

THIRD EYE EDITION

Terms of endearment

There's an Italian proverb which says that if nothing is going well, call your grand ma. I call my grandma nearly every other Sunday and I do so for many kinds of reasons. It's a relief to call someone who I can trust not to talk about work or ask me if I've seen the latest flick or read the latest book which I haven't. I can count on her not to overawe me with the recipe of a Vietnamese dish whose name I can't pronounce even if my life depended on it. She's one woman who doesn't confuse me with fashion trends, make-up tricks and tempting information on bargain sales. I call my grandmother because her breathless, girlish voice on the line., joyously enveloping me with tender endearments, peps up my weekend, and many days following it, as nothing else can. I call her because, bless her, she doesn't know what it is like living today, the mad scramble to get ahead of others, the walls people built to shut each other out, the abject worship at the feet of Mammon. Grandma, my mother and I are the three Matrushka dolls, fitting snugly into each other, drawing strength from each other, loving each other with a love that is unconditional, possessive and well, sometimes overwhelming. Last month, eighty-five-year-old Grandma made the long, arduous car journey from her Jorhat home to welcome a new grand-daughter-in-law into the family at Guwahati. She donned her crisp new mekhela chador with the vanity of a young woman, avidly followed the complicated rituals, chatted amiably with complete strangers, preened before the camera and while we from the groom's side were formally and rather awkwardly granting entry of a new bride into our clan, Grandma overturned all protocol, thrust her handbag (containing housekeys, money, spectacles and hanky) into the bejeweled bride's hands in the middle of the wedding reception and said cheerily, "Here, hold it for me, will you, dear, till I come back from my meal?"

Yes, that is my grandma, the antique little girl, completely free of artifice, or inhibition, unfettered by stifling conventions of a hidebound society, doggedly defending herself from her children, mainly her two daughters, as they worry and fuss and even scold her for doing and saying exactly what she pleases, her mischievous grin melting our hearts even as she triumphantly puts in the last word.

A couple of weeks ago, I spent two magical days at my parents' home just so that I could be with this silver haired little girl with her smooth as silk moon-face, her non-stop chatter, her goofy sense of humour, nimble-footed waddle, impulsive kisses and a deluge of memories, flowing endlessly like the waters of the Bhogdoi on whose banks she has lived all her life. She is the angel who holds the keys of the kingdom of my childhood, from which I have long been exiled as all grown-ups are, and to which we yearn to return, but are without the singular luck of Peter Pan. I check out the little old lady. Yes, everything is in place. My short-statured, solid-hipped Aita, touchwood, has taken on the long yeas with her trademark survival skills. Her voice still drowns other voices, the posture is erect, the reflexes swift, yes, there are those two familiar moles, one just above her left eyebrow, the other on the side of her nose, which had endlessly fascinated my brother Jaideep and me so long ago, moles we thought were actually fat juicy brown raisins with a life of their own, capable of falling off any moment with little plops into the cauldron of steaming tenga anja she was stirring vigorously over the fire. Here are the dear hands which had wiped our childhood tears,

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rubbed our grazed knees, rumpled our hair, passed on yet another ghila pitha when Mother wasn't looking, busily plucked herbs from her vast garden, held the chain of Toby, the frisky dog, as it nipped at our terrified heels... here is that uninhibited cackle after a good joke that she has avidly memorized to tell us, still going strong is her unshakable belief that she has an exclusive hotline to God whom she can call without intermediaries like priests. And also at hand is her faithful personal lizard, which always screeches at the right moment, which is just after she has said something we all take with a pinch of salt, and its timely assistance is the portable lie detector test which unfailingly works in her favour. My Aita still smells of Pond's dreamflower talc and Jabakusum oil, though the earlier fragrances – camphor turmeric, fresh mint leaves and dried bogori are missing. What else is sadly missing is also the glowing vermilion dot on her forehead since the day my gentle, quiet Koka passed away in his sleep, as quietly as a breeze among the nodding fronds of his beloved coconut palms, returning time and again in our dreams as a loving spirit from the great beyond.

Old age, illness loss of a life partner, how piercing are the slings and arrows of fate, how desolate the world seems to turn and how closer the shadows hover. One could be forgiven for wallowing in self-pity, exaggerating one's aches and pains, demanding love and attention from the young, the able bodied. But Grandma is made of sterner stuff. She tells us over telephone of a bad fall only weeks after she has recovered, cheerfully calling herself a fool for putting her foot on a wet puddle. When she is lonely, she talks out things with Koka, framed in a sepia tinted photograph. He was never a man of many words, and his silence now she accepts as his tacit agreement to whatever she says. When lightning struck a tree in her garden two summers ago and neighbours told her it was an ominous sign, she scurried about summoning men to hew it down in the space of a single day, with urgent appeals on her special hotline to God to watch over each and every member of her family scattered all over the State, the country and the world. Her persuasive words have, I like to believe, encouraged so many good things to always happen around her... the grass to grow, the fruits to ripen, the flowers to open their petals, the family's cows to yield creamy, frothing milk, huchori singers to ululate in joyous abandon on her front porch, serene bhakats from a nearby satra to bless her as she served tea in gleaming brass bowls. Impoverished students crowded her back porch for my uncle's old books and clothes. Humble folk from nearby villages arrived on creaking cycles, on bare foot, calling out hopefully to her, in minutes they would have a warm meal in their bellies, some money in their pockets, a pair of coconuts on their cycle handlebars and free advice on how to make an honest living. I suspect she has persuaded even the Bhogdoi not to climb up the embankment and flood her beloved home. It has been behaving itself till now and still gives her a wide berth... for hell hath no fury like a woman scorned...

Grandma was the women of substance long before we reduced into a cliché. She has been there, done that., raising a family in a tea garden, moving to the heart of a major upper Assam town, marrying off three daughters, educating two sons, standing like a rock beside her man, flying off to Mumbai and dancing at her son's wedding at the Taj by the blue Arabian Sea, picking up "kem che?" from her Gujarati daughter-in-law. Some years down the line, she was dancing again, this time at Fort William, Kolkata, on my brother, her grandson's wedding. She has the wisdom not to dim her vision with the nostalgia of the past, to accept with equanimity the sunshine and the shadows, taking on life as it comes,

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unchanged, unflinching, treating my astonished sons – her great grandsons – with a vintage Suraiya song rendered in a coquettish quaver. Today as my mother supervises Aita's meals, bath, nap time, television watching time with the Virgoan's exacting perfection and eye for detail, Aita enjoys her new role of the petulant child, naughtily breaking her daughter's rules. This moon faced little doll with silver hair rules our hearts like a queen and though short sighted herself, gives us all the clearest vision of how life is to be lived, I just hope one day my own grandchild will say the same about me.