

A PAIR OF GRANDPARENTS: A BLACK AND WHITE RELATIONSHIP WITH MY PATERNAL GRANDFATHER

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In this piece, Ahmed describes his relationship with his paternal grandfather.

I stepped inside the G train in downtown, Manhattan. The door shut behind me and, after a backward sway, the train took off. As the train left the station and entered into an obsidian tunnel, I glanced at an older couple and a toddler a few seats away. Extending his arms outward, the toddler rushed toward the old man and shouted, “Grandpa!”

While the old man hugged the child, an old lady with gray hair patted the child’s head. A few passengers passed by and blocked my view. All of a sudden, I began to reminisce about my childhood.

I remember, at the age of four, waiting for my grandfather to come home.

I had only met my maternal grandmother who had become blind in her ripe age before my birth. I would hug her and wait for her to guess who was in her lap. With her gentle hands, she would feel the hair on my head. Then, slowly patting my shoulders, she would clasp me in a firm grip, and whisper in my ear, “Furry, Furry, Furry...” I still can feel those moments. I remember changing my voice, expanding my shoulders, and puffing my chest to betray her calculations and to deceive her into thinking I was my older brother Rizwan. But she always got it right.

At that young age, I was her guide. She would shout my name whenever she wanted to use the bathroom or visit her nieces across the street. For me, she provided an appetite of life with a grandparent and as I tasted it, I became greedy. My desire to meet my grandfather surged forth, jolting me to my bones.

I would jealously hear other kids running home and playing with their grandparents. Since my grandmother was there for me, I thought my grandfather was out of town and one day he would come home too. I waited for him to come back, hug me, and say my name like my grandmother. In my mind, I envisioned an old man, a similar one to the picture in my home, knocking on the front door and saying he was my grandfather.

In my innocent mind, I believed I was special because I had only one pair of grandparents. Every time my siblings argued about the absence of my paternal grandfather, I thought they were talking about my maternal grandfather. They

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complained my grandfather had decided to stay in India and refused to come back home when my father went to get him. I began to hate him for not coming to see me. Knowing well the answer, I would inquire and my father would respond, "Son, I personally went over there to get him, but he refused to come back with me."

My father's comments were so casual I thought India was another town on the other side of Chenab River, which was less than two miles away from my home. The more I heard he refused to join us, the more I hated him. I would look at his picture, hanging on the wall, and find ways to hate him. *Perhaps the long black beard is smelly. He would not want to hug me. The staff in his hand is to beat me.* Deep down, I still wanted my grandfather in my life, as if seeing him would complete it. To satisfy these feelings, I pictured my grandma as my grandpa. Whenever I helped my grandma, I imagined I was holding my grandpa's hand. I would proudly thrust my tiny hands in her comforting palms and help her walk through the house. Yet, soon these precious feelings were disrupted.

My six-year-old mind began to grasp the concept of "is and "was." I understood I also had two pairs of grandparents and all of them had passed away before my birth, except for my maternal grandmother. When the comprehension settled in that my siblings were talking about my paternal grandfather in the past tense, my tiny hope shattered; I realized my grandpa would never come back from India and hug me just like my grandmother. Within, I still hated him for not coming, but loved him for being my grandfather. The notion of meeting my father's father lingered over me like a ripe fruit in my sight, but unreachable. Externally I clung to my grandmother to comfort my mind, but that did not last long either.

Within six months, she departed as well, leaving me alone to explore my world without her guidance.

In the following grandparent-less months, my perception shifted. I understood it was beyond anybody's reach to stay alive, until all of his or her grandchildren had been born. Then one day, I found two of my sisters talking to each other. I pretended to play nearby and heard one of my sisters saying, "You know, when our grandpa was in India, he wrote a book?"

I strained my ears and caught the other sister nodding in agreement and saying yes.

That simple statement settled in my heart. I rushed inside the room and looked up at my grandpa, high on the wall and beyond my reach. From that day on, I began to see my paternal grandfather's picture from fresh eyes. I would change positions in the room and stare at the picture. No matter where I stood in the room, those eyes, inside the metal frame, followed my movements. I began to like his black beard, his erect posture, the staff in his hand, and the way his chin rested in the tips of fingers on his right hand. Gradually, a seed kindled in my heart to become like him. After a while, I wanted to be a writer like my grandfather (except not abandoning my family).

I enclosed my sacred dream within my heart and stared at his picture on the wall. I focused on my health, paid extra attention to my education, and visualized myself writing a book. Time moved forward; days turned into weeks; weeks overlapped months; months disappeared into years; and years floated into space like

an invisible moth, metamorphosing me into a thirteen-year-old-boy. Then, I recalled my childhood dream.

Finally, on one spring afternoon, I asked my sister Mahmooda about the book my grandpa had written. She cast a quizzical glance at Fakhra, my other sister. After a moment, Fakhra broke her gaze and moved toward the piles of books on the shelves in the far corner of the room. As she stretched upward and balanced herself on her toes, my heart leaped up and part of me screamed inwardly. *I have rummaged through these shelves a thousand times. How could I have missed it*, I thought.

When she turned around and my eyes settled on her hands, I felt betrayal. I remember asking her with inquiring eyes, “Is this...?” In response, she extended her arms toward me with a small pamphlet, perhaps twenty pages. I grabbed the “book” and went in another room to read it. It was not even written by my grandpa. These pages revealed a story of my grandfather’s religious devotion depicted by his teacher. Hungry for more knowledge, he had decided to stay in India and became an imam for a local mosque.

Even though part of me was disappointed, the belief that my grandfather was a writer had succeeded in its objective. After that day, within, the desire to write a *book* had intensified.

Back in the G train, passengers moved away as the railcar slowed down for the next stop. Again, I watched the same toddler sleeping in his grandfather’s lap, while his legs were sprawled on his grandmother’s forearm. I smiled, recalling my hugs with my grandma. I love you grandma and grandpa.