ESSAY

Ginger Grandmother

by Anushka



"Fragmented Pulse" by Mukul Chandra Barman

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I’d been murderous about my grandmother for years now. You’d think it was anger or perhaps even hate seeping into unassuming errant thoughts — an idle wondering about when she’d leave the world for good and us in peace. It did begin that way.

Twilight years. Damning words. The reason why my mother had fought the rest of us to keep her mother at home. The woman had a house of her own and she’d made no secret of her insistence to live by herself. She didn’t need us. Oh but she did, my mother would reason. With herself, with us, even if she couldn’t reason with her mother.

For someone so intent on making it alone, my grandmother tied herself to us however she could. So ingrained was her presence in our everyday that I could hardly remember what life had been before her.

Watching my 55-year-old mother cancel plans to keep herself close to her sick 75-year-old mother was unbearable. And what even for? The woman had spared my mother no abuse, not while her voice had any strength left.

Having given the prime of her life to her husband’s convictions, you’d expect to see resentment in my mother. Yet there’s not even a trace of it.

“Age is just a number,” she would say to me often. “There will be time for me later.” I always disagreed with her. Now I stop myself and wonder, *what do I know?* I’m only twenty-three. I’m two years younger than when she had my sister — her first child, and one year from when she married my father. Her husband and her children have been the nucleus of her world ever since. She has been mothering us, making it all about us with an obstinacy that can easily be mistaken for devotion.

When will you live for yourself? I've wanted to ask her so many times. To her, though, doing something for herself is a crime beyond mere indulgence. What mother could choose herself over her children? *Yours* — was the answer that I never offered. Her expression always read, *I can’t.* But there was more to it. Something along the lines of, *I want to, but I can’t — you wouldn’t understand.*

She was right though. I truly didn’t. *Because you’re not a mother,* I guess, is how she’d finish that thought. I’d argue that my grandmother wasn’t her child either. Her answer to that would’ve been — *She is to me what I am to you.* And there would be no going forward after.

For the longest time, I’d thought she wouldn’t cry when her mother finally went. Maybe because she’d already spent her tears over the years, mourning the woman who’d raised her but never truly earned her place as her mother.

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Would it matter the way she'd go? I'd often think to myself. I could've crushed a bunch of sleeping pills in her nightly drink and that would be it. It would've been cruel, and crueller still on my mother, if I'd ground glass and mixed it up with the sugar she took in her chai, leaving her writhing for hours before she'd finally beg to be released.

Strangely, she gave up her will to live before I could give in to my morbid fantasies. When she passed away a few months ago, my mother seemed uncharacteristically composed. After all, she was entrusted with the responsibility of the final rites. At the cremation furnace, however, when the body was pushed inside, that was when it struck her. She sobbed inconsolably for the next few minutes. I stood by her. A rock, a wall, a witness; I was all that and more — whatever she needed me to be.

I didn't kill my grandmother after all. I did kill her likeness though — even if it was only in my dreams. The victim of my brutality was the ginger cat of my neighbourhood, a creature I'd grown to associate with her. For his ever-so-surly demeanour, he'd earned himself the moniker Grumpy. We'd lost count of the number of times he'd wandered off and then surprised us days later with his return. We'd once gone as far as to give him away to an eager child who believed she could evoke feelings out of him. He never stopped coming back. It'd been the same with my grandmother, she'd swear at us and leave us to go stay with her relatives, her extended family and then return bitter and dejected. She'd already been cast out of her son's place, having spent years poisoning his home, pitting his wife against herself and forcing him to choose one over the other. With no one to turn to, she'd come back to the daughter she'd cursed to suffer her same fate — that she'd live out the rest of her life unloved and unwanted. Like the ginger.

It was unusual how he'd brought out the cruel streak in me, an ailurophile who can't resist petting even strays. His death was a particularly graphic visual. I'd thrown at him what I'd thought to be a slipper but turned out to be a piece of rock. A blink later his head was smashed in, his blood spilling onto concrete like a splash of red dousing a gray canvas. And yet, I remember deriving no satisfaction from it.

Just the way I felt about her passing. By the end, she'd actually been desperate to go. My mother couldn't bring herself to give the bottle of sleeping pills she'd been asking for everyday.

"It would be a kindness to let her go," my mother had said. *Then why can't you do it?* I couldn't bring myself to ask her.

With my grandmother gone, I wondered if the ginger would bring out the same revulsion in me. The yowling yappy creature that refused to move once he stationed himself at our doorstep. But I haven't seen him since.

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