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Heart-broken over passing of a friend I had not met

S.H. Tan

THIRTY years ago, give and take a couple of years, a chap wrote to me. As what he had written was an article, and I with The Malay Mail, I published it.

When he read it, he phoned to thank me and asked if he could continue to write.

"Of course," I said.

So he continued to write not only articles but also letters to the editor. And I published them.

His phone calls became more frequent. We exchanged views on the news of the day and, in between, discussed the affairs of our mutual friends and what they were doing or not doing.

When I left The Malay Mail, he continued to write - but addressed his correspondence to other journalists. As a result, editors, reporters and those in between were on first name terms with him.

His phone calls to my home were at first once or twice a month. Then once or twice a week till, finally, it was almost every other day unless he was on holiday or indisposed.

Our chats finally zoomed in on his biggest gripe - why his articles and letters were not published by the newspapers.

I pretended not to know till he complained the editors these days were not like those during my days. He said that when he asked them why his contributions were not published, they fobbed him off with excuses. And their favourite was "space constraints".

"Do you believe that?" he asked me.

"Friend," I said. "Editors and their minions are tactful. They will not be frank with a reader and unwittingly offend him."

"But why are my contributions not published?" he was adamant. "You always published whatever I sent you."

It was time to come clean. So I said: "When I was with The Malay Mail, and you wrote to me, I was patient. So I took the trouble to trim the skin and bones of your articles and letters."

"Many editors do not have the time, what with the daily race against the clock."

"Then why couldn't they tell me?" he asked.

"Because they do not have the heart to be blunt with you and tell you that you are long-winded. Besides, an article or letter has to be topical or of interest to other readers."

Enlightened, he did not complain any more. But sometimes, when frustrated, he would phone a journalist till the poor guy or girl could not take it any more and took time to edit his contribution and published it - just to get him off their backs.

His phone calls to me became more regular. During one of them, he said that he had taken up painting. So instead of his literary masterpieces, he sent me his landscapes and what-have-you. For my birthday last October, he sent me "A misty morning in Kampung Jerlun, Perak".

Then he reminded me to visit him before my next birthday. Yes, we had written or spoken to one another for years but we had never met. Come to think of it, I have many other friends whom I have also never met.

One day, when I told him I had to have an angiogram followed by angiography, he was concerned. He phoned every day, sometimes two or three times a day, to cheer me up and to tell me not to worry.

As he was housebound, he repeated his invitation to visit him. I promised him that I would - after I was discharged from the University Hospital.

Then, one Sunday, he asked me what I thought of the Umno Youth/Pas debate. I said that I was against it. He said that Royal Professor Ungku Aziz had accepted the invitation to be the moderator. He gave me Ungku Aziz's phone number and asked me to voice my misgivings.

I phoned Ungku Aziz. About an hour later, my friend phoned and asked me if I had spoken to Ungku Aziz. I said that I had.

"What did he say?" he asked.

"When I urged him to be careful, he said that people who walked on fire should expect to have their feet burnt," I said.

"And what did you say?"

"I wanted to say that to begin with, people should not walk on fire unless it was Thaipusam or the Nine Emperor Gods festival. But I did not."

"Why not?"

"It would not have been polite to rebuke someone as erudite as Ungku Aziz."

The next day, Monday, the speech by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad at the Asia Society Gala Forum in Hong Kong, was published in full in the New Straits Times.

This was just the type of news for my friend and me to sink our teeth into. When he did not phone, I wondered why.

On Tuesday, when he still did not phone, I was baffled.

On Wednesday, when he still did not phone, even my wife asked me why.

On Thursday, when I turned a page of the New Straits Times, and saw a report that he had died on Wednesday, I was devastated.

No more phone calls from him? No more hearing his voice? It was so sudden, so unbelievable, I sobbed and called out his name over and over again. "What happened? What happened?" I kept asking him.

When I saw my wife coming down the stairs, I did not want her to see that I was sappy. So I hid my face behind the paper.

She was suspicious and asked me what was up.

I had controlled myself but I knew that my voice would betray me. So I just showed her the paper.

She looked and said: "Ahmad Aris Eckhardt ... he is dead?"

I nodded.

"Isn't he your friend? And he had been phoning you every day?"

I nodded again.

She realised I wanted to be alone. So she went to the kitchen.

I phoned Zainab, Ahmad's widow. She described to me what had happened. She said that there was no time to inform me even when he was in the Subang Jaya Medical Centre so that I could see him to say "hullo" and then "goodbye".

For the next few seconds, I was lost in reverie. "We never met, Mat," I mused. "But we will one day. Till then, continue to badger them with your articles, letters, paintings and phone calls. You said that it was therapy to you when you were here. It should also be therapy to you now that you are there. When they finally plead, 'Please, Pak Mat, no more' then only RIP."

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