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## Growing Up

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After lunch she reclined lazily on a chair in the front veranda with her long hair kept loose in the soft mellowing sun. 'Kamma, see what I have brought for you, an orange', said Putu, the six years old daughter of her elder brother-in-law.

'Didn't you go to school today, Putu?'

'Yes, but our school was over early'.

Suddenly the cell phone on the table started to ring and Putu ran in with tapping steps in her usual jubilant rhythm. 'Kamma, Kakai'.

'Dr. Roy is available today at 6.30 in the evening. Come to his chamber. I don't want to wait any more.'

'Have I not been waiting? A long wait ... It was just one month. After our return from Shimla...' she went on thinking down the memory lane looking at a host of sparrows twittering at the gutter. Unknowingly she smiled, a genuine smile. It was a beautiful sight. The mother sparrow was feeding the little ones. 'Why do you wait for me every day till so late at night, Ma?' she once asked her mother 'you should take your dinner with them. I can't manage earlier.'

'Don't pose like an old woman; you won't understand it until you become me.'

The large antique wall clock clang repeatedly for four times. Pritha felt an awkward jerk within. She went into the kitchen in a low spirit intended to do something, but she suffered an amnesia; lost her mind in the crowd of so many anonymous feelings. Scratching her head like a young student forced to face a difficult question paper; she placed the pan on the burner and prepared tea for her mother-in-law and herself. Purnima, her mother-in-law, came up chewing a betel leaf and cast an endearing look at her, 'looking very morbid; are you feeling sick, bouma? You could have called me, I would prepare the tea.'

'No Ma, actually could not sleep after lunch, feeling a bit inert.'

In the quiet afternoon, just before the evening settles down, the clamour of the children brought the neighbourhood into consciousness. Putu, wiping a drop of snot, petulantly insisted her mother to let her go and join the children on the street. She has been controlling an irresistible wish since yesterday. Her father had bought a doll for her on his way from office. Since then it has been her main obsession, the most precious thing on earth. She found no one else reliable enough but her Kamma for caring the doll, keeping it safely. At night during a self induced study break she tip toed to her Kamma's room, avoiding her mother's military surveillance to have a quick look over the doll. Now she has almost taken a bow breaking vow to play with it and to secure a prestigious position among her friends. Pritha got ready and was about to leave. She stopped for a moment and then cajoled her with a tone of persuasion, 'Didi, please let her go... poor girl, she demands nothing more, only...'

‘Enough Choto, it’s only your over indulgence that Putu is growing haywire. You won’t understand how much hazards we, the mothers, have to bear.’

An ice cube rolled down her spine, making her aware of what persistently eludes her, the dark pit of her consciousness that she carefully hides even from herself. She remembered how she deceived everyone on that day with her sickness. Her husband blushed to tell his mother that Pritha was vomiting at night, was feeling extreme dizziness and that she has just fallen asleep. Purnima closed her palms together and acknowledged her unmixed gratitude to goddess kali and whispered a promise to Baba Biswanath of Kashi from her father-in-law’s ancestral residence at a South 24 Parganas village, almost untraceable by Google map, that she would offer puja to Him for His grace. Roma Kakima, their faithful neighbour, came with a wide smile and unequivocally gave some invaluable suggestions on how careful they all should be at this stage. Calling her husband she warned, ‘Babu, this is the most important time in your life, be careful.’ Babu gave a smile shyly. Pritha felt a sort of inexpressible joy, a triumph, a fulfilment. On being informed, her mother came, a proud mother indeed. She told her, ‘Now you will understand...’ At night every one retired to their room. Pritha was reclining on a chair in the front veranda. It was a moonlit night. The tune of some half incomprehensible music from some unknown land cast a magical spell on her. The shrill sound of the cricket had never been so melodious before. Babu came from his usual smoking after dinner and stole behind her. Pritha stood up slowly, turned at him, hold his hand and kissed him. Then whispered in his ear, ‘Thank you’.

On that occasion Dr. Roy after some clinical tests informed them hesitantly, ‘The report is negative’ I think there is some other reason for her nausea, you should go for a whole abdomen USG’ and dismissed all their plans and preparations. It was 8 O’ clock at night, she returned with her husband. Purnima opened the door merrily, hoping to hear the news for which she has been waiting for these five long years. ‘What did the doctor say?’ she asked her son expectantly. Babu was in a strange predicament. He was torn between the self of a son and that of a husband. He could feel the anguish of his mother at her disillusionment and her subdued propensity to hold Pritha responsible for it; at the same time he could not help internalising the self abusing pain of his wife. Failing to understand what to tell his mother, he said, ‘Ask your bouma’. Pritha could not look at her face neither could she tell anything. Purnima remained silent, only heaved a sigh and left. His mother’s silent disappointment hurt his ‘good boy’ disposition that he has carefully kept secured for these thirty five years. Pritha expected a severe reprimand from her mother-in-law, wanted to get reminded of how unholy she was, that a total failure daughter-in-law like her does not deserve such a good household. But her mother-in-law’s sullen face, refusal to tell her anything was a thousand times more agonising to her. Slowly she crept to Babu, looked at his face and tried to hold his hand.

‘I have some other business’, he said, and left. Pritha went into the kitchen, intended to do something but, forgot what she wanted to do. She came back, switched off the light and fell asleep.

Putu switched on the light in the veranda. It was already dark outside. ‘Where are you going kamma?’ asked Putu, ‘I’ll go with you.’

‘No Putu, you prepare your lesson, by that time I’ll return and we’ll play together.’ Pritha left. She has visited Dr. Roy on a few occasions before. He is a very good doctor, gentle, handsome, almost like a friend to talk to.

‘Please come, Mr. and Mrs. Mukherjee.

‘Thank you doctor’ said Babu.

They entered his neatly equipped chamber. A showcase crowded with medical books and journals, several wall hangings displaying female reproductive system, common reasons of female infertility, their precautions and probable solutions. Pritha looked at them minutely, became almost oblivious of why they came there. ‘So Mrs. Mukherjee how are you now?’ ‘She is not having any other problem, doctor but... I mean... you know everything doctor. I am growing hopeless now. She has already taken all the medicines that you prescribed...’

‘Don’t be impatient Mr. Mukherjee, these days medical science can do miracle.’

Pritha did not understand why should there be a miracle! Why should it not be as normal as anything else? But she could not tell anything, remained silent like a shadow.

‘Did she undergo all the medical examinations?’

‘Yes’

‘Let me see’

Pritha looked at her husband, then at the doctor, again at her husband and finally at the doctor, ‘What... I mean...’ she faltered. The sullen face of her mother-in-law, the suggestions of over enthusiastic Roma kakima, and the oblique remark of Putu’s mother on what she is not – all flashed before her eyes. She desperately wished to rush out of the chamber, for playing with Putu or entering the kitchen or seeing the sparrow feeding the little ones.

‘Nothing wrong is there in your reports, Mrs. Mukherjee; you are absolutely doing well.’

Pritha could not tell anything. She looked at her husband with awe. Babu looked at the doctor and hesitatingly asked, ‘Then doctor, what will we do now?’

‘Mr. Mukherjee, don’t mind, but I would suggest a few medical tests for you. Sometimes couple fail to have baby because of male infertility...’

‘What? You mean doctor...’

‘Please don’t be upset. Recommendation for a test does not always mean to validate some problem, let’s see’.

Babu heaved a sigh of relief. Pritha, like a young girl was alternately looking at two adult men discussing something grave which goes beyond her perception. ‘Male infertility? What’s that? How on earth can such thing happen?’ Every incapability, inadequacy she has heard of so far, refers to the female only; ‘can any man ever be inadequate in term of anything? Can they be incapable of anything?’ In her childhood, it was Hiru, her brother, who was braver, sharper, and stronger than her. Her brother was the measuring stick, the standard maker, like the pole star, fixed in its position, showing direction to the sailors. When she thinks of her childhood, something queer happens in her mind, unnoticed by others, unperceived even by her husband. She feels a sort of lassitude in her present days, a kind of undefined sorrow, almost a fear to fall down from some scaffolding.

One day while playing, Putu told, ‘Kamma, when I’ll become big like you; Ma, Papa – none will scold me, I’ll do everything that you do.’ Pritha smiled, a precarious smile as if she has discovered the meaning of being ‘big’ and told stoically ‘Putu I wish, I could be like you again! At least they would scold me when they would be angry, and I could cry like you.’

Now a days, it seems more than ever before, she desires to go back to her early days, those of quarrelling with Hiru on the share of Tiffin, punishment given by her father, stories told by her grandmother- all give her a distant call. When her grandmother told her enchanting stories of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata She remembers, Hiru would try to imitate Arjuna or Rama while she would try to understand why Kunti, the mother of the Pancha Pandavas, had left Karna, her eldest son; why Yujidhishira, Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula and Sahadeva in spite of being Dharma putra, Pavan putra, Indra putra and Ashbins Putra respectively, are called Pandavas. Her inquisitiveness would remain unanswered; her grandmother only told her, 'Didivai, You will understand it only when you will become big, not now.'

'Not now? Am I not big now?' Pritha murmured.

Pritha was in the kitchen, humming herself in a low tune, when Putu's mother came and told her, 'Choto today I'll go to Putu's school to attend a parent-teacher meeting, would you keep Putu with you?'

'Yes, didi, don't worry, and when will you return?'  
'I'll catch train at 10 o'clock in the morning and will return by 2 pm'.  
'Ok'.

When her mother went away, Putu came to her room with her usual happy-go-lucky demeanour. Putu switched on the T.V and asked, 'Kamma, may I watch cartoon?' 'Yes' Pritha said indifferently. She was thinking of something. Suddenly her cell phone rang.

'I'll meet Dr. Roy today with the test reports. I'll be late'. Pritha felt a strange joy and remembered what she was trying to think of – 'male infertility'. She wished to know regarding it but dared not ask anyone. She stood in front of the mirror, after long time, and found herself shabby, looked at the room, and found everything disarrayed. Pritha tucked the loose end of her sari well and cleaned the room, kept everything in proper place and looked at the large antique clock. It was 12:30. She called Putu, gave her bath and made her sit with her lunch. Pritha then took a thorough shower and came out. Putu had finished her lunch and had resumed her favourite T.V. show – Tom and Jerry.

'Putu, it's bed time, switch off the T.V.' Pritha lulled her to sleep, got ready and started straight for College Street. The suburban train whistled in. Pritha got in and secured a window sit. The gust of wind through the window shed a spell on her. The narrow lanes down the Sealdah station, crowded foot paths on both sides of the M.G. Road, the hawkers shouting their trade cry – took her back to her college days. She wanted to get into a bus, but then decided to walk. The musty odour, usual cacophony, reckless busyness of the home coming people – all these are so familiar to her. She did not walk fast; she did not walk slowly either. Actually was relishing her walk. She went to a book store opposite the central enquiry of Calcutta University. She had visited this store with her friends on a number of occasions before. Now she is alone.

'Give me a book on male infertility', she told. In no time the shop keeper gave her one. Suddenly Babu called her over phone 'Can you come to Dr. Roy's chamber now?' he told quickly, 'He wants to talk to you.'

'Yes, but it will take time. I am at College Street now.'

'College Street! Why?'

‘Came to buy a book’

‘Ok, come quickly.’

She went to a nearby metro station and secured a seat. She opened the book and read the chapters on hormonal problems, obstructions, sperm antibodies and almost unconsciously discovered the story of Kunti. Her eyes filled to the brim. Unknowingly she murmured, ‘I have become big, Thamma.’

From Jatin Das Park Metro Station she took a taxi and reached the doctor’s chamber. Babu refused to meet her eyes; was sitting with his head down.

‘Mrs. Mukherjee, I know you two have been wishing for a baby since long, but your husband’s medical reports reveal some problems for which you fail to conceive. But don’t worry, these days medical science can do miracle. I would suggest you to visit a sperm bank and undergo IVF which is a safe process and is being practiced on a large scale now.’

Pritha slowly asked, ‘May I get a bit glue, Doctor?’

‘Glue? Yes, but why?’ He brought out an adhesive tube from his drawer and handed it to Pritha. Pritha opened the book, detached the page showing a table on male infertility and stuck it on the wall where several wall hangings on female infertility were shining brightly since long, and made gesture of going out. Babu followed her, came closer, tried to hold her hand. Pritha stared at him, wanted to tell so many things, but remained silent.