

The Ghat Of The World

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The writer had a friend named Agha Shahid. Both the writer and his friend were then living in America. The writer knew that Shahid had brain cancer and had been under treatment for about fourteen months. Shahid knew that he was not going to live long. But the first time he talked to the writer of his approaching death was on 25 April, 2001. The writer had rung him up to remind him that they had been invited to lunch at a friend's house. While responding to the writer's call, Shahid said that he could see nothing. He knew that his end was very near. He said to the writer, "When it happens, I hope you'll write something for me." The writer tried to reassure Shahid and said, "Shahid, you'll be fine, you have to be strong." But Shahid knew his fate and said, "You must write about me." The writer could think of nothing to say to a friend on such a topic. But finally he said, "Shahid, I'll do the best I can."

From that day, the writer started keeping a record of all the conversations and meetings, he had with Shahid. Here he reproduces all that he could gather about his friend's life and his personality. Shahid was a poet and a collection of his poems had been published in 1997, 'The Country Without a Post Office'. The writer had read some of these poems and was greatly impressed. Till then, he knew only this much about Shahid that he was from Srinagar and had studied at Delhi University. The writer too had studied at Delhi University and their time at the University had briefly overlapped. But the two had never met.

Shahid came to America in 1975. His elder brother was already there and they were later joined by their two sisters. Shahid's parents continued to live in Srinagar. It was his custom to spend the summer months with his parents in Srinagar every year. Though the writer had never met Shahid till 1998, they had some friends in common. One of them put the writer in touch with Shahid.

Between 1998 and 1999, they had several conversations on the phone and even met a couple of times. But as yet, they didn't know much about each other. They were just acquaintances.

Between 1999 and 2000, Shahid worked as a teacher in different colleges in America. On 7 May, 2000, the writer went to meet Shahid in a college where he was then employed. There he saw that Shahid was very popular with his students. In February 2000, when he was doing a brief job at New York University, he had his first blackout. After tests, it was found that he had brain cancer. Now Shahid decided to move to Brooklyn so that he could be close to his youngest sister, Sameeta, who was a teacher there. The writer lived a few blocks away from that place. Now they became very thick with each other and met quite often. Though Shahid's condition was fast deteriorating, he was always jovial, full of life and wit.

One afternoon, Suketu Mehta, who was also a writer and lived in Brooklyn, joined them for lunch. Together they made a plan for an adda, a place where they could just meet as friends, talk together and be happy. Now they began to meet regularly, and from time to time other writers also joined them. On one occasion, a crew arrived with a television camera and filmed their conviviality.

Shahid was a lively person. Notwithstanding the fatal disease he was suffering from, he enjoyed

every moment of his life. Often there were parties at his house. He said that these parties did not leave him any time to be depressed. His apartment was on the seventh floor of building. It gave him a good view of the city across the river. To him, it looked like a ghat under the glittering lights of the city. Shahid was a great lover of good food. Very often people gathered in his apartment. And in the kitchen, someone would always be cooking or making tea. Shahid always kept track of the progress of the meal that was being cooked. From time to time, he would leave his friends and to the kitchen to give directions to the cook. Even when his eyesight was failing, he could tell from the smell alone, which stage the *rogan josh* had reached. Shahid took personal interest in the preparation of food for a dinner party. He placed great emphasis on the exact method of cooking. He would not tolerate any deviation from traditional methods and recipes. He had 1 special passion for the Kashmiri food in the Pandit style. He loved Bengali food also. The writer had some common tastes with Shahid. Both of them were fond of *rogan josh*, Begum Akhtar, Kishore Kumar and old Bombay films. Both of them had a common indifference to cricket. Shahid was especially fond of Begum Akhtar's music. He had met Begum Akhtar through a friend when he was a teenager. And she had influenced him deeply. He had a fund of stories about Begum Akhtar's wit and humour. Shahid himself was always witty and full of humour.

Shahid's heart was always in Kashmir, though he had left it long ago. When he knew his end was near, he wanted to go to Kashmir and die there. But later, he changed his mind due to some reasons.

On 5 May, 2001, the writer had a telephone conversation with Shahid. The doctors had give up all hope. They gave him a year or less. The last time the writer saw Shahid, was on 27 October, 2001. Shahid was then at his brother's house. He was aware of his approaching end and he had made his peace with it. There was no trace of any anguish on his face. Shahid had said once to the writer, "I love to think that I'll meet my mother in the after life, if there is an after life."

Shahid died peacefully in his sleep at 2 a.m. on 8 December, 2001.

The writer felt a great void after Shahid's death. He was amazed that so brief a friendship had resulted in so vast a void. The writer says that often when he walks into his living room, he remembers Shahid's presence there.