

## Wind Beneath My Wings

*Anjana (Jhuma) Sen*

He changed his mind as soon as he stepped out. What appeared to be a beautiful autumn day from indoors was indeed a beautiful autumn day outdoor as well. Oh, but it was cold!

‘You should have worn your blue jacket,’ he could hear her say. ‘This old thing needs to be retired now, for goodness’ sake’.

‘You’re always right,’ he muttered as he went in again, careful to remove his shoes before walking the short distance to the cupboard. He put away his beloved parka before donning the smart fleece lined jacket she had bought from M&S a few years ago. Lacing his brogues at the door, again, it occurred to him how he had started doing all the things she had nagged him to do for 34 years.

‘You trained me well, Dee,’ he grumbled as he double checked the doors before walking away.

He didn’t go out much these days, there didn’t seem to be any point. Their friends had respected his request for privacy and space, and the phone calls and casseroles were not as forthcoming as they had been a few months ago. He was grateful for that. He had no words, even for his own friends. The only person he could talk to was their daughter, but she was young and busy, and leading her own mad life in London. He always tried to paint a bright and busy picture for her when they chatted. She saw through it though, he knew she did, they had been so very close, the three of them. But she let him pretend, giving him some time to ‘cope’.

Cope! That was the word everybody used. All the cards, the well-meaning words, the hugs...they all came with the same wish “I hope you find the strength to cope.” He did not want to cope. He just wanted her back so he could get on with life again.

Walking on briskly towards the shops, he passed the little duck pond. It was getting cold and the poor ducks looked hungry. She always brought titbits for them, and instinctively he rummaged in his large pockets. There was no duck food, but he brought out a handful of assorted receipts and tickets. From when he had worn this jacket last. Staring at them, an entire kaleidoscope of memories washed over him. Almost as if someone had poured a bucket of home

cinema over his head. Noise, chatter, colours, smells and laughter, all buzzed around him and he made his way gingerly to the bench by the pond.

He didn't need to look at the clump of paper to know exactly what they were. Two Scot Rail return tickets from Whitecraigs to Central, a lunch receipt from their favourite Thai restaurant and the movie tickets.

He could hear her now, her everyday bossy little voice cross at him. Again!

'*La La Land*, Dave, I had said *La La Land*.'

'Well, it's my birthday, I get to choose, and I want to watch *Train spotting*,' he had retorted, uncharacteristically holding his ground, leaving her at a loss for words for once.

They had enjoyed the movie together, having watched the first one, also together, over twenty years ago. But did not give up on her *La La Land* and made him promise to get the tickets for the following week. He had not really wanted to, with a silly name like that; she should just go with her friends. And of course, she had gone on and on about it over the next few days.

Till she collapsed at work five days later.

He whispered to her that first night, through her tubes and monitors at the ICU, 'I've bought the tickets for your movie, love, even used the Meerkat deal. Wake up now, and we can go on Tuesday.'

As usual, she didn't listen, did she? No, she hung in there for a few Tuesdays and then slipped away in February, just as her first crocus started to peep up through her lawn.

'She didn't stand a chance, David,' the doctor said to the little group of shocked and stunned friends and family. Dave and Poppy crumpled into each other; their world ripped apart by one devastating cardiac arrest. Who even knew her heart wasn't strong?

The funeral had been remarkably easy; father and daughter went through every motion like well oiled robots playing a part. He had refused to speak publicly, but their friends had insisted.

'Deena was all about words, David,' Maggie, her best friend had said. 'She would be gutted if you said nothing.'

'Ay,' her husband Morgan added, 'she'll probably dictate the lines to you when you're up there, so don't worry.'

That had given Dave the idea of going through their desk to hunt out a speech he had given recently. The speech that she had written for him to make at his retirement farewell dinner less than a year ago. Just like she wrote all his speeches over the years, and lord knows there had been a few towards the end when he peaked at his career. Reading this one, he found himself weeping quietly, it was quite perfect!

The crematorium had been bursting at its seams. They should have booked a larger place they had thought. How did Dee *know* so many people? There were their friends and family of course. There were her colleagues, her book club girls, her writing club friends, her walking partners, and her yoga club people. There were his colleagues, Poppy's friends, their parents. There were people from their street he did not know. Even the owners of their local cafe were there. And almost as if they had all mutually agreed to, no one was in black. The room looked like a rainbow had burst open in it. She would have loved it; he couldn't help thinking, as he went up to the podium next to her casket.

'Some of you may remember me reading out from this very piece of paper when I retired. This is what Deena had written for me to say out loud. It had made you smile then, and I had read it out with a chuckle in my voice. But today, when I stand here, next to her for the last time, no words can better describe what my wife meant to me.'

He could see his Poppy trying hard to smile. Like him, she too had not really accepted what was happening. He searched for the relevant paragraph and started to read,

"As you all agree, I owe everything to my beautiful young (she was only three years younger, this had made people giggle then, it made them smile now) wife. I am who I am because of her, and the only reason why I was made the Managing Director of this Company was because she chose to selflessly set aside her own life to look after our home and hearth. Dee, I don't say this very often, but you are truly the wind beneath my wings.'

Looking up at a sea of moist faces in front of him, he had added again, very softly, 'she was indeed the wind beneath my wings, and I don't know how I can fly, or indeed, even walk alone without her.'

Poppy had decided not to say anything, she couldn't, she said, and he did not insist. But to his utter surprise she came up after he had finished, held his hand, and said to the casket, 'Mummy, I can't let you go without saying anything.'

She had then sung the baby lullaby that Dee used to sing to her at bedtime. The casket had gone down into the bowels of the crematorium, accompanied by the beautiful clear voice of their daughter who had not sung a tune since quitting her school choir.

True, Deena could not have planned her own funeral better if she had tried.

Sitting on the old bench by the duck pond now, Dave felt a cool gentle breeze blowing into his face, as if to say, 'Hey big boy, quit feeling sorry for yourself. The wind is back beneath your wings.'

With renewed energy, he stood up, deciding against his usual trek to the Co-op for milk. No, he would instead try and recreate that day with his wife, he decided on an impulse. He walked up to the station and got his return ticket to Central. In the City, he walked up and down Buchanan Street listening to the buskers, dropping coins into their hats like she did. He even went into that ridiculous tea store where they sold outrageously expensive pots and mugs and bought himself a bag of Oolong tea leaves. However, he drew a line at dawdling in the Haberdashery section of John Lewis, where she could quite easily spend ages. When he got hungry, he walked up to their Thai restaurant and had the fish cakes. He didn't need to have conversations with her anymore; she was helping him to do all this for himself.

On the train ride back home, he started making little notes in his head to call a few people. There had always been an understanding that he would start his own Engineering Consultancy after retiring. Well, he was going to start now. He was only sixty-four after all, and his job here wasn't done. That was her line, wasn't it?

'My job here isn't done,' she always said.

'I'm not going to mope anymore Dee,' he whispered, causing the young girl in pink hair sitting across from him to shoot a quick raised eyebrow look in his direction. He smiled back at her before getting off at his stop. And all the way back home, there was this lightness of being, which was the wind beneath his wings.

The phone rang later just as he had boiled the kettle to have some of his new tea.

It was Poppy.

'Dad, guess what's on telly tonight? Channel Four, 9 pm.'

'Oh, Poppy love, I'm not up to watching TV tonight, I'm going to be working on some new ideas I have,' he said, telling her a little about his plans to start working again.

She was delighted, just as he knew she would be. However, she insisted,  
'Daddy start working tomorrow. Tonight, watch TV. It's *La La Land*.'

**Anjana (Jhuma) Sen** started writing (semi-seriously) two years ago, when struggling with an empty nest in her fifties. She stumbled upon Eastwood Writers, a local writing group affiliated with the Scottish Association of Writers. Encouraged by a few awards (Falkirk and Eastwood Trophy), she decided to delete the above 'semi' and begin to get serious about writing. She participated in the 2020 Poetry Marathon and the Scottish Writers Centre Roulette Speakeasy 2020 and she is currently waiting for the anthology to be published, which will feature a few of her poems. She grew up an army brat in India and gained her degrees in English there. After a brief career in advertising as a copy writer, she chose to follow her husband around the world. Living in China for two years, and Zimbabwe for five, before 'settling' in Glasgow in the year 2000.