

An Ordinary Death

Sunil died in the bomb blast.

He was my fruiterer.

Which bomb blast you ask?

Does it matter?

He had gone for the election rally at the Town Hall. The bomb went off. Sunil died. That's all. When I got home two days later that was what I was told.

Sunil died on a Monday. I met him the Saturday before at the Colpetty market.

"Baby," he said. That was what he called me. *Baby*, even though I was twenty years old. He called my mother *Mummy* to me, and nothing to her face.

When he wanted to sell her fruits, he would say, "Baby likes this," and when he wanted to sell me fruits, he would say, "Mummy always bought this," holding up an apple like Eve, or an orange—imported not local, as the local ones were prohibitively expensive, which brought home another anomaly of the age we lived in.

Anyway, that Saturday, Sunil asked me, "Baby, do you want oranges?"

I told him, "Let me ask Mummy. Mummy!" I said moving towards her, "Sunil wants to know if you want oranges?"

My mother turned from her vegetable man from whom she was buying keera, brinjals, pathola and thalana batu, and came towards Sunil and me.

"Not oranges, but anyway how much are they?" My mother likes doing these things. She likes saying she doesn't want something but will still ask the price. The price determines whether she wants it or not. Sunil must have quoted a good price. Six oranges were put in the bag.

"Papaw?" Sunil looked hopefully at my mother. She shook her head and took out her wallet to pay for the six oranges. Sunil's response to that was to simply say, "Papaw for juice." My mother asked "How much?" The papaw was put in the bag. Sunil smiled at me who had been standing all the while beside the two of them. I

smiled back and my mother and I went down to the car. That was on Saturday. Sunil died on Monday.

What was he doing so close to the stage, I wondered? Had he gone up to speak to someone? Some politician he admired. Some politician he wanted to complain to. Some politician he wanted to vote for.

Ten people had died in the bomb blast. Ten ordinary people. Sunil my fruiterer was one of them. He had a wife and a four-year-old son. I didn't think Sunil was old enough to have a wife and a four-year-old son. He looked nineteen to me.

Sunil and I had this wonderful arrangement when my mother was out of the country visiting her firstborn in the land of plenty. Sunil would arrive at eight in the morning just as I was leaving for work. While putting my bag in the car I would give him the list of fruits I needed. They varied only to add fruits in season. Bananas, oranges, papaw, and pineapple were standard orders. Mangoes, mangosteen, custard apple, avocado, woodapple, belli, soursup, durian, rambutan, guava, jumbu, and grapes came into the house during the season. In the afternoon when I came home for lunch, Sunil would dutifully arrive with the fruits. He was paid whatever he asked for and he went away with instructions to return every three days. When he came back in three days any fruits that were spoilt, sour, unripeable, or just plain disappointing were reported to him. As compensation he would throw in an extra banana, mango, or orange. I tried to introduce Sunil to my various relatives and friends but their arrangements with him never lasted.

My mother came back and Sunil's visits to the house had to cease. My mother, who thrives on her daily trips to the market, instructed Sunil that she wasn't as lazy as the Baby and that she would come to his fruit stall personally. I'm not sure Sunil preferred that arrangement. My mother would look at his fruit with her beady eyes and ferret out the choicest of the bunch. She would manipulate papaws and mangoes with expert fingers. She would shake woodapples and bellis with a firm fist and she would squeeze avocados mercilessly. I'm sure Sunil liked me better than my mother.

Sunil, who died in the bomb blast, was short and thin. He had short black hair cut in a fringe that drooped on his forehead. He always, *always* wore long baggy shorts and an oversized T-shirt, making him look smaller, shorter, and thinner than he really was.

On Tuesday my mother went to her usual haunt. My father says that my mother in her previous birth must have been a market woman. She is addicted to the place. Even when she has the flu, she drags herself out of bed and drives there weakly. But as soon as she enters the compound, she miraculously gets an injection of energy and visits all her usual stalls and yet comes home with a single small bag of goods. This rationing of purchases forces her to visit the market daily. Sometimes, she comes back from the market and no sooner does she enter the house, but she remembers that she has forgotten an item—she jumps in the car before anyone can stop her, and rushes there again. My father wonders whether he should have bought a house right next to the market to save on the petrol bill. I feel that the house is prison to my mother and the market is the only place she can legitimately go to and not have anyone complain that she is loafing around.

When my mother went to the market on Tuesday, she saw white flags hanging along one whole side of the market. She didn't take much notice. The market is quite big and quite old. About once a month one of the vendors dies. She goes to the newly bereaved stall, condoles, and continues with her marketing. This time she went straight to the fruit stall before going to the vegetable stall. While standing squarely in front of the rows of fruit, she realized that Sunil hadn't made his usual magician-like appearance beside her.

"Where is Sunil?" she asked his assistant. And that is how she got to know that Sunil our fruiterer had died in the bomb blast at the Town Hall—when after the election meeting he had gone close to the stage to talk to the Member of Parliament from Kollonawa and that as he approached the stage a suicide bomber had detonated the bomb that killed Sunil and not the President for whom it was intended.