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Portrait of a Grandmother

Naveen Kumar Kottidi

“Get up, Daddy!” commanded a lovely voice. Ramu woke up stretching his body lazily. It seems his dream sleep was curtailed. Ramu is a lecturer who works for a college and the lovely voiced pretty girl is his five years old daughter Fruity.

He was surprised or rather confused observing her funnily angry face. “What happened, dear?” He said. “So you forgot the promise made?” she replied.

It flashed to Ramu’s mind that he promised her, two days ago, to take her to his granny, and so he said, “I’m sorry dear, I forgot it. Never mind. We are going now, so get ready”

“My daddy is so sweet and he is a good boy too, you know mummy”, Fruity said.

“Aha! You two started complimenting each other? What a father! What a daughter!” Seetha, his wife, said controlling her laugh while preparing the coffee.

After taking a hot shower bath, Ramu had a cup of hot filter coffee. Shortly after, he dressed up casually and looked at his daughter and wife. They were already ready. Ramu took his bike out and kick started it. His wife insisted the daughter to sit on the rear part of the bike but Fruity preferred to sit in the front so that she can have a glimpse of the world. Having convinced his wife, Ramu released the clutch and accelerated his bike making it run like a race horse.

“What are those green fields, daddy?” Fruity asked observing the surroundings. “They are paddy fields from which we get rice.”

“So rice is grown here,” Fruity said. “No, paddy is grown here which we take to rice-mill to process it, then we get rice which is ready to consume,” Ramu explained.

“Oho, that’s the matter,” Fruity nodded her head trying to figure out the complexities of life. She wondered if the street dogs were similar to their pet Brownie. She complained about the cool breeze and wore her woolen coat. She was enjoying the ride. Throughout the journey, she kept on asking questions about surroundings as if it was her past time. After a while, she started singing the rhymes which she learnt in her nursery recently. It was altogether a new experience.

After an hour of bike journey on tar road, they took a right turn and the road was bumpy. Little angel was dozing off. Ramu was riding carefully slowing down at the ditches. Finally they reached a building with a sprawling campus. Ramu wondered if it was the right place but a sign board on the left hand side clarified his doubt. Ramu parked his bike and asked his wife and daughter to follow.

They went close to the gate and waited if anybody would help opening the gate. Nobody turned up, so they helped themselves and entered Ashram, an old age home.

“What a spacious pleasant place full of green trees as if humanity gave birth to nature which is a rare sight nowadays in this concrete-cultured societies,” Ramu felt.

They walked straight to the building where iron grilled door is locked from inside. Ramu saw through the door. A medium sized hall having long wooden benches, on the sides, ready to be occupied. An old man occupied one of them and engrossed in reading a newspaper like a student preparing for a public exam. He was in his late seventies, clad in white dhoti and a khaddar vest. His skin textured like a modern art painting showing its age. Ramu knocked at the door. The old man didn't move. Ramu waved his hands. The old man is still and is still reading. The old man must be either gone deaf or involved completely in reading the colourful page three events.

Ramu, Seetha and Fruity, all yelled at once at the top of their voice. Then they observed a change in the posture of the old man. Adjusting his bifocal spectacles, he looked at them. There was a smile on his face. He moved his head from the daily to the door. His lean fragile body shivered and the dull dry eyes became wider. Seeing the visitors at the door he felt so happy which was expressed in his toothless hearty smile.

He got up and stepped forward controlling himself to receive them as if receiving his own guests. Though his offspring neglected him he still feels for the love of his people. After all, human beings need a touch of affection.

Ramu greeted him and entered the hall. An elderly woman in her forties came forward, questioned about the purpose of their visit, and then guided them to the hall adjacent to the TV hall.

They entered a marbled hall. A cool breeze made their passage pleasant. Ramu was observing the big halls which were occupied by the uncared, unloved and orphaned old men and women. He observed the rooms giving second life to the nation's senior citizens. Each room sheltered twenty and all of the inmates were playing their second half of the long tedious test century.

They reached the room as told by the woman in white, stepped into the hall walked up to the bed of his dear grandma. She was doing something. They observed her for some time, and then disturbed her. Seeing them standing right in front of her, was really a very pleasant surprise for her. Grandma's eyes shone and his became wet.

Even before asking about her health, she questioned their well-being. She showered them with affection and their little daughter with kisses. She offered biscuits and fruits which were meant for her. Fruity took an orange, but they had some water. Then they gave her snacks which were brought for her, but she reluctantly accepted a striking difference between the giving and the taking.

Grandma was speaking on and on. They kept on listening. Suddenly she gasped and stopped remembering something. Then, she showed them her new possession, a cell phone gifted by her son, like a kid exhibiting her toy. Modern age has widened the gap between parents and their offspring, but at least shortened the communication gap. Thanks to the modern technology!

Grandma, then, introduced her friends and roommates. It was a moment of pride for her. Ramu was trying his best to keep her happy. She took them round the kitchen and dining hall explained everything in detail as if a new bride showing her ultra-modern modular kitchen.

After a while, walking with the help of a stick she led them to a marvelous hall of god, the church, and asked them to pray earnestly for their well-being. Ramu prayed absolutely not for momentary gains, but something sublime. A sense peace pervaded his turbulent mind.

As the lunch bell was given, they were asked to wait there and grandma, along with Seetha, went to have her sketchy meals. Now a days, she can eat only soft food, like curd rice.

Ramu has become nostalgic at once, thinking of his childhood at grandma's place.

"What has time done? She was tall then, but she is short now. She was strong then, but she is fragile now. She was straight then, but she is limp now. Time has taken away her youthful beauty. It has not only doubled her age but multiplied her wrinkles. She was in her own private home then, but now in an old age home. God, you are merciless!" he thought.

"What's wrong with you, dad," fruity asked her father.

"Nothing," he said.

“You must be thinking about granny, I know,” she said.

"Of course, your guess is correct, baby. You study my thoughts well. You know, how strong my granny was. That was a good olden time," said Ramu.

“It seems very interesting. Come on, dad, why don’t you tell me about granny?” Fruity asked.

“Definitely, I would love to narrate it to you,” he said.

“You know I spent three years of my childhood at granny’s place where I completed my preprimary in a single teacher run school,” Ramu said.

“As there was no entertainment in my village, I kept visiting my maternal grand ma’s home every weekend. That’s a kind of break for me, much awaited and after a long week of exhaustive class room teachings, home works, assignments and what not?” he continued.

“You must have had a lot of fun, then,” Fruity said.

“Yes. Every Sunday was a holiday which includes eating, drinking, and a lot of fun for the guests and the family members. The place was a kind of hotspot for gossip and entertainment where all of my aunts and uncles with their families meet and mix. My granny would prepare hot green chilli Mirchi using corn flour. What a really hot and tangible thing to the palate! What a lovely past-time!” he recollected.

“What was your grandpa doing for a living, dad,” Fruity asked.

“My grandpa used to run a grocery store which was the only source of income to the family. They had five children, four girls and a boy. All of them were sent to government run schools and were matriculated. Their only son was supported well enough to complete graduation, and he was the first to have a bachelor degree in the village. As was the custom for many a young graduate, he left for Hyderabad a land of opportunities and joined job, eventually bought a home, had a wife and children,” Ramu said.

“So, they were all educated. What about granny?” Fruity asked his father.

“Granny was an uneducated village woman who didn’t know the practices of town people. She never attended any function nor did she visit any place. She was remote in true sense and was not habituated to transactions of the society,” Ramu told his daughter.

“Of course, I see that aspect in granny. Please continue,” Fruity said.

“Grand pa and grandma would share, support and help each other at all times. They didn’t buy a TV. It’s not because they couldn’t afford it, but they wanted to save every penny to give a better life to their children.”

“Very interesting..., dad”

“Ten years rolled by. Her husband had a stroke and he was paralyzed for the rest of his life. She had been a woman of strong character and so never wanted to be a burden to her sons nor her daughters. She had become a mother to her husband and nursed him very well. So far so good, and years rolled by. Grandpa, a septuagenarian, after quite a few days of sickness, passed away, leaving her all alone.”

“That’s very sad. Then, how did she manage the family?”

“Granny worked hard to see her children settle in their lives. She had been running pillar to post to run the show for fifteen years since the death of grandpa. It made her grumpy, dominant enough to handle the people. It was difficult for her to get her daughters married. Not that they were beautiful but she was looking for the right in-laws. In fact, the daughters were the most eligible maids in the entire village. After a fine groom-hunt, they got married. Having everybody left home, she was to stay at home alone which was difficult for a person of age and wisdom. Eventually she took refuge in an old age home.” Ramu lost himself in the past.

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Completing her lunch, the old woman rushed in as if she would miss the golden moments. Father and daughter were involved in conversation.

They came to senses when his wife was called him repeatedly. Grandma was asking something. Her voice, love and affection were unique and of course, stood the test of age.

Then grandma took them round the garden. They had a walk and saw the other friendly beings, playing in the park, such as rabbits, ducks, hens and few other birds living on the same campus. Seeing them Fruity felt so happy and even tried to catch them. Ramu and his wife were enjoying the chasing scene. Seeing them grandma felt happy. It was a sense of belonging. That breathed happiness into his nerves.

While walking in the park, as long awaited moment of his life came real, Ramu asked his granny to come along and stay with them. Granny was silent for some time. The request being a surprise yet welcoming, was melting her. Tears were rolling down the eyes, wetting her cheeks. She is sobbing. She could not resist her feelings any more. She was not sad, but over joyed. All of them were in tears. There were no words, but shared happiness. Venting the long-suppressed

feelings, Granny looked better. After a while, she replied that it's a pleasure to be with them, but she sought time to think about it. Ramu responded positively.

It was four in the evening. They knew that time stops for none. It was time to leave. All of the inmates gathered to bid a great farewell. His grandma asked them to visit again. With a heavy pounding heart they promised her. Grandma kissed little Fruity and Fruity returned them. Then, they set out waving hands. She stood silently smiling and their eyes met and became wet. Parting makes a bond stronger, but it is painful.