

Achmat Dangor A reason to love

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The phone rang very early that morning. Monica lay still, her eyes closed, hoping that her husband Ronnie would let it ring. The caller could leave a message on the answering machine if it was something urgent. In which case they could get up and respond. And if it wasn't anything pressing, they could go back to sleep and call back later. But she felt the weight of the bed shift, and heard Ronnie padding on his bare feet to answer the phone. He was not the kind of person to leave things "well alone", as her mother used to say. She opened her eyes and glanced at the clock. It was nearly four thirty; calls at this hour early were usually from Ronnie's family in South Africa. But she no longer feared the worst, which was that something dreadful had happened to one of his brothers, his sister or his mother who was in her seventies and suffering from all kinds of ailments. She was used to people calling during "their" day, forgetting the time difference between Johannesburg and New York.

"Hullo? Hullo?"

She sat up. He had closed the bedroom door and stood in the darkened kitchen, wearing only his shorts, she guessed. Ronnie never prepared himself for a crisis; she would have slipped on a gown on a cold November morning like this. She thought of getting up and handing him his gown, but realised that he may want to be alone; he found it difficult to absorb news, bad news especially, if she was around, not that she was expecting any, she reminded herself again. Ronnie was a typical man in that way, finding it hard to show that he was scared or upset – or simply just moved – by what he had just had heard.

Monica listened to his tone of voice change, the initial barked "Hullo" giving way to something low and almost secretive. She sighed. There was no possibility of going back to sleep now, no matter what it

was whoever was on the phone was telling Ronnie. She felt so tired recently, even after a full night's rest, and knew that the day ahead would be a real challenge if she couldn't get another few hours of sleep.

She wondered who he was talking to. This was going on too long for an ordinary conversation. Ronnie had a very abrupt telephone manner, always getting directly to the point, whether conveying or receiving news, joyful or tragic. Well it wouldn't be either of his two brothers; they wouldn't spend money to call him long distance. And his sister, the sane one in the family, wouldn't wake them up at this hour simply to chat. Maybe it was an old lover, a lost girlfriend, one of those people from his past who pop up quite mysteriously from time to time. But no, Ronnie was beyond all of that.

"I've grown up!" he liked saying.

It took her a long time to believe that he had finally put his past behind him even though a note of regret still crept into his voice, from time to time, when they talked about what a "ladies man" he had been, the writer with a love or a lover in every place he'd visited. That's when he used to be on the conference circuit, in demand because he was a South African, someone who was part of the "unfolding political miracle". But such talk also turned him defensive, these days, and made him use such strange, formal language.

Those were "wasted" years, time spent on "politics and polemics" instead of writing, he said. She didn't like the seriousness this always brought to a casual and friendly discussion over a glass of wine. Now the other night she tried to get him to lighten up and made a joke: *You enjoyed it, especially the fringe benefits, you know all the women...!*

But he didn't appreciate her humour and instead, retaliated: *Listen, if it wasn't for our one-night-stand, we wouldn't be together, today!*

She resented his inference: she was just like all the others, a casual sexual encounter that in this case had – by some miracle – led to something more lasting. It wasn't exactly a one-nighter, she had to remind him. Yes, they slept together a week after they met; far too quickly for her liking, but that was because their meeting had been meaningful, for her at least.

He immediately became apologetic, saying he didn't mean it "that way" but couldn't say which he way he meant it.

He tried to appease her by saying: *Look, I've grown up.* She had been tempted to hit back as well: *Growing up or getting old?*

But she was incapable of being cruel to him. With others before him it used to come so easily, the ability to crush their vanities. What a

peculiar frailty some men suffered, seeing loyalty and monogamy not as something natural but as an imposition, a curse of passing manhood.

Why *did* she love Ronnie this way, with generosity that often roused in him something noble and for that moment, he seemed to genuinely enjoy being her companion? There were a lot of other times when she felt her affection was wasted, and that it frightened him off. God knew he was a difficult man, full of contradictory moods. Everyone said that that's the way writers are. But she didn't believe in all that rubbish. Writers – *artists!* – they proclaimed when they were drunk, didn't have any special rights, nor did the demands of their "art" make their needs more compelling than the needs of others.

He had finished speaking. There was a strange silence in the apartment; a mournfulness in the wake of his low, entreating voice. She slid down into covers, pretending to be asleep. The door creaked as he opened it, but she did not feel the bed shift; he was so obvious in the way he climbed in and out of bed, even though he tried his best to be catlike and quiet. She peeped out through half closed eyelids. He stood in the doorway, his head held down as if he was observing himself. Perhaps he too could envision the way his body would change; that still flat stomach becoming rounder, his slender but muscular legs becoming spindly. At fifty-three he still looked good, but decay was inevitable, was it not?

But no, he was looking at her through his lowered eyes, at the bed, at the darkness around it. That's one reason why she loved him the way she did, because of his vulnerability, his child's way of asking for comfort without saying a word.

Monica opened the covers and he slid in. For a few moments he lay close to her, accepting the gift of warmth, the fragrance of her hair which fell over his face as he rested his head on her shoulders. Then he turned away and lay on his back; the fragile moment was gone, his own thoughts had returned, reclaiming the solitariness he was prone to in moments like these.

"Who was on the phone?" she asked.

"Zerina."

His mother. She didn't usually call herself. Got others to do it on her behalf. And she wouldn't call at four-thirty in the morning for no reason at all. Something must have happened, then.

"Anything wrong?"

"Not really."

Monica closed her eyes and tried not to get angry.

She hated it when he answered her like that. What does “not really” mean? She used to challenge him about these peremptory statements, once, long ago, when she was eager to understand everything about him. She knew better now. He’ll choose to tell her when he was ready, when he had been able to mediate his feelings, blur them with words, blunt their edges by constraining them, as it were, in a poem or a story. She had seen the most painful of his emotional experiences emerge in verse that changed sadness to wistfulness, or stories that carefully cut the wound of some tragic hurt from his memory and gave it to someone else, a fictitious character that bore Ronnie no physical resemblance – they were often women – but who thought like him and spoke his words. So many unsaid things between them became things that strangers said in his writing.

Anyway, she was glad that he didn’t want to speak. She needed to sleep. His silence may be a mercy after all. But she knew it would continue to bother her; that she would soon turn onto her back and ask – demand, politely – that he tell her what his mother had said. She braced herself for his silence, as if was some impenetrable barrier she was about to crush into.

“Are you asleep?”

To her surprise he spoke without her having to prompt him, in a voice that came from somewhere else, from another time, another person almost, childlike in a way she had never known him to be.

“She’s going on hajj. Going to Mecca after all these years. Found God in her old age.”

“Oh, when is she going?”

“Soon. You know, I could see her sitting in that old chair of hers, the one in the living room, you know how sunny it becomes in the afternoon ...”

“Yes ...”

She could picture Zerina sitting as Ronnie imagined, in the slant of sun that fell into the narrow front room of the house he grew up in, the *township* house, part of a big, noisy family, struggling but close. He always spoke about that house with passion, breaking through the indifference that had settled over him and made him the quiet man he became. Childhood and youth were layers of memory from which he drew the occasional incident or character for his stories, but he rarely dwelt on the subject, as many people do. Except for the family home, a large and rambling place that stood on a hill overlooking row upon row of squalid “project” housing; a remnant from a time before apart-

heid that had somehow survived efforts to have it destroyed. It stood defiant and incongruous; even Monica, unsentimental by nature, had been impressed. As Ronnie continued speaking, she knew that his thoughts were in that house now, perhaps back in a time only he could see, and that even what his mother had said was gradually sinking into its shadows.

"Yes, I can picture her; what did she say though?"

When he spoke, it wasn't in answer to her question; he was still mentally describing his mother in the front room of a house he had not seen for years.

"She must have decided to call right there and then ..."

Monica's voice sharpened; an intake of breath gave her words their rasping quality.

"Ronnie, was there any particular reason for the call?"

He stiffened; she felt the peculiar tautness in the way he stretched his feet, as if his body's reaction to her tone of voice had startled him as well.

"She called to ask my forgiveness."

"Forgiveness? What do you have to forgive her for?"

"People who go on hajj have to obtain the blessing of those close to them; ask to be forgiven for things they've done or think they've done."

"So, it wasn't anything specific."

"No, she just said, forgive me; I need your forgiveness before I go on hajj."

"So it's theoretical, then?"

He went quiet. Her question had shattered something. For a moment he had seen his mother's gesture as profound, something truly spiritual that gave meaning to acts of faith like pilgrimages. Maybe it was the fact of her calling him at four-thirty in the morning to ask his forgiveness that touched in him the faithful child of *imaan* he had once been. *Maaf* was the word Zerina had used, straight out of the Koran; he didn't even know that his mother understood Arabic. But it was gone now, dissipated in the cold air, driven away by Monica's quiet logic. He resented the mercilessness of it, but knew that if he tried to explain that it was a cruel question, quite unthinking, and so unlike her, that they would have to explore the logic of this as well and he would soon truly be lost. He did not know how to use words in order to understand things, even though he was a writer. Or maybe because he was a writer. Shaping words, giving them a certain musicality, and inserting them into the minds and the mouths of fictitious characters was enough.

Their meaning, their very logic, lay in their rhythm.

But not for Monica. She was a lawyer – a human rights lawyer – who had no room in her mind for the ambiguities of faith. She worked at the United Nations, in the Secretary General's office. She always told him, when they talked about her work, that giving vague advice based on what she believed rather than on "irrefutable" facts and cold analyses could get her, and those who used her advice, into lots of trouble. They talked a lot more about her work than they did about his. Hers was more tangible, and had a far more direct influence on the way she thought and even the way she lived. Being a human rights lawyer made it easier to know who you were. A writer could be anybody; a creator of make-belief worlds who sometimes found it difficult to extricate himself from the place where for so many hours each day he was absolute lord and master

A sudden thought came to him.

I love Monica.

The clarity of the thought, without equivocation or explanation, surprised him, as if it was an entirely new realization and not something that he had come to accept as an integral part of his life. Love between two people inevitably becomes a habit – a comfortable one – that does not have to be acknowledged every minute of the day.

I love Monica.

The words came back again, demanding to be explored. He shuddered. Next thing, he would be remembering all the other people he had ever loved, his mother, his sister, his brothers, women he had forgotten. He had to ward off the emotions that started rising up within him; he feared he would lose control, that he would start crying. How pathetic for a grown man, all that *snot en transe*. He knew that had to harden himself inwardly.

I love Monica, he rationalised, *except when she's like this, so cold and logical about everything.*

He felt that she gave up going to church when she was still young because the idea of God seemed too unreal. She no longer prayed, even silently, though she thought that the concept of a creative force greater than man was a marvellous one. Her rationality made it impossible for her to worship something that could only be sensed. They no longer discussed things like God and belief; she knew that he prayed, uttering his private, unorthodox prayer each night, not to a God upon the altar, the cross or the mimbar of a mosque, but to a vague and therefore even more pervasive "God of life."

He knew what was going through her mind right now: why should anyone feel compelled to confess as it were, if they had nothing to confess? The concept of cleansing oneself of all enmities, real or perceived, in order to face God or God's ritual's such as the hajj would be completely baffling to her. "A false, cover-your-bases approach to finding salvation", he said to himself, using her kinds of words and her perplexed but challenging way of speaking.

"She hasn't done anything that you have to forgive her for, not actually, I mean?" Monica asked.

Suddenly he was beset with doubt. Perhaps Zerina did have something to be contrite about and did not know how to say it. He remembered when they were young, he, his two brothers and his sister, how his father was always away, making money and spending it in far off places, how their mother coped with the material hardships of a woman on her own with four young kids to care for in a rough township, and with her loneliness and with the pity with which her family regarded her. *Coping*, that's what Zerina spent her life doing. Back then she seldom did anything to get away from the house and the kids, the way young mothers do in order to retain their sanity. She had gone out without them, once or twice, from what Ronnie could remember.

He remembered one occasion when she went dancing with her two sisters; she became a different person when she put on a red dress the children had never seen before. Most of all, he remembered how the lipstick she applied to her pouted lips transformed her face. When her sisters and their friends came around to pick her up, they called her "Tzarina", like the Russian princesses of old, in memory of some magical time before she got married; the guttural sound of the "T" and the "z" pressed against the front teeth suited her more than the soft, somewhat pious "Zerina". She stood in the doorway, a stranger, too young to be the careworn wife and mother the kids knew. His little sister had started to cry, and his mother had given him a despairing look. He had comforted the four-year-old girl, while his mother went out towards the waiting car, not daring to look back, lest her courage fail her.

Was that it? Did his mother remember that one instance of "inappropriate" behaviour, a woman still young, abandoned by her husband, to all intents and purposes, going out to have some fun? She hadn't mentioned any specific incident when she called that morning, but the how could she? She was his mother, and mothers do not usually reveal their sins to their children. And why should they? No, she had called because the *kitaabs*, Muslim religious texts, advised poten-

tial pilgrims to find absolution from real and imagined transgressions and so ensure that their pilgrimages were not void, *makroef*.

What hypocrisy! But why should it bother him? He was, in effect, a non-believer since he had discarded his Muslim name, Haroon, drank alcohol and did not pray to the God of Mohammed but to the God of his imagination.

“Ronnie?”

“No, not actually, I suppose.”

“Not actually what?”

“She doesn’t have anything specific she needs to ask my forgiveness for.”

“Then it is theoretical, no?”

He sat up in bed.

“I need some coffee.”

She knew he was trying escape. If she let him get out of bed now this question would hang over them for days, a pall that would swallow everything; she dreaded the half-silences and the evasions that followed. They would not look each other in the eye and try not to touch intimately, until at last it became unbearable and the only way to break down whatever it was that had come between them was to have wild sex. In the aftermath of brutal passion the unease usually faded away, yet neither would initiate the love-making, since both saw it as a false way out and not a resolution at all. And so they would be trapped inside of a conundrum, needing to have unrestrained, passionate sex in order to overcome their alienation but seeing this as *fucking* which was something they promised each other, would not be the only basis for their physical intimacy.

She could let go, by turning to him now, gently embracing him, letting the whole thing settle like sediment in him; he was used to finding room in his heart and mind for unresolved things and not allow them to disturb him. How she wished she had his ability to accommodate inexplicable things. Why had Zerina called at an ungodly hour to ask forgiveness she didn’t need and why didn’t Ronnie feel free to talk about the strangeness of this request? These questions would remain with her, alive and bothersome; she would have to willfully drive them out of her mind. She feared the effects of all the suppressed thoughts, their slow and toxic accumulation – yes, emotions too can rot – gradually poisoning their marriage.

“I don’t want coffee, I want to talk about this and then go back to sleep.”

He looked at his watch. She had always wondered why men go to bed with their wristwatches on. The easy ability to look at the time was a tactic. He held it before him, the face glowing in the dark. He had no need to say anything. In his own mind the watch, with its barely audible tick-tick, conveyed something more compelling than his wife's persistent questions.

It was five-fifteen. This had had been going on for forty-five minutes.

"Why don't you want to talk about this?"

"About what?"

"About the reason your mother called and about why my asking a simple question has offended you so."

"I am not offended."

"You're evasive and that means you're offended."

"All I wanted was a cup of coffee."

"Okay then, go and make your cup of coffee."

He got out of bed and went to the kitchen, still only wearing his shorts. He came back and closed the door. He filled the old-fashioned espresso machine and carefully spooned in the right amount of coffee; it struck him that brewing coffee this way, early in the morning, had become a ritual, one that Monica had introduced into their lives soon after they met (*what I don't understand is how a man of the world like you can drink instant coffee!*)

The recollection of their easy banter, the familiar nature that their intimacy assumed early on – the fact that it still bound them, as evidenced by the slow way they ate and drank, enjoying a leisureliness that contradicted the habit both had of doing things at breakneck speed – made him want to go back to bed and take her in his arms, *say, let's get some sleep, we'll talk about this later.*

But he stopped himself. The problem posed by his mother's call was best addressed when they were both awake, after a day's work, under bright lamplight, over a glass of wine, not in the shadowy silence of a bedroom before dawn.

But the thought of having wine suddenly filled him nausea. Maybe because it was so early in the morning; or was it because his mother's voice still rang in his ears, bringing back the embarrassment he used to feel when she smelled alcohol on his breath? He placed the coffee pot on the stove and ignited the gas; perhaps the routine that preparing coffee brought to the beginning of his day would dispel the sick feeling in his stomach. The blue flame danced, filling the quiet dark-

ness with a vivid blue glow. It took him back again, to the lamp-lit house of his childhood. He was about seven or eight, people were praying, someone had died, and old man whose face each one of the kids had to kiss. The powdery feeling of dry sin, its pale surface tinged with a blue that could almost not be defined as a colour.

And his mother, in the background, tears filling her eyes, her features fighting to restore their familiar calm, and when it succeeded, took on the coldness and resolve that stayed with her all of her life. Was *that* something she needed to ask *maaf* for, not reaching out and taking her bewildered children into her arms to tell them that the man lying there was their father, leaving it to them to discover his suddenly wizened presence as they bent down to kiss the face? He recalled how they sat in a row afterwards, numb, unable to pray or cry, watching their father's family prowl through the house, inspecting everything, curtains, crockery, the contents of their cupboards. After the body was washed their father's brothers carried it to the green hearse parked outside the house. They were like debt collectors reclaiming property on which payment had defaulted. What Ronnie remembered most was how old his father looked when they were allowed to look at his face one last time before the shroud was sealed.

He always wanted to ask his mother: *Why was our father so old? Why did you marry a man so primed for death, when you were so young?* He might even have told her: *You could have been a real Tzarina, dancing away the dark hours of your life, and filling all our lives with a young man's breath and eyes and skin.*

But Zerina never allowed them to get close to the woman she was underneath the black mourning clothes she wore ever since her husband died. Perhaps that was what she had called to ask forgiveness for: never letting her children embrace her desolation. And he would have forgiven her, had she asked.

An icy chill came over him, and though his desire for the coffee's hot, biting taste was alive on his tongue, he felt he had to deny himself that pleasure. A small gesture compared to his mother's lifelong denial of the things she desired. He got up and turned the gas off, ignoring the coffee's warm, rich smell. He went to the closet and draped over his shoulders the ankle-length overcoat he had bought for a trip to Moscow one December. It felt coarse against his skin, but its heaviness gave him the strange feeling of having been rescued from somewhere desolate. He heard Monica stirring in bed, and walked on tip-toe to the settee where he sat down, waiting for the sky to grow light.

Monica felt the pall of silence beginning to settle; with Ronnie it usually started with a look of pride that slowly moved down from his face until it covered his body like a suit of armour. She thought back to the time they first met. She was part of an international mission to South Africa to observe the first democratic elections. On a trip to a rural province, they were accompanied by a group of local journalists. Ronnie was one of them. They travelled from village to village, where the voters stood patiently, in long, snaking lines. She noticed that he always gravitated towards her group which was called the North American Unit. He stood somewhat apart, observing everyone with his melancholy eyes that seemed to soften his rather angular countenance. They exchanged glances, smiled at each other, though she never intended to convey anything more but the polite acknowledgment of a friendly face.

Later, someone in their mission asked him why he thought the election was so important to these people. He smiled and said: *This is their first act of total freedom, choosing someone they want ... as their leader.*

It was not a particularly original thought, but said with such passion that everyone was moved. He had looked straight at Monica when he spoke. She was enchanted. She was surprised afterwards when thinking over the whole thing, that she had chosen the word "enchanted". To be under someone's spell. In other circumstances it might have sounded cheap, banal even, but the atmosphere of freedom, of wild emotions being restrained – how calm those people were, standing in the hot sun for hours, displaying the measured restraint of illicit lovers sure that their hour would come – helped her seduction. She would still not be sure years later, whether it was self-seduction; a woman alone in foreign place, the mood so "heady", willing herself to be enchanted. They slept together a week after they met, in his strange and narrow house in one of Johannesburg's strange and narrow suburbs.

She was surprised to see that he was circumcised, and now she found herself giggling at the memory of how shy he had been, when in the midst of their love-making she asked him about his religion. *Later*, he had said, and afterwards, lying next to her, he explained that his real name was Haroon but that it had been shortened to Ronnie at school. Somehow the nickname stuck. He was filing stories under the even shorter diminutive of Ron Gafiieldien.

Now nine years later, she was Mrs. Monica Gafiieldien. She was nominally Christian and he claimed to be a secular Muslim; they got married in a civil ceremony in Philadelphia, without family and only a few mystified friends.

Religion had never been an issue between them, temperament had. What do you see in this melancholic man? Jane, her girlhood friend, had asked.

Enchantment, a reason to love. If you have to ask what the reason is, then there isn't any. Who knows where such emotions come from?

She heard the coffee reaching its bubbling crescendo. He was making a whole pot. He was preparing to retreat into his corner at the window, stare out at the river, sip coffee, take out his pad and pen and scribble away, or if he was confident of the idea in his head – it has to be clear, luminous, he said – switch on his computer and sit tapping away. Maybe he had deliberately not stopped the coffee from boiling away so noisily and was inviting her to join him. She turned onto her side, stubbornly deciding that she needed to sleep – one more hour – more than she needed to know what his mother had meant when asking for forgiveness, more even than the need to be enchanted.

But she knew that sleep was impossible now. She opened her eyes, and found herself on his side of the bed, amazed at how close the street seemed, even from fifteen floors up. Without his body to shield her from it, the light crept in under the blinds and licked at her face like a dog. It was strange, more like the darkness growing paler rather than real light.

She looked at the bedside clock again. Five-thirty-five; too early for daybreak. This must be what they called a "civil dawn". She had come across this term on the weather channel and didn't know exactly what it meant; it had robbed her, though, of the protective warmth she wrapped herself in during moments of uncertainty.

She sat on his side of the bed, feeling with her feet for her slippers, a habit that has remained with her since she was a child. But she was on the wrong side of the bed and found Ronnie's rather large and inappropriate leather sandals that he used as night slippers. They were worn and rough, but were somehow reassuring to touch. She slipped into their manly warmth and went to the bathroom.

She sat on the toilet, thinking that one day she'll find out why Ronnie's mother needed forgiveness. Maybe her transgression was that she had not forgiven him for marrying a Christian, and that even being unforgiving required absolution before one entered holy places. But she had encountered Zerina only briefly, that one year of flying visits to see her lover before they moved to America and got married; it was difficult to tell then whether Zerina's reserve had been a snub or something natural, an unavoidable part of her character, like Ronnie's shy-

ness or her own stubborn habit of not letting go of things that didn't make sense, even if she got hurt in the process.

She went to the window and peered out. The city was taking shape, the shadows becoming more defined. She liked New York when it was stark in outline; vague men and vague places have the same habits of deception. She took Ronnie's gown from behind the door, and found him sitting on the settee, wearing the heavy black overcoat she thought made him look sinister. But this morning its rough texture made him seem pale and undernourished, refugee-like.

She poured each one of them a cup of coffee and sat down next to him. His face had that fresh and somewhat wild look of a man who had just wiped away his tears.

How easy it was to find a reason to love him, again.