

Valentine's Day 1997

by Janet Jagan - Feb. 17, 2007

I used to think that Valentine's Day was a joyful day, one to take note of and do something pleasant on that day. I can remember as a child at school we used to make Valentine cards, using lacy paper that is usually connected to cakes and sweet things. Receiving a Valentine's card with a "guess who" as a signature, was always exciting and caused endless guessing about who had left it on my school desk.

In later years, there were gifts on Valentine's Day and cards for my children, then my grandchildren.

But on Valentine's Day 1997, the worst possible thing took place. The day was ending pleasantly and comfortably. I was on the third floor of State House, the living quarters of the official residence. My husband, Cheddi came home late in the afternoon after a hard day at the Office of the President and climbing the three flights of stairs.

He deposited his pile of papers on a table and sat down near me. Our dog, Terror and our cat Elvis came to play under his feet. They were fun to watch in their love-hate relationship, sometimes, cuddling together and sometimes snarling at one another. Then he left for his study and I brought him his dinner there.

At midnight, I was awakened by Cheddi. He said he wasn't feeling so well and had tried to telephone our doctor, Dr Hughley Hanoman, but the phone wasn't working. He telephoned his nephew who contacted two doctors who came over to State House to examine him. It was decided that he should go to hospital for checks. But our medical services were not what they are today. There was no ambulance. I remember that we put Cheddi in a Berbice chair and the guards carried him down the three flights of stairs and into a car. He was taken to the Public Hospital and placed in the Intensive Care Unit.

Thus began the almost three weeks of sorrowing, pain and uncertainty that led to his demise on March 6, 1997. All during his travail, he remained the Cheddi we all knew and loved. He never complained, he never asked for anything, he smiled and was always contained, trying at his best to comfort his sorrowing family, never adding to our distress by appearing to be in pain or discomfort. When he could not speak, due to a tube in his throat, he gave no evidence of hurting, but wrote notes to assure us all.

He died as he lived – composed, kind, understanding, not allowing his pain, his obvious discomfort, his knowledge that he knew he could not come out alive to add to the awful pain his family felt.

Very soon we will commemorate the 10th anniversary of his death. He remains alive in the hearts and minds of so many Guyanese – for who he was, what he did and how he conducted himself throughout his life and when he reached the zenith of his political life. He was a simple, yet profound man, a kind and gentle person who could be strong and demanding when he was fighting for the rights of oppressed people; he was an impressive public speaker who could influence thousands, yet he consulted all and sundry, from the porter to the academic, on issues that he considered important and not for one man's

decision alone. His legacy is for all to see and know. But what is more important is the love that so many had for him and still treasure.

For me, Valentine's Day is the day that always reminds me of the loss of a great man, a loving husband, brother and father, father not only of his two children, but of the nation.

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