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## The Tribute

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“*Ajoba* is no more.”, she heard her mother’s troubled voice over the phone. It sounded so different- a dense layer of the slimy mucous lining up her larynx and nostrils; then its quick and frequent inhalation. She figured out that her mother had been sobbing the whole evening. Rohini didn’t know how to react. What would she have said? ‘I am so sorry to hear!’, just like the local Americans do? Or ‘Old age spares no one.’, which seemed to be the most logical answer?

“*Aai*, it’ll be okay.”, she managed to say after a long pause. Her mother’s mucous which seemed to have stopped momentarily, trickled down again. She heard her gulp it down as she let down her tears.

“*Aai*, don’t cry. Don’t cry.”, Rohini just couldn’t think of anything else.

“Come home, *beta*.”, her mother replied.

Now it wasn’t that Rohini hadn’t been close to her grandfather. Infact, she had been his most favourite grandchild. But home wasn’t very close: it would take her at least 25 hours to reach. -2 hours to the airport, an 8 hour flight, 4 hour layover, another flight of 8 hours, and then a 3 hour road ride to reach home.

“And I won’t even be able to see *ajoba*.”, she thought.

“Did you book the flight?”, her mother called her frantically. By now, the mother had her sister-in-law sitting beside her, helping her with tissues.

“Mom, I am looking it up.”, Rohini didn’t want to hurt her mother.

“Wait, I’ll get it booked.”

“No, I’ll do it.”

She called up her father.

“*Baba*, how’s mom? Is she okay?”

“Yes, disturbed. But we are here for her. Me, your uncles, aunts, brothers.”

“She said I should come down.”

“Oh, that’s not needed. We are here. Here to take care of her. You don’t need to come.”

Rohini sank on her sofa. But the next day, turned out even harder.

Rohini came back from work, opened the door to the lonely apartment, where she lived all by herself, and then she sobbed- she sobbed partly because the outside wind was very cold, but also partly because her grandfather’s loss was just sinking in. As she just rested on the sofa, which felt like the only cosy place in the barren house, her father called up. He sounded authoritative this time. She felt he’s angry too.

“If your mother needs you here, you should come. That is what I feel. The rest is up to you. But do remember that every decision has its consequences and when you make a decision, you should be ready to bear the consequences too.”

“*Baba*, I...”, but the line had already gone dead. Her father, a believer of data saving, had instantly switched off his internet after the call. So, when Rohini tried calling back, there was no response.

Vexed, she tapped the phone on her head. And tapped it again. And again. And again. Until it hurt. Her tears rolled down her eyes. This time, due to the pain the violent tapping of the phone had caused.

“They must have cremated him by now. They must have got the ashes home now.”, she thought as she dialled her mother.

“How are you feeling?”, Rohini asked.

“I am okay.”, then a pause.

“Rohini, I feel so ashamed to call you my daughter. You couldn’t even come home. I needed you.”, she said with her husband sitting next to her, holding her hand.

“Yes *Aai*, I know but...”

“Such a shame to the family. What would your uncles think! Such a shame! I thought you’d get some sense in your tiny brains and show your face after a day of his death at least. But no! You have your own priorities, your own preferences. The American self-centric attitude

is not good, child.....”, said the lady who had forcefully pushed her daughter to study abroad, even when Rohini wasn’t entirely willing to.

Rohini cried as she sat on the floor of the dimly lit living room. *Such a shame, such a shame!*

“He always liked you the most! Always used to ask me how you’re doing, when do you plan to return. Always so concerned. He was your grandfather you know!”

Rohini knew it very well. After all, he was the only grandfather she had had.

The next morning, she woke up late, her eyes swollen, lips dry.

“Good Lord!”, she exclaimed as she checked the time. Then she cursed. And cursed again, as she slapped herself hard. Again and again. She pulled her hair with both her hands, pressed her forehead tight and cried as she slid her fingers down her closed eyes slowly.

She decided to take a day off.

‘Grandfather no more.’, she wrote in the subject line. Then backspaced. ‘Sick leave’, she typed.

“Are you free today?”, she called up her friend.

She spotted her friend in the coffee shop they had decided to meet in, his one hand waving at her, and the other busy wiping his running nose. His smile disappeared as he saw her from close up. And as she got out her tissue, he asked, “Have you been crying?”

“Let’s go to the Home Depot. I need to buy a shrub.”, she said ignoring the question.

And so, they drove, she, wiping her eyes, he, wiping his nose.

“Aai-Baba must have completed all the rituals now.”, she slipped in her thoughts.

“Will you at least tell me why are we doing this?”, he said, after he could no longer hold his emotions back.

“I lost my grandfather.”, she said with a straight face, got out of the car and strode in the nursery.

Her friend, as shocked as he was, decided to follow her. He saw the tears on her cheeks dry, as she brushed her fingers over the flowers. The flowers, almost on the verge of freezing in the harsh weather, probably felt better. She went around the place and decided to pick up the brightest of them all- the azalea reflected the mild sunlight with its tiny pink flowers.

Upon reaching home, she chose a spot in the backyard, where she knew the morning sunrays would hit; she sprinkled some water on it. Then she put on her favourite gardening gloves, and dug the mud with a trowel. Delicately, she unpacked the shrub, securing the small thread-like roots with her palms. Then she placed it in the adequately wet ditch, that seemed ready to nurture its new gift. Placing the earlier displaced soil in the ditch, where it belonged, she lightly pressed the base of the shrub. She sprinkled some water again, this time on the shrub's leaves and its pink flowers too; and patted the flowers gently, just like her grandfather used to.

She smiled at her friend, feeling a bit relieved. He smiled back, still a bit confused.

Once indoors, he made Rohini their all-time favourite Cadbury hot chocolate. As she held the warm drink in her cold palms, he asked, "Would you like to talk about it?"

She took a deep breath, and exhaled it slowly. She pursed her lips and blinked her eyes thrice. And then, she spoke it out, vivid and in details: "As a child, I used to visit *ajoba* often and....."

The birds chirped, the Sun rose and the pink flowers in her backyard sparkled in its rays.

#### Glossary-

*Ajoba*: grandfather

*Aai*: mother

*Baba*: father