

# The final cruise

By: Dr Neelam Verma

Tis but human nature to live in denial that nothing bad could ever happen to us. It always happens to “other” people. Sometimes, those “other” people can be you.

Every immigrant who leaves family and friends in their home country and plans to emigrate to another, is least prepared not to be able to get back in time for a close family’s funeral services. I never thought I will ever be writing this. But I am to bring closure to myself.

Living thousands of miles away from your aging parents, you always dreaded that one phone call maybe in the middle of the night when your phone would make that eerie screech bringing your world crashing down.

This call wasn’t in the middle of the night. It was right in the middle of a relaxing Sunday when family debates were on their peak as the sun shone outside melting the mountains of snow that had made Vancouver a slippery icy ski resort for days in the middle of February of 2017.

It was my brother from India. He just said “dad is gone” and hung up. He choked on those three words which obviously had taken away all his remaining strength in him from taking care of him but left me in disbelief.

I was so sure that this was a prank. I had talked to my dad just 2 hours before. In fact thanks to technology I saw him a couple of hours prior to this phone call. Unlike other days when he was not in a mood to talk when I called, that day of February 12, 2017, he willingly spoke to me for a couple of minutes. And I saw him, of course not in pink of health, but also not ready to call it a day. We had the usual conversation – I asked him to come to Vancouver and he asked me to come to India this time. “You come first” he had said. Not realizing those would be his last words he would be speaking to me, I let him go back to bed. The invitations were very casual and so were the good byes. Except this would be the last good bye and his words of invitation would ring true as just a couple of hours later, I would be packing my bags and going but not to see him or hear him. The image on facetime would be his last one etched in my memory forever. Did he have a premonition when he said “You come this time”? I had seen tears in his eyes when he said that but at that time, presumed that he just had eye drops put in his eyes.

I called my bro again. It took a couple of rings, with me waiting with jittery hands before he picked up the phone again. I couldn’t take any more info out of him. “Dad is gone. Come soon.” Another two words from him and he hung up. I knew it wasn’t easy for him to say those words and I didn’t have the nerves to call my mom. If I sit here thousands of miles away in broken disbelief, I couldn’t imagine what kind of emotional and physical state she would be in. If I couldn’t provide solace with my arms around her, I didn’t want to be a cause of further grief. Distance does create fear of the unknown.

I reached India as soon as I could but not fast enough to see him leave for his final journey – 18 hours too late. Because of weather conditions and advice of the priests, they had to let him go on his last cruise to his final destination within a couple of hours. They said it is important to give peace to the departed soul and to enable them to enter the world of ancestors. They couldn't wait but I am sure, my dad couldn't wait either. He was a passionate traveler, always ready to go see places, always on the move with his bags packed along with his entourage – cruising being his best mode of travel as it relaxed and entertained him all at once.

Thanks to his work with the External Affairs Ministry, he got to travel the world with all of us in tow. Travelling and seeing place, working hard and partying hard was his passion. Not one weekend passed without him either being invited to a gathering or he inviting people over, whether he was in India or travelling abroad. A duplicate of the legendary Kishore Kumar, he was the cynosure of all parties. His loud jokes, songs, ghazals and stories amused adults and children alike.

Having fun and spending time with family, which could be distant relatives, was his motto. Every evening he went swimming and took all his grandchildren with him. He taught mine and my sibling's children to swim and made the effort of staying in the water for hours so all six of them got to spend time with him. If the kids were good, he would reward them by swimming lengths of the pool with them on his shoulder. He spent hours playing with his grandchildren, taking them places and even sitting with them on mini toy trains, all crouched up like a 3 year old because the kids wanted him to be there and not their mothers. He would watch cartoons with them, eat what they ate and even walk the streets of Seattle donning a Donald Duck cap.

Since I moved to Vancouver, he had visited me five times in the last 15 years – the last being the summer of 2016, when Glaucoma had taken away vision from one eye and just a fraction left in his second. He was under treatment yet he wanted to come visit me as the traveler bug in him was biting him. My mom and the doctors had repeatedly not given him permission to travel to his favorite place – Haridwar – as the pollution and travelling by road might further deteriorate his condition. This time he was vehement and put his foot down. Like a child he became stubborn and finally he arrived to visit me, which unfortunately turn out to be his last. Even in Vancouver, he didn't want to sit at home. "Lets go on a cruise, everyone together", he would always tell me. "We will plan something dad by next summer once all the kids are out of school," I had made excuses. He always said, travelling creates memories and memories is what we cherish. So true! But too late!

I visited my to dad's office in Noida, where he had been going for the last 2 decades. Just 14 months back I had taken a picture of myself with him sitting on his high leather chair and my Vancouver number displaying prominently on his notice board. My name had Vancouver in bracket. I had always teased him about that. "Dad, how many Neelams you have in your life? I am the only daughter with this name. Unless you have a girlfriend." He had laughed his hearty laugh and offered me "*chole bhatura*" to shut up.

Now, on his leather chair now sits his framed picture with white orchids in front of him. His newspapers lay tidily on his desk. A glass of fresh water sitting on his right side as if waiting for

him to come and drink it. I always made it point to visit his office whenever I went shopping or visited India but will not be able to continue with this ritual any more.

He never sat idle and was always doing something – reading, talking, playing badminton or table tennis, yoga or even watching cricket. Life had never come to a full stop for him, even after he took voluntary retirement, a decision he told me once that was the only regret in his life. It was only when Glaucoma took away his vision, he slowly slipped into depression as the meaning of life had suddenly started changing. Being deprived of his travelling passion, he was losing his zest for living

Life never gives you a second chance-I have heard and read that many times. I never really tried to understand the depth in words this little sentence held. Too busy in my own life raising children, their soccer and basketball games, work, career took priority over parents. Despite trying to spend every little vacation I had once a year, I came back with a feeling that it wasn't enough. After losing the shade of a big strong tree which most of us take for granted, the plants underneath have suddenly aged. Someone said it right – the only man a girl can trust is her daddy. With him gone, a lifetime of bereavement has just begun.