

WHEN Datin Seri Endon Mahmood died on Thursday, the outpouring of grief moved even those who were themselves so grieved.

That shared sorrow lessened the pain of her loved ones, not least, the man who shared her life for more than four decades, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

The countless who filed past her body were saddened, many among them red-eyed, with grown men and total strangers weeping unabashedly.

Abdullah, however, remained stoic and dignified, providing the strength his family needed in facing their most difficult time.

The tears flowed unabated. And none more than from those whose lives she had touched in small and simple ways.

Like the staff at the Treasury, working through the nights to prepare the Budget speech her husband would deliver, who received packets of the best Johor Briyani Gam with an attached thank-you note from her.

Or the young aides of the Prime Minister for whom she bought sarong *pelikat* and *batik* from Jakarta when on an official visit; or friends who would receive their favourite Muar *otak-otak* just before dinner; or her husband's friends whom she would tap on the shoulder and ask, "How is your daughter now? Is she better?"

Many of them were there at the Putra Mosque that Thursday night, holding back their grief, and praying silently that she would find her place among God's loved ones, and thankful that her suffering had ended.

There were many things about the private persona of Endon that tell the story of a woman, mother, friend and patriot that the outside world never knew.

The prayers ended, the lights switched off at the mosque and the darkness added to the gloom already enveloping the country.

As the stories were exchanged, little nuggets of information came out, re-affirming a picture of Endon we all had in some corner of our hearts.

How she would wrap herself in a blanket, sitting on the sofa in the family living room, and listen to Abdullah reviewing a campaign video and stubbornly insisting that he preferred a smiling image of himself rather than a sombre one.

And when everyone seemed about to give in, she would gently nudge her husband and say, "Lah, you look nice..."

That would melt Abdullah and the look he would give her across the room would be enough to warm any heart.

She loved her country and her people.

Some time last year, when Abdullah held a dinner at home for some academics and participants of a major international conference, Endon dropped by to greet the guests before she left for a charity dinner.

That was about the time the National Service had just been introduced and people were uncertain about letting their until now protected children be exposed to a



*To live in hearts we leave behind
Is not to die.*

— Thomas Campbell, *Hallowed Ground*

A memory no one can steal

THE SUNDAY COLUMN

By
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tough three-month regime of living in barracks and un-homely discipline.

What if the buses were late, they complained. Or the names not on the list.

Letters poured in to the newspapers and, as editors, we had no choice but to publish these letters and stories which created a lot of pressure on Abdullah's deputy, Datuk Seri Najib Razak, who headed the programme.

Just before she left, Endon pulled me aside and asked me for a favour.

"Don't be harsh on Najib. He is trying to do a good thing for the people. Please try to help him," she said.

She was not telling me what to do, mindful of how protective journalists are about their profession.

She was just gently reminding that there was a larger good in the programme to help Malaysian youngsters which we might not be seeing.

That is how she touched many people, in unassuming little ways.

Not long after she started her treatment for cancer in Los Angeles, her friends and family organised a surprise birthday party for her.

She was born on Christmas eve in 1940 and the function was organised in a small room at the Shangri La Putrajaya.

A day after returning from Los Angeles, Abdullah led Endon into the room where all their friends and family were gathered.

Yes, she was surprised but as she sat down, she must have realised how much she meant to those who were there.

A choir of her friends and family stood up and sang Stevie Wonder's hit *You are the Sunshine of My Life*. They had been practising while she was away.

Everyone in that room knew about the inevitability associated with cancer.

Yet, till her last days, everyone hoped that she would recover.

And as everyone stood up, some eyes focused on Abdullah. He stood smiling, holding his wife's hand.

It did not seem like his lips were moving but it seemed like his was the loudest, singing:

*You are the sunshine of my life
That's why I'll always be around*

*You are the apple of my eye
Forever you'll stay (be) in my heart*

*You are the apple of my eye
Forever you'll stay (be) in my heart*

You must have known that I was lonely

*Because you came to my rescue
And I know that this must be heaven*

How could so much love be inside of you

Many years ago, maybe in 1995 or 1996, I was in Sungai Petani to visit my uncle. When I walked in, my father, who had come earlier, was seated with his eyes red, as if he had been crying.

My uncle took me aside and whispered: "He is missing your mother."

My mother had passed away in 1989 and I was a little surprised that my father still felt the pain so much so many years later.

It was a little surprising because he travelled a lot and although there were occasions when we remembered the gentle ribbing and fondness our parents occasionally displayed, they were never outwardly or publicly affectionate to each other.

He was talking to my uncle when he sat back and said: "Let it never be that your wife goes before you. It is so lonely..." And he cried.

Since then, I have come to learn and appreciate what my wife, Helinna, means when she tells me: "I do not know what I would do if something were to happen to you."

As much as I try not to think of it, I have wondered many a time what would happen to me if I ever lost the one person who has made my life so complete, who has given me the family I love so much and who has stood by me in good and bad times for more than 22 years.

I cannot imagine life without her and understand how my father must have felt.

There will be times, as my father experienced, when out of the blue, the loneliness hits you and you feel so empty and alone.

But while death leaves an ache that no one can heal, it is also true, an Irish saying goes, that love leaves a memory no one can steal.

And true love stories never do have endings.

As will be the case with Abdullah. He is lonely and he will continue to miss Endon. Yet, it is said, they are never alone who are accompanied by noble thoughts.

He will throw himself into his work. But his love story will not end and he knows that death is universal and everyone dies.

But he also knows that it is not everyone who lives. Endon lived and touched so many lives.

Willa Gather said: "I shall not die of a cold. I shall die of having lived."

Endon epitomised that philosophy.

May Allah s.w.t. bless her soul.

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