



Praveen

R Praveen Nair

14 May 1989 – 28 August 2011

Kishore and Shailaja are Indian expatriates. Their life of joy and happiness came to a crashing end the day their only son, Praveen, was killed in a car accident in Batam along with two of his friends. Praveen at 22 was the focus of their dreams, the centre of their universe, his father's pride, his mother's best friend. He was a caring son, who, despite his hectic social life, made time to go for family dinners and watch movies with his mom. He would share his plans - he wanted to be a game designer - and dreams - he asked his mom to write thrillers that he could turn into computer or Xbox games. His parents cling on to all the precious, happy memories he left them even as they stumble through a vale of sorrow that seems hard to comprehend.

Written by E. Shailaja Nair, Praveen's mother

To borrow the words of a song, where do I begin to tell the story of a love so deep? There is nothing that comes close to the feeling of love that overwhelmed me the minute you were born and put into my arms. I can still see that small round face with its shock of black curls and you looking up straight at me unblinkingly. You seemed to carry the wisdom of generations in that look. And I felt waves of love wash over me, you were the centre of my existence from that minute on. It was a Sunday, 14 May 1989.

And then that day, that evening, when your aunt's call came. I picked up the phone so cheerfully and that was probably the last time I was cheerful. That call, the one telling me that you had been killed in an accident in Batam, destroyed my world forever. And I felt waves of pain wash over me, threatening to drown me. It was a Sunday, 28 August 2011.

But between those two dates, in a short span of 22 years, you brought so much joy, so much happiness, so much comfort to so many. You were such a good son, a wonderful friend, a loving nephew, a precious grandson, that the memories still carry us all through.

I value every one of those memories, even the one telling me that you were gone

forever. The first thought was really selfish—I didn't know how I would live without ever seeing you again. Though all my friends were here, rallying to my support, I saw none of them. They supported me, but my real support, you Praveen, were gone.

I remember little about the ferry ride to Batam at 9.30 pm that night and the taxi ride to the hotel. But once I saw your friends, I knew I had to be strong to help them. They had gone through hell already, identifying all three bodies—you were killed along with two of your best buddies.

The ride to the morgue was long. And the road was dark, just like my life without you. Do you know all the way I kept hoping everything was a mistake and that you were still alive? That is how idiotic we human beings are!

But once I saw you in the morgue, I hoped and prayed that your death was immediate. I couldn't stand the thought of you suffering after those horrendous injuries to your face. My baby, my beautiful baby was smashed. And just because someone couldn't be bothered to remove that trailer from the middle of the road or put up warning lights. Praveen, did you feel scared when you hit that flatbed trailed? I hope it was only a second before you died, before all three of you died. I wish I could have saved you from that accident, but if it was inevitable, I hope you didn't know when and what happened.

Did you know how many people love you, son? I didn't. There were so many friends at your wake and your funeral. You had a peaceful day at the Mt Vernon Sanctuary in Singapore. Your room was called Harmony and I hope where you are now, there is a lot of harmony and peace, I hope you have found a sanctuary with God. And of course, all the people whom you loved and who adored you are there, waiting to take good care of you. Two sets of grandparents who adored you to say nothing of all the great uncles, great aunts and aunts and uncles. You will be well cared for certainly.

Remember how when you would say every weekend that you were going for a friend's birthday, we asked you how many birthdays your friends had? Pardon me, Praveen, I didn't realise how many friends you really had. In fact, you must have skipped a few birthdays because there are only 52 weeks in a year and there were certainly more than 52 friends at your funeral. And they were friends not mates. Each one came up to me to share a particular memory and I felt proud even in my sorrow to see how much they loved you. Son, you certainly knew how to choose friends, they are the best.

You grew up in the midst of news, thanks to me and your aunt both being journalists. I remember how your kindergarten teacher told the other parents that you were the one with the most advanced vocabulary. Because at five, you spoke about reporting and news coverage, and clients and itinerary. This was the legacy of a journalist mom and travel agent dad. And you died surrounded by news coverage. In fact, you were the news. Your accident and death made the front page for a week, darling. Though I would have loved to have seen you covered for your computer prowess or your knowledge of cars, but it did make me proud to read what your friends said about you.

I wish I had never allowed you to go to Batam with your friends for that weekend break. But you wanted to celebrate your friend's birthday and with college reopening soon, you said you would be away for only a little over a day. But then your friend sent me the link to the photos and videos taken just a few hours before all three of you were

killed. You all looked so happy, that I felt a tiny glimmer of solace. Though I could see little of you because I guess you were filming.

You loved to take control of the camera whenever possible. But I am thankful I have some videos of you especially when you were small and we went to Langkawi and Genting. You were such a beautiful boy. Every time I looked at you my heart would brim over with love and pride.

I remember all the holidays we had—Papa, you and I in Vienna, Munich, Salzburg, Venice; the weekend in Langkawi when you played pool for the first time and beat both Papa and me; the six-hour walk up to Vaishnodevi shrine nestled among the Himalayan peaks; the holidays in Kerala. But you didn't holiday just with us, you had as much fun with your aunts, uncles and cousins, with your grandparents; your friends. As your cousin said, all your friends also enjoyed life to the hilt but you lived life at a frenzied pace.

You were really a man for all seasons. A computer geek who was also a party animal; an extrovert youngster who spent as much time with your parents as with your friends.

You were my best friend, we loved to do so many things together. I can't believe I will never do those things again—go for a movie with you, dine at places that you would always choose, watch Home Improvement on TV. Never again will you stand in my way in the kitchen stopping me from walking away because you wanted me to agree to something you wanted. Like allowing you to go to London with your friend for vacation or change our car to the Nissan GTR you loved. I used to get annoyed when you did that, putting all six feet of you in my way. But now I would give anything for you to do it again.

The question that keeps rising in my mind is why you had to go out that night, and just the three of you while the rest slept. Papa says he can almost hear you say, "I am sorry Mama and Papa, I didn't want to leave you, I didn't want to hurt you." And you would have an excuse for what happened. This is what you always did when you made a mistake. And we would forgive. Because you could argue and explain your way out of anything with us. I used to be so proud of the way you could equivocate even as I would scold you.

At times I wonder if only you and your friends had not hired that car in a strange place you and your two friends might be still alive. Did you know that car had no insurance? And that no road tax had been paid on it? That the owner of a car like that could hire it out seems inexplicable. Then he tried to extort money from us, the parents and relatives of the three boys, as he knew he would get no insurance payment for the smashed vehicle. He had lost a car, we lost our entire future.

When I think how I will never see you graduate or get a job or get married or become a dad or take over Papa's business, I feel so sad that I can barely go on. I am living, but only in that I am drawing breath and haven't died. My life as I knew it, the happiness that pervaded every sphere of my life, disappeared into the fire with your coffin. Now I know what a broken heart feels. I can feel it physically. It is painful, beyond words.

The overwhelming kindness, sympathy, empathy and support from our friends and yours, the family, all this keeps Papa and me going. But every time I use the computer that you made from scratch, and which my office IT person says has unmatched speed, or sit in the sports car that you chose and which you loved so much, we miss you. I miss

the sight of you sitting on the sofa playing on your Xbox. Remember how I used to ask why you were always playing it? I would give anything to see you back on that sofa.

And your friends miss you as much too. They write on your Facebook still, they send me Blackberry messages, they come over to watch your favourite English football team Arsenal play. And I saw their love for you in the memorial service that your friends organised in India, your homeland though you had been living in Singapore for so long.

The memorial service held at our home in Delhi was beautiful. Your friends did it all—from decorating the place with candles and flowers to organising the multi-religious service. The video of pictures taken by your friends was wonderful. There was a reading from the Ramayana, then a few renditions by a qawwali troupe from a mosque and then at the end, hymns by a church choir. I chose Nearer My God To Thee and Abide With Me, two hymns that I have loved since I was at school but which were never more poignant than now. You are certainly nearer to God, just stay close to Him till I join you up in Heaven.

The third hymn, The Lord Is My Shepherd And I Shall Not Want, ... What can I say? I want to be able to believe that, I want to more than anything believe that... But it is difficult when my heart is still crying for you. How do I find the strength to see the rightness of your death? How do I accept that you are not here anymore? How do I carry on? What do I live for? What do I work for? Who do I save for? In fact, what is the point of doing anything?

Kahlil Gibran wrote: “When you are sorrowful look again in your heart, and you shall see that in truth you are weeping for that which has been your delight.” And you were my delight. I do weep for what was once my delight, which is everything you did. From the SMS's you would send asking me to go to sleep and not to worry about you to the pictures of puppies that you regularly threatened to adopt.

And then there was the email you sent me on all famous people who had failed some time in their lives. You were responding to me nagging you to study; I wanted you to fulfil the promise of primary school when you topped every test, every class, every year. You would have spent quite some time compiling that list. I didn't tell you then but I was touched that you took the time to do that to make me feel you would ultimately turn out ok. Darling, I did know that. I was only worried you might not realise all that you were capable of doing with your talent and your abilities. But ultimately you did find what you wanted and loved to do, game design. I wish you had lived long enough to enjoy it as you would have. The world did lose a passionate game designer, player and lover when you died.

One of your friends made a comment that was so apt: how you had fulfilled so many of your dreams. He was talking of you going to the Emirates Stadium in London, home of your favourite team Arsenal. It is so true—you travelled all over the world with family and friends; you fulfilled your passion for cars, driving on F1 tracks such as when you were at the London School of economics for summer school; playing computer games; participating in Xbox challenges; cooking and eating all kinds of food you loved. I am so happy I let you live the way you wanted, do all the things you liked. If you were only meant to have a short life, I am glad I was able to let you live it as you liked.

But how do I live never seeing that smile or hearing that voice again? Maybe Stephen Hawking's theory of Information Paradox is an explanation for your accident and death. There really seems no reason for anything to happen. There is no cause and effect. That is the only way I can explain your going away to myself.

Since you went away...

*I hate the breeze blowing in the window,
Why does it not blow my sadness away?
I hate the rainbow in the sky,
The empty promise at the end of day.*

*I hate it all,
I hate it all.*

*I hate the graduation that I will never see,
I cry for the celebration I am denied.
I hate the sound of bells and trumpets,
They seem to mock me since the day you died.*

*I hate it all.
I hate it all.*

*I hate the wedding you will never have,
The grandchildren I will never see.
I hate the roar of a Ferrari revving,
The Top Gear show on TV.*

*I hate it all.
I hate it all.*

*I love the memory of times spent with you,
The shows we watched, the comedies, the drama.
I gaze at your picture on the living room wall,
I strain to hear you call again -- 'Mama'.*

*That is all,
That is all.*

E. Shailaja Nair