

Nisah HARON

This Too Shall Pass

*It lies not in our power to love or hate,
For will in us is overruled by fate.*

~ Christopher Marlowe

My mother died approximately six months before my wedding day. She didn't even get to meet my future husband then. She only knew his name. That evening of June 20, 1999, at about 5 p.m., I was out buying groceries from the nearby supermarket when my father frantically called me on my cellphone: "Hurry home! I do not know what is wrong with your mother."

He sounded panicked, so I dropped everything and drove home. She had probably suffered a stroke. The symptoms that I later learned were all there. She died that very night at the hospital.

I was numbed. I don't remember crying at the hospital. Suddenly, it dawned on me that I had a lot of things to do. A lot of decisions had to be made. We had to decide when she would be buried, schedule the funeral and the *kenduri arwah* prayer gathering in memory of my mother. All I could think about was everything that needed to be done. Being the only daughter, suddenly everything seemed to fall into my lap. In fact, I don't even remember crying that night or even the next day.

I guess being the eldest child, I am quite used to being in charge of my life. Upon my mother's death, everybody started looking to me for decisions. I knew that I would have time to grieve later. Right then, it was my father's turn to grieve the loss of his beloved wife. They had been an item. Her death must have made his world crumble.

As Muslims, we do grieve, but we are sober in this sense. During the funeral, while waiting for the body of the deceased to be prepared for burial—wrapped in seven layers of white cloths, bathed in seven types of waters, the final ablution—those who came and paid their respects would recite some *du'a* prayers¹ and some chapters from the Al-Qur'an, especially the chapter called *Yaa Sin*. If any of the family members were to cry or weep, it is expected, but we don't encourage wailing or screaming, nor would we beat ourselves. We believe the soul of the deceased would suffer the most when the family members 'over-grieve.' It is not that we are denying such feelings or failing to address the tragedy. We simply do not encourage any act of self-pity or feeling sorry for ourselves just because we've lost someone whom we love. We are like soldiers in the battle of life: a soldier may fall, but the fight and fighting spirit must endure.

We try to expedite the burial process. As Muslims, we do not cremate the bodies, and we believe that the longer the body is kept from being buried, the more the soul will suffer. But, on the other hand, I am looking at it as the process of moving on and learning to let go. If we do love someone, it is not exactly the physical body that we are in love with. We could also love and hold on to the good memories and the feelings that we keep inside us.

¹ *Du'a* are prayers for the soul of the deceased to be accepted by Allah so that his/her sins will be pardoned.

As a writer, I don't like to end my story by killing any characters, especially the protagonist. To me, death is not exactly the end of any story. Death is part of the story. Death could also be the beginning of something. I often advise my students not to end their story with unnecessary deaths. Popular ways to end a story with death, especially among 'young' writers are leukemia, brain tumor and accident (usually a motor vehicle accident)—you know, playing around with *deus ex machina*.

I wrote a novel called *Lentera Mustika (The Light of Mustika)* in which I address the tragedy of death. If you've read the story, you know that the main character, Mustika's husband, would eventually die of a brain tumor. I purposely chose this fate to show to the young writers that, yes, you can kill your character, and he can die from one of the most popular 'death sentences' that writers use to punish their characters. But then again, it must serve the purpose, prove that his death was not in vain.

When I die, I hope that I will have played my part and served my purpose in this big canvas of life. For death is not about dying. It is all about how you've lived and lived well.