

Another fortune cookie?

When I saw the Chinese woman and her daughter playing cards together at their restaurant table, the water and the lights of Sydney harbor shimmering behind them, it set me thinking about Stuart and the reason he had to give up driving his car.

I was going to say 'my friend Stuart', but I suppose he's not a friend anymore. I seem to have lost a number of friends in the last few years. I don't mean that I've fallen out with them, in any dramatic way. We've just decided not to stay in touch. And that's what it's been. A conscious decision, because it's not difficult to stay in touch with people nowadays, there are so many ways of doing it. But as you get older, I think that some friendships start to feel increasingly redundant. You just find yourself asking, 'What's the point?' And then you stop.

Actually, my first name did never suit me like it does now. My mother, who never wanted to do the same thing as everyone else, decided to call me Ezhno. Yes, you read right. That weird and "so originaaaaaal" (according to my parents) name means "the lonely one" in the Aboriginal language. There were probably even more correct than they thought they would be. It's been months, maybe years, since I didn't hang out with someone. Once again, I was going to say 'a friend.' But I must admit that I haven't got one left.

It hasn't always been so. I used to smile, to laugh with people. I used to have projects and wishes for the future. I used to live; before that evening that wasted my life. It was exactly ten years ago as of today. Stuart, Aliya and I were partying in a Chinese disco, to celebrate the birthday of who was, at that time, my best friend. Oh, I had forgotten you do not know who Aliya is. Well, who Aliya was. I think no one can completely understand how much I suffer, how much it hurts me to have lost such a wonderful person.

I've known her forever. She's always been there, that may be why it's so hard for me to continue my way without her. She was rather tall and had a glistening light in her bewitching green eyes. The thing I miss the most is certainly her smile. It was able to stop the Earth from turning and make the sun shine brighter... She was about to finish her psychology and sociology studies, at the time. She wanted to live among the Aborigines, later: she said she wanted to understand how people's minds work and why there was so much violence and hatred in our society, by going back to a "wild" civilization, which wasn't polluted by all those technological devices which rule the world and constantly make people in such a hurry. Yes, she had always been idealistic. Maybe a bit naïve too. But that was part of her appeal and we loved her that way, with her ambitious dreams. Well I could speak about her for hours, but I've got a story to tell.

So, that night, we had danced, well eaten and, more importantly, drunk way too much. I wish we hadn't drunk that much, and regret that we hadn't been more cautious. But as the fortune cookie I had eaten just before leaving said "What is done can't be undone; it's not worth crying over spilled milk". That was so true: in the ten years that I have relived that moment every night in my dreams, I've never been able to change anything.

I remember we were walking in a parking lot; Aliya's long blond hair was reflecting the moonlight, when she stopped and said out loud "I wish this evening could last 'an eternity'". She didn't know it would really happen. It was about 3 a.m. when we took the road back. We were exhausted, unconscious, drunk and... perfectly happy. Then, everything just happened so fast. Too fast. Stuart was driving, and he couldn't avoid the car which was arriving in front of us. Cries. Tears. The emptiness. The dark. The end. She died on the spot. Stuart was paralyzed. I miraculously got only a little scar under my chin, which reminds me the accident each time I put my hand on it. I was alive, but was it worth it, as I had just lost the one who gave a meaning to my life?

Since that night, I have kept cutting myself from the outside world: I've refused to see people who were visiting me and I haven't pick up the phone anymore. My entire world had just collapsed and they couldn't understand. Their smiles, laughs, hypocritical handshakes and words such as "Life continues, you know" or "Tomorrow will be better man, don't worry" sickened me. As time went on, they all, one by one, stopped trying to get me out of my jail of memories. I can't blame them; I certainly would have done the same... The only one who could probably save me was now dead.

I spent the next months in a sort of fuzzy haze: colors, feelings and noises seemed to be attenuated. That bitter coldness and these regrets, which have haunted me since Aliya's funeral, would they ever leave me? I think you couldn't even imagine how guilty I felt. I should have prevented this horrible accident; I should have drunk less...

I was still, once again, rehashing those old demons, when the waitress interrupted the thread of my thoughts:

"Have you finished sir?"

"Yes, thank you. A coffee and the bill, please"

"I'll bring it in a few minutes. Take a fortune cookie while you're waiting, it's on the house. See what destiny reserves for you"

It was now ten years I hadn't eaten one of those biscuits, with a message nested in them. The last one's prediction had been so scarily right, that I was almost afraid, while opening the cookie she offered me. As expected, a little piece of paper felt of it. Only a few words were written: "One more chance." I sighed: this sentence was so a stupid and worn-out cliché... I was about to begin to eat the small cake when I noticed something strange inside: a small and silver pill on which it was written in very very small letters "30 minutes to the past". What did it mean? That was nonsense! I put the message and the pill in my jacket's pocket and decided to forget them both.

I suddenly felt oppressed in this restaurant: the air was stifling... So I quickly paid and began to walk outside, trying to breathe slowly and to calm the wild race of my heart. It was Monday, and as every Monday since ten years, I walked to the cemetery. Oddly, this dark landscape, with tombs everywhere calmed me down. Hers was there, between grave number 114 and 116, just behind a tree. I sat in front of it for a while, without speaking. Tears blurred my sight...

Days passed by, each one like the last, punctuated by my boring job, boring shows on T.V. and those weekly visits to Aliya. How pitiful my life was... I couldn't get this silver pill out of my mind. I kept wondering what its effects could be, and whether I should swallow it. I hesitated a long time, and one night, woken up by one of my usual nightmares, I finally, without thinking, ate it.

I instantly felt so tired that I put myself into bed. I don't know exactly what happened that night. I remember the same dream: Stuart, Aliya and I are about to leave the disco, we laugh... But that time, instead of having a car crash I see myself begging Stuart not to take the road. He agrees and... I woke up. Totally out of breath and panicked. What a realistic dream! I could even smell Aliya's sweet perfume on my pillow. I went to the bathroom, to let some fresh water run down my face. I looked at myself in the mirror: something had changed, but why? I did look exhausted, but there was something else. I put my hand on my chin and suddenly understand: my scar had faded away. That was incredible. I even imagined that Aliya had come back and that she was going to say "Hey Ezhno! What did you do, woken up at that night?! Come back to bed!"

But she wasn't. I was alone, as usual. And moreover, I was getting crazy... Fantastic! How lucky I was. I went back to bed, trying to have some sleep, without success, of course.

One week later, as I had almost forgotten this weird incident, I went back to the cemetery. I knew the way to Aliya's tomb by heart and so I let my feet be my guides. Something was wrong: grave number 114 was there. The tree was there. Grave number 116 was there. But the 115th, Aliya's, wasn't. It seemed as if it hadn't existed at all: even the space between the 114th and the 116th wasn't there anymore. I asked the guardian. He said, with a suspicious look: "But Sir, it has always been so. A mistake, certainly."