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Glimpses of Grandma: How I Grew up to be Me

By Shabnam Nadiya

And in the end the love you take
Is equal to the love you make. John Lennon

When I was six and had just started school, I came home crying one day because the other children had teased me. I was too different from them. Just returned from England, my Bangla wasn't as good as theirs though my English was a lot better. I wore pants like the boys, ate weird food (people didn't eat mushrooms!), I didn't call my parents *Abbu* and *Ammu* like the rest of them and my mom was away from home all day, so I couldn't go home after school. Also, I called my grandma *Didima*. I was a criminal in their eyes, and they wasted no time in letting me know that. Hell, I must be a Hindu or a *Chrischan* to call my grandma *Didima*! I sincerely doubt that any of us really knew what a Hindu or a *Chrischan* (Christian) was back then, but the way they said it made me squirm in abject humiliation. After-school hours were spent at my grandparents' house nearby as mom was trying to complete her MA and usually had classes at that time of the day. I went and blubbered in *Didima's* lap and also demanded to know why my mom wasn't home for me like the other mommies.

Didima, soft and comforting as usual at first, gradually told me some hard truths. She told me that I couldn't have my *mamoni* right then because she had a class to attend, work to do. She told me that I would always be different from the others and that I had better learn to deal with it. How many other children did I know who had mothers with a university education? How many of the kids had working mothers (a rarity in those days of our community) which I would have as soon as my mother completed her degree? How many children did I know who were six years old and spoke two languages fluently? Nerdy, even back then, at the ripe old age of six, I was probably the only kid who took equal pleasure from having her nose stuck in a book as from having her feet stuck in mud. I was different, she told me, we all were. She explained to me that what my mother was trying to achieve was a difficult task in itself, more so for a woman and especially so for a woman with small children.

By the time she had finished, my heart held a feeling as pure and holy as a martyr's; as if my mother was a pilgrim on some arduous and holy journey, and it was my sworn and solemn duty to help her

complete it. I promised myself that I would be a good girl and no trouble to her at all. I swore that I would do well in school and make her proud of me. Of course, those resolutions (like all my good intentions) didn't last long, but the intense pride I feel to this day for my mother's achievements perhaps stems from that hot and weepy afternoon when I understood the simple pride *Didima* felt in her eldest child.

Soon after my grandfather died, *Didima* started buying sarees by the dozens. Her epic journeys into Bailey Road and Hawkers Market became part of family lore. We'd nudge each other and smile with a small waggle of our eyebrows -- There she blows; she's off again. Unbelievably finicky, in nine out of ten cases she would have to make 2/3 return visits because the *kolki* in the *anchal* wasn't just the perfect shade of blue, or the stems of the flowers in the *paar* were turned left instead of right.

Having lost her father at an early age, *Didima* alternately lived with both sides of her parents' families. She was never made to feel that she was a burden or that she was unwanted, but one lesson her mother drilled into her from the very beginning -- Remember, you do not have a father. Never ask anyone for anything and whatever you are given accept it with a smile in good grace. She spent a lifetime accepting things in good grace.

When she was just beginning to grow up, her cousin got married. On a trip back from Kolkata, the newly acquired *Dulabhai* brought home some sarees. The glossy new sarees lay on the bed as *Dulabhai* sat down to lunch. *Didima* watched the colour of the sarees from a distance. Obviously he had brought the sarees home for his new bride -- but what a riot of pleasurable colours they were to the eyes of the young girl who had trained herself not to ask of anything from anyone. After lunch she was called into her sister's room. *Dulabhai* had instructed his bride that the girl was grown up enough for a saree now, so one of them was for her. What colour blouse did she want? She had stood silent at this undreamed of question. What did it matter! One of the sarees was meant for her! It was filmy material, glass nylon, the height of fashion then. *Dulabhai* had chosen well for the fair young girl -- a deep blue with bold white stripes throughout. She felt like a princess as she wrapped the saree around herself.



And so when we laughed at her hours spent on selecting the exact right shade of green, or how she would grow bored with a carefully selected saree in just a month, how were we to know that no saree she ever bought could be quite perfect, for no colour and no design could ever rival the blue of that first gift, the texture of that first grown up saree?

She talks to me about her own mother, how she was unlike herself, my mother or me in physique. We are all three of us slender while my great-grandma had had a heavysset, comfortable figure. She tells me how my great-grandmother used to have clumsy feet. That woman, *Didima* laughs, could trip on her toes and fall down on plain

ground. I think to myself that I must tell that to my husband. He's always teasing me about how clumsy I am, slipping and tripping all the time everywhere I go. I feel relieved somehow...it's not something wrong with just me, it's something that's come down from my great-grandma. It's in the family.

I learn so many different things from her. She tells me that somewhere beyond the bounds of the horizon, somewhere beyond the bounds of our vision there is a link between the earth and the sky. Or else why should all plants yearn upwards to the sky as they do? Why else does the rain come straight down to the earth instead of being distracted by the sky and the wind? I learn that land is the biggest asset of all, for the earth never tricks you, never deceives you. She explains the unequal distribution of land ownership between men and women to me; that women are the keepers of the land, the earth, she tells me -- we water it with our tears and we nourish it, we too bear fruit in sympathy with the earth's pain. This is why women never own land. For you do not need to own something that deep down inside is already yours.

I watch as her life shrinks...it used to be she made plans for next year...clothes she would buy, people she would see, or a few months. Now her plans extend only up to next week. Awareness of death grows within her, and somehow that touches my sense of my own mortality. She laughs at my fears. Death will come to us all, this we know, but does the fear of that inevitability touch us all in the same manner? She tells me how she should be turning to God. Pray more, think of Him more, and detach herself from all her earthly bonds -- detach herself from us she means. But I still have some things I need, she tells me, things that hold me back. She tells me that we should all help her in fulfilling her desires. I did it for you once, she reminds me, calling in old debts. I should have a child soon to help her along her way she tells me out of the blue, give her a great grandchild. I tell her that she's already had a great grandchild -- my niece, so that can't be so important. No, it's your child that I need to see, you are the one, you are the daughter's daughter. Then it will be all right, she adds. As if, I think, seeing the fourth generation woman-child will assure her of her own continuity. She laughs at herself. Old age makes people say strange things, she warns me, don't take it all too seriously.

I watch my mother change her perception of *Didima*. The impatience and irritation she used to feel at her mother's shortcomings changes to a grudging admiration. I watch this transformation and wonder at the mutability of life -- my childhood angers at my mother slowly dissolves as I watch her come to terms with her own mother.

I've grown beyond her reach, *Didima* tells me. She who taught me my first words cannot understand a lot of mine these days, she tells me in a wistful yet proud voice. But it doesn't matter, I realise. She never attended college or university like I did, never read the books I have; she never had the "exposure" that I had. But being brought up by her was probably the most important of learning experiences for me.

Didima is old now although she still has the same comfortable smell and her cooking remains unbeatable. Her face hasn't changed much either, just grown thinner in places creating an interesting play of shadows and lines -- perhaps a good sign for me; women in our family age well. She's indiscreet now; she tells me things I shouldn't know -- the bad habits and scandals of my other relatives. She still talks of the day my parents snatched the three-year old itty bitty me away from her and took me to faraway England. She talks of the words I used to lisp so sweetly and at the drop of a hat she'll tell you how they used to celebrate my birthday all the while I was gone. She embarrasses me in front of other relatives by explaining how devoted her grandson-in-law is to me, how he always accompanies me wherever I go, what a nice boy he is, and how, soon after our marriage, he carried her down two flights of stairs to the car when she had broken her ankle. She explains that her son-in-law, my father, had also done the same for her soon after my mother got married when she had again hurt her foot and that my father has been such a good son-in-law. As if this somehow made everything fall into place -- an assurance for her that I too would come through life and marriage successfully. She walks the two flights of stairs up to my apartment to look at and water the plants she makes me keep in the veranda, and she always arrives with a gift -- a handful of *peyajus*, a bowl of *shutki bhorta*, a story from her childhood or mine.

Didima was there for me when I needed her most growing up. She fed me pickles and sweets, saved the puffer fish that accidentally came in with the regular fish so I could blow them up like weird balloons She caught snails from the nearby lake so I could lie on my belly for hours watching them. She taught me how to make mud pies, how to suck out the single drop of honey from wild flowers and how to chafe and polish clam shells into the sharpest of slices for green mangoes and other delicacies. She taught me that girls should be nice, sweet and gentle, and showed me how to raise hell when necessary. In return I gave her heartache, worry, and some laughter. Perhaps that's payment enough for a lifetime of love.