

Poetry

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“*Atcha*” – while growing up, that’s what I heard mom address you
I did not have anyone to address as “*Atcha*” around,
hence you were my “*Atcha*”, not “*Muthatsha*”

I never saw your thick black hair
Or dark brown eyes
Or fast-paced military-man gait
But I admired your breathtaking, thick silver strands of hair
your grey senile rings
your thin wrists where the green veins ran
your scent, like the fragrant temple *Vibhuti*
and, your long fingers
When someone says, “*You have got long fingers.*”
I would instantly reply, “*They are my maternal grandfather’s*”
They help me reach my *Veena* strings with ease.

I remember the peace when I finally locate you
among the crowd of parents outside my school gate
Now I look for you in my photos of us
Try to reminisce your voice, fragrance, warmth, and softness

Your voice from the tales you told me countless times,
Of the honesty of King “*Harishchandra*”
Of the devotion of “*Markandeya*”
Of “*Chichilu*, the Rabbit”, my favorite comic book story
Your voice, reiterating “*Human body has 206 bones*” before my biology test

Our walks through our post-harvest paddy fields
to buy duck eggs in the warm April mornings
And our walks to home from where my school bus drops me
I would run and hurdle ahead without waiting for you
You walked slowly, carrying my school bag
Can you believe I still carry the regret of my impatience?
Wish I had walked with you, listening to your travel stories

I stood outside the home, craning my neck, waiting for you
to return from the village’s grocery shop
Checking for the tiny “pocket” you made
with the edge of your pristine “*Mundu*”
And the joy of finding peanut bars and lemon-orange candies in them
that I didn’t ask you to buy

The pride when you handed me
a single note of 1000 Indian rupees from your pension
when I did well in the 5th-grade Half-yearly exam.
Your softness when you wrapped me around your lean arms
as I shivered with a fever that night

The delectable dessert that you bought
from the temple at 7 AM on every single birthday of mine

That heaviness in an imprecise chest chamber
every time I remember about that noon,

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I refused to eat the lunch you served
I would trade everything for a chance to say sorry to you

The last New Year we celebrated together
You lied down in your royal blue sweater
my green stethoscope's silver diaphragm on your chest,
you said to Mom, "*She is Learning*," and beamed proudly

But all the memories we made together started to wane
At the zenith of which you asked, "*Who are you?*"
"*Home feels empty*," you said to Mom
when I left for a 7-day-Girl-Guide camp
I feel the same now

**Atcha*: Dad

**Muthatsha*: Maternal grandfather