

A bloodless bond...

I had heard she was barely 17 when she went to Malaysia as a bride from a small village in Punjab, India. Yesterday, when I saw her, she was about 75. But she also looked beautiful, serene, calm and tranquil.

She was married to a wealthy businessman in Ipoh (Malaysia), had two daughters and became a widow in 1961 while she was still very young. That's when, the wise folks say, the life really begins - a world of responsibilities, children, future, security, home, sense of settling down, looking at the future out through the window. She must have missed all this.

We never care to know what such a long and solitary self-vegetation does to a person. No matter who else is around you, you would miss that special single person, who had become the pivot of your existence. So we fail to understand and assess the endurance limit and the cost of it that he/she might be silently paying to the Fate. And therefore we fail too, to reach out to a seemingly warm person who has gone so frigid inside.

In January 1996 I went to Malaysia on a teaching assignment. I didn't know then that she even existed. I came to know her grandson Jagjit (Jay) first who rented an apartment next to ours on Jan. 1, 1997 (*that's why I remember the date!*). He appeared to have tied the nuptial knots very recently and hence, I didn't want to be obtrusive in his married life by my frequent senseless chats or even more senseless visits to him. Then she came along, and so did her daughter (Jay's mom) from Ipoh. In the beginning, we didn't even talk much: simple imperceptible nods and few forced smiles was all that was going on. My 3-year-old daughter was the catalyst to further the conversation and get to know them slowly. My wife (Shakila) and Jay's mom would talk of this and that mostly while hanging out clothes in the yard and Jay's grandma would say something in her native Punjabi to Shakila, which will be translated into English by Jay's mom. Our kids would get Baksheesh (gifts) from her on their birthdays! So much so, even my wife got 50 Malaysian Ringgits for hers one year! We started addressing her as *dadima* (grandma) and our relationship kept

growing. Of all, Shakila became very attached to her and through her the rest of us.

In January '98 we went to India after 8 long years. Due to my new semester, I came back alone and Shakila and kids stayed back for 3 more weeks. During that period, dadima saw to it that every evening when I came back from school, Jay's mom would prepare hot dinner for me and pass across the fence. Everyday dadima would admonish me not to eat outside. And that was the time when I felt I didn't lose my own sweet grandma after all. She had passed away when I was still a young boy, and I distinctly remember even to this day how she would care for me with the same glow and affection as this old lady to whom I was nobody. And then, before we could even get to know her better, Jay bought a home in the next street and they all moved there in late March '98.

Sometime in May '98 dadima again moved back to Ipoh with Jay's mom. And that's when the trouble started. One day Jay told us that dadima had slipped and broken her femur and was bed ridden for quite sometime. We would call them in Ipoh every now and then to find out how she was doing. Around November, Jay brought his mom and grandma back, while she was still wheel-chaired. We all felt very happy that she was around. She would ask Shakila to massage the Axe-brand eucalyptus oil on her feet and arms, which she would do unhesitatingly, since Jay's mom told her that whenever she gave a massage, dadima would feel great relief and sleep well in the night.

One day, dadima showed Shakila one of her hands and told her that the gold ring in one of the fingers wouldn't come out. Could she try to take it off? Shakila gave a few tries and it slipped out of dadima's finger. When she tried to give it back to her, dadima said in Punjabi: "I wanted you to have this, that's why I asked you to take it off." No matter how much she refused, dadima wouldn't budge. She started showing signs of hurt at Shakila's repeated refusal and Jay's mom asked my wife to accept it as a gift from dadima and slipped it onto one of her fingers. That I believe was one of the greatest moments in Shakila's life.

Not because of the gold. But because of the affection she felt towards dadima for treating her as one of her own.

Since Jay's mom couldn't leave dadima unattended, Shakila eventually became their helping hand in bringing groceries, vegetables, medicines, running errands. Thus the unseen bonding gained strength with every passing day. One unfortunate day, while walking back from the bathroom, dadima fell down and hurt herself badly. Jay got her admitted in the hospital, where surgery took its own course due to her ever failing health. She had broken her femur again and doctors were concerned about her heart condition before doing anything. She became totally bed-ridden. In the meantime we moved to another apartment about 30 miles away from her. Our usual daily grind didn't allow either of us to visit her in the hospital, though we got to know from Jay her condition on a regular basis. She is coming along, he would say.

We didn't hear about her for the next several weeks and then one afternoon Jay called: "*Bhaijaan (dear brother), this morning my grandma passed away*". I couldn't believe my ears! I didn't know what to say. The shock was so sudden and of such a magnitude. But more than that, a sense of sheer guilt was pounding my chest non-stop. *Why in the whole world, we didn't go to see her in the hospital, when she was alive?* All I could do was mumble some words of condolences and promise him that we were coming to his place right away.

During the entire drive of about 45 minutes on the highway we both were lost in our inner thoughts. I kept asking myself only one question: *What was so important to me that I couldn't go and see her in the hospital?* I asked the same question to my wife also. I felt, in the end, we utterly betrayed dadima. I felt, in a way we told her she was none to us and we were nobody to her after all. Are human relations so flimsy, that you can rip them off to threadbare with a blunt fingernail of a careless attitude? I didn't believe that. Not until we entered Jay's home. Soft, heart-rending devotional music with verses in Punjabi was playing in a low volume. I could understand what the verses were all about. They were about the trivialities and insignificance of a myth called life. They were about the

minuteness of a flesh-clump called human being. Hoisted up on an Indian style rectangular wooden cot was a casket. And there she was: clad in white coffin, her face washed, looking fresh, fragrant. She appeared as if she was asleep and looked so peaceful: in peace with the Lord at last! After, all the pain and all the sufferings of the recent months. Shakila went to her and touched her hand over the coffin and started crying silently. I kept my lower lip in between my teeth to control myself. It was so difficult. All those memories of hers started flooding my mind like a slow motion flashback. I felt a strong pain in my heart and wanted to keep my head on her shoulder and cry like that young boy who had lost his own grandma long time ago.

Those of us who are fortunate to have mothers will never know what it is to lose one. But I could see and feel the burden of loss when I met Jay's mom in the corner room. And when we hugged, I couldn't contain myself anymore and broke down. And for the first time since Jay told me that dadima has passed away, I realized the loss, the void and the gap that her passing away has left in all our lives, was real.

I was not related to her, nor was she to me in anyway. She was a Sikh and I a Muslim. Not even the common bonding of religion. And yet, the magnetism of this inexplicable relationship is something beyond any geographical or dogmatic similitude. I had a last look at her calm face before we left and for an instant I felt as if she was telling me something from that casket. I tried to figure out what it could be. But couldn't.

People talk of and teach about, the virtues of charity, but looking at her at that moment, I understood the true meaning of charity. The real charity is to love someone without question. No strings attached. That's what dadima did: to one, to us and to all.

Rest in Peace, dadima, wherever you are.

We love you and we shall never miss you, because for some reason I know, you will always be amidst us!