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## Bond of Love

Meenakshi Gogoi

It had been a few years since Pahi's grand-mother died, but her memories were still afresh. Pahi often reminisced about the good times spent with her grand-mother during festivities. During the Bohag Bihu, celebrated as the Assamese New Year and winters, her family always visited her grand-parents at their ancestral home in Kodomtoli village. Pahi missed her grand-mother's hand-made sweets, the black sesame *pithas* (a local sweet made of rice powder, sesame seeds and jaggery) and the mouth-watering coconut *laddus*. Her grand-mother's special bamboo shoot pickle recipe from raw and juicy bamboo with ripe *bhoot jolokia* (king pepper) was quite famous in her extended family. Pahi missed making videos of her grand-mother preparing the bamboo shoot pickle and pomelo jam recipes, visiting the village temple and crop fields, and plucking vegetables with her in the kitchen garden. She lost a dear friend with the demise of her grand-mother.

It was again the arrival of winter, and Pahi and her family would visit her grand-father. Her mother prepared snacks, walnuts and almond cake for him. She put them carefully inside the luggage bag, hoping her grand-father would love to taste her mother's prepared food items just like her grand-mother's cooked food. She purchased a flute as a gift to her village childhood friend Ratan. He was a mellifluous flute player at a very young age. Pahi heard his flute playing for the first time in the village temple during the festival of Janmashtami. Over the years, they bonded well as good friends. She expected to have a good time with her grand-father and Ratan in the village.

Pahi and her parents arrived at their ancestral village in December winter. After arrival, they hired an autorickshaw from the railway station to their village home. It was late afternoon when they reached their ancestral house. Pahi spotted her grand-father sitting comfortably and leaning back on a thick, beautifully carved wooden chair in the garden. She and her parents touched his feet out of traditional values and sought his blessings. Her grand-father was delighted to see them after months and happily welcomed them home. The house-help, Manohar, greeted them with joy and quickly stored the fresh veggies and Rohu fish in the kitchen, which he got from their farm and home pond. He helped her father keep the luggage in their bedrooms.

After they had been freshened up, Manohar served them aromatic hot cups of ginger tea and a platter of local sweets and biscuits. Pahi's mother put a few slices of the walnut and almond cake on a plate and offered it to her grand-father. He relished them and told her mother, "Aruna, you made a fabulous cake. I have tasted something very delicious in a while." Her mother smiled and replied, "I am so happy you liked the cake, Father. I will prepare your favourite food while I am here." Soon, her parents and grand-father were engrossed in conversation about the village, city life, and her grand-father's health. Pahi finished her tea and loitered around the corners and rooms of the house. She went to her grand-father's room, and to her pleasant surprise, she found a tidy room and a table with dust-free books placed in order.

The blue embroidered tablecloth, which used to be filled with tea stains when her grand-mother was alive, was unbelievably stain-free. The tea stains were from her grand-father's poor habit of spilling tea on the tablecloth while reading and writing. Pahi remembered not-so-heated but silly arguments between her grand-parents over this habit of her grand-father. She was utterly surprised to see the well-organised cupboard, and her grand-mother's *mekhela-chadors* (Assamese women attire) were nicely folded and kept inside it. She felt a drastic change in her grand-father's habits, such as keeping things in order after her grand-mother's demise. The pleasant change in the room was worth appreciating. Pahi spotted a photograph of her grand-parents on the wall adjacent to the bed which was not there before. They looked newly married in the picture supposedly taken in a hill station during the early years of their married life. She remembered seeing the photograph in a family album. The fragrance of the *rajnigandha* flowers from the vase beside her grand-mother's photo frame on a corner table was sweet-smelling. Pahi understood flowers were meant for her grand-mother as she loved flowers immensely and nurtured varieties of them in their garden. There was an old tape recorder on the table. She felt that her grand-father became soft-spoken and spent most of his time listening to old Assamese songs. He used to be more active, aggressive at times, an avid reader, and full of life when her grand-mother was alive.

After completing a round of the house, Pahi joined her parents and grand-father in the living room. Her grand-father politely asked her mother to cook his favourite fish curry. He said, "Our farm had a good harvest of cauliflowers this time. I have got some fresh cauliflowers from the farm and stored them in the kitchen. Can you please cook the cauliflower-fish curry tonight? I have asked Manohar to help you in the kitchen." "Sure, Father. I will prepare your favourite dinner tonight," replied her mother. It was late evening, and Pahi's mother went to the kitchen. Her father went to his bedroom, and Pahi accompanied her grand-father to his room.

Pahi sat near her grand-father on his bed, and they talked about her higher secondary school life and studies, her grand-father's new book collection, and his daily life in the village. Pahi asked, "Grandpa, don't you feel lonely when Grandma is no more? Why don't you come along with us? Father asked you to come with us several times, but you avoided coming to our place. We will have good times together. Isn't it?" Her grand-father replied, "Pahi, I am surviving with your Grandma's good old memories. I still love her and this house dearly. I want to live and die peacefully in my ancestral house."

Pahi asked, "But Grandpa, you cannot manage everything alone at this old age? You need people to take care of you." Her grand-father smiled and replied, "Your Grandma was alone in the house when I was at work. You were all in the city, but she was here looking after me and caring for the house even in her old age. Today, I feel what she must have felt about being alone most of the time." With little tears in his eyes, her grand-father said, "I did nothing great to express my love towards her, nor did I find enough time for her. I regret it today when she is no longer with me. Her absence taught me the value of life, love, and companionship. She loved me the way I was and adjusted to me like a devoted wife. Now, I want to be alone with her thoughts and memories." Pahi deeply felt his emotions and remained silent, nodded in response.

Soon, Pahi's mother called them for dinner. Pahi, her grand-father and father entered the dining room, and all sat on the floor for dinner. Dinner was served on big banana leaves, a traditional village style of eating meals on banana leaves. Her grand-father praised her mother's cooking and said, "Aruna, you reminded me of Savitri's fish curry. I loved the fish curry. It was tempting to my taste buds." Her mother happily replied, "Father, I have learned to cook the fish curry recipe from mother-in-law. I know how much you loved the fish curry she cooked. She was a fantabulous home cook. I am glad that my fish curry reminded you of hers." Pahi's grand-father smiled and said, "I recall Savitri in every way she cared for me." Pahi knew her grand-father dearly missed her grand-mother in every small thing. She felt her grand-parents shared a true bond of love. The dinner was over, and after some good talks and listening to soft music, they all went to sleep.

The next morning, after breakfast, Pahi went to meet Ratan. She found Ratan was not at his home. His grand-father told Pahi that Ratan had left the village home and was staying with his maternal uncle in Kolkata. Pahi was highly surprised to know about Ratan and enquired more about him. Ratan's grand-father said, "I cannot afford Ratan's educational expenses alone. His

maternal uncle is very close to him. After Ratan's parent's died in an accident, his uncle insisted on taking Ratan to educate him. But my wife and I were not sure of that. We are quite old now and cannot look after Ratan. A few weeks ago, his uncle came, and Ratan wishfully accompanied him. Ratan wants to pursue a good education in Kolkata and stay there. He has to build his life and career. I wished him good luck." Pahi felt disheartened that Ratan had not shared the news with her. She took his maternal uncle's phone number so she could speak to Ratan personally. In the daytime, Pahi rang Ratan's maternal uncle. He received the call and handed it to Ratan. Ratan excitedly greeted Pahi over the phone. He said, "Hello, Pahi. Glad to receive your call. How have you been?" Pahi replied, "Hello, I am doing good, Ratan. But I am a little upset with you. Why did you not inform me about leaving your grand-parent's home? You have my phone number. Right?" Ratan said, "I lost my phone. Before leaving for Kolkata, I visited your grand-father's house, but he wasn't home. I asked my grand-father instead to give you my contact number because I knew you would come to meet me once you came to the village." Pahi replied, "Alright. I have spoken to you and feeling good. I hope you have adjusted well to the new place by now. How's the new school? Have you made friends there?" Ratan happily replied, "I like the new place. My maternal uncle and aunt are very nice to me. I have made a few friends at school, and they are good with me." They talked for some time and ended the phone call with a promise to see each other soon on Pahi's next visit to their village.

In the evening, Pahi kept the flute inside the cupboard, which she desired to present to Ratan when they would meet next time. She told her grand-father about Ratan's leaving the village. Her grand-father knew about the special bond of friendship between Ratan and Pahi. He said, "I wish I had met him before he left the village. I hope you are pleased after talking with him." Pahi smiled and replied, "Yes, Grandpa. I am happy that Ratan has adjusted well to the new city life. We promised to meet each other soon." Pahi's grand-father smiled back at her, knowing their unaware growing bond of love in his thoughts. He expressed his desire for them to keep their friendship alive.

A week passed in the village amidst fulfilling, joyous days for Pahi and her parents. They would soon return to the city. With moist eyes, Pahi exchanged warm hugs with her grand-father on the morning of their departure to their city home. Her parents asked Manohar to look after her grand-father, and they took leave of him until they meet next time. A hired auto rickshaw dropped them at the railway station. Pahi missed Ratan and wished to see him on her next visit.

The train was right on time, and they left the station, leaving the village behind but with good memories to cherish.

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