They had bought a video recorder from the Expert shop and she had recorded several of these movies for him.

Otherwise, Mr Petterson had been a rather quiet man all his life and with the passage of time he had become quieter. Therefore, his communication with his wife was primarily confined to different kind of gestures and grunts that rose above the sound from the television. Only occasionally, he would say a few words that always surprised Mrs Petterson that he could still speak. Ever since he had fallen off the bed, while Mrs Petterson had indulged in once-a-week bath and stayed on the floor until she had come out and found him missing on the bed, he had refused to be left alone even for a short while. Twice a week came a girl from the social bureau and did some quick cleaning, and shopping of the essentials for them. And only once a month Mrs Petterson left the flat to go to the post office in the Sollentuna Centrum to pay the bills and get some cash. On each occasion, before she left the flat she tucked the cushions on both sides of her husband to make certain that he would be there on the bed when she returned.

She liked to go to the post office on the first Tuesday of the month, because experience had taught her that very few people went to the Sollentuna Centrum on that day. One would have thought that this once-a-month Tuesdays was a day of freedom for her and she might avail herself a few moments for personal needs, but that she never did. Because of her Lutheran upbringing her inner call for duty subdued all other feelings her mind might harbour.

As usual, she went to the post office on the first Tuesday in September. She conducted her affairs and was back to Häggvik within an hour. She entered the lift when it reached the bottom floor and accidentally pressed the button for the fourth floor. When she came out of the lift, she was overwhelmed by the spicy smell of the newly baked bread. Hidden strings of the memory from the bygone times drew her to the door on the left. Outside the door she closed her eyes and stood there silently. Her grandmother's face flashed on the screen of her mind and then she saw her grandma bending down to take out the small buns from the oven. She extended her hand to receive one. She heard a soft sound and opened her eyes. The door was ajar and a woman who wore a strange black dress and had a white scarf on her head looked at her questioningly. Mrs Petterson did not know

what to do or say. She felt like a little girl caught for eavesdropping. She stepped back and said something to the woman in the black. She showed no response; probably she did not understand Swedish. Mrs Petterson pointed towards her nostrils and quickly inhaled twice to indicate that she was there because of that smell.

“Ah!” the old woman exclaimed and added, “Zafran.”

Mrs Petterson also smiled, nodded twice and said, “Saffron.”

Then she turned and went towards the staircase. As she reached the fifth floor she looked downwards and saw the woman in the black dress still standing there. Mrs Petterson once again smiled and nodded, and then went up to her door, unlocked it and went in.

She took off her shoes and went straight to her husband to check if everything was all right. He slightly turned his head and stared at her. He always showed his annoyance on her return from the outside world that distracted her from her duties to him. Then his eyes returned to his television. Mrs Petterson was on her way to the kitchen when someone rang their bell. Both of them were startled. Their social help came only on Mondays and

Thursdays. Therefore, somebody calling upon them on a Tuesday was entirely out of order. They looked at each other and then she hesitantly went to the door. Very reluctantly, she opened it. The woman from downstairs was standing there. She had a plate in her hand that contained a dish made of yellow rice and something on it. She handed over the plate to Mrs Petterson, said "Zafran", turned around and went downstairs.

Mrs Petterson stood there spellbound. The spicy aroma from the plate invaded her nose but she was not aware of that onslaught. She was trying to remember when the last time someone had offered her anything was.

"Who was it?" she heard her husband ask.

Yes, who was it? She had no answer; or rather, she had no answer that he would understand. She looked at him and shook her head to indicate that it was a wrong call by someone, and then went to the kitchen. She sat there for a while and looked at that strange mixture. She recognised the main ingredients as rice, meat, peas, carrots, and then a sauce whose constituents remained beyond her. She took a fork and tasted a little bit of meat. It was cooked quite tender. Then she tried a little rice and a bit more, and then she suddenly realised that more than half of the

plate was empty. She hurriedly put the fork on the table, waited for a few seconds, picked up the fork again and emptied the plate. After that she served her husband his usual lunch and sat down beside his bed.

That was the first time in years Mrs Petterson has fallen into sleep while she watched television with Mr Petterson.

The next day Mrs Petterson did an unusual thing. When Mr Petterson was taking his nap in the afternoon, she slipped out very gently and went to the small grocery shop in Häggvik Centrum. There she bought a thin packet of saffron, some yeast and white flour. Then she entered her flat very quietly, went to the kitchen, closed its door and started working.

Mr Petterson was having a nightmare in which he was caught stealing his favourite buns by his father, and was about to yell for his mother to come and help him when he was brought to reality by his wife's hand. Drenched in sweat he looked at her horridly. The whole room had a strangely familiar smell. She calmed him and then helped him with tea, and small bits of yellow buns.

"Is it already December?" he asked in a surprised voice.

She shook her head in negation and said, "No, but I have made them for you."

Then she went back to the kitchen, picked up the plate that was left by the lady downstairs and now had six newly baked buns in it. She did not ring the bell but knocked at the door on the fourth floor. The door was opened by the same woman. She still wore the same black dress. Mrs Petterson smiled and handed over the plate to her and said, "Saffron."

The woman in the black bowed gently and took the plate. Both of them kept on looking at each other. Nothing was said, but everything was conveyed. The smiles grew deeper on their faces and then the door was opened fully and the host stepped aside. An invisible hand softly pushed Mrs Petterson into that apartment. The room was sparsely furnished - a large carpet covered the floor, two chairs by one wall, and a three-seat sofa on the other wall. Facing the sofa, across the main table, a large television sat on a small but sturdy table. A somewhat stout and aged man wearing a fez occupied a corner of the sofa. He looked at them, smiled, nodded and said, "Salaam!"

Mrs Petterson nodded back.

On the television screen a woman with elegant attire sang in a foreign language. The words

remained alien to Mrs Petterson ears but she liked the singer's voice.

"Feroze," said the lady in the black and pointed towards the singer.

Mrs Petterson showed her appreciation by smiling more widely and then she remembered her husband. She pointed towards the man on the sofa and then upwards to the ceiling hoping that the other woman would understand and turned around to leave. The lady in the black closed the door after she had gone.

It was Saturday afternoon when there was a gentle knock on the door. When the old lady opened her door, she found Mrs Petterson neatly dressed, with well-combed hair standing there.

"Coffee," uttered Mrs Petterson and pointed towards her door.

The woman retreated to her husband, talked to him, and they came out together and followed Mrs Petterson. They were almost in the middle of the room when Mr Petterson observed them.

"Good Lord! Where did you find these Martians?" he exclaimed.

Mrs Petterson smiled and said to the husband, "Relax Lars, they are our neighbours."

And before Lars could comment upon that revelation, she asked the couple to take the chairs

beside her husband's bed. The man went straight to Lars, carefully lifted first his head and then the rest of his upper body. His wife put a pair of pillows behind him. Then both of them sat down on the chairs. Lars was still trying to sort out the new changes in his life when Mrs Petterson entered the room pushing a trolley with cups, a large pot of coffee and some slices of yellow bread on a plate. She poured the coffee, served it to the guests and then instead of feeding it to her husband as she usually did she placed his cup and the plate with the sweet bread on the table beside him. Three faces looked at Lars. Rather awkwardly, his hand protruded and got hold of the cup and saucer. He kept staring at the cup, steadied his hands and then took a sip. He lifted his eyes and found three smiling faces looking at him. He smiled back. Then he picked up a piece of the yellow bread and brought it close to his nose. Two voices said "Zafran," and the third uttered "Saffron."

"Saffron!" said he and balanced the equation.

The coffee was consumed silently but in unison. When that was over the man from downstairs took out a videocassette from his gown, showed it to Lars and said "Feroze."

"What?"

"Feroze," answered the man.

In sheer amazement, Lars watched the fat man as he got up from the chair, went to the video machine, put it on, inserted the cassette, switched the channel to AV and pressed the button on the remote control to play it.

By that time, Lars had also prepared himself for all eventualities, and for the next hour or so in the midst