

## The Portrait of a Lady

### A. Before you read :

- Grandparents are the most lovable people in this world. They pray selflessly and continuously for our well being.
- Do you have grandparents ? What do they do ? Do you spend time with them ?
- Interview your friend's grandparents about the following :
  - their likes and dislikes,
  - how they like to spend their time, and
  - some important events that they remember.

Share this with others in your class.

- A portrait is a painting, picture or any other artistic representation of a person. Whose portrait do you think will be presented in this story ?

Now read the story.

### B. The text :

#### I

My grandmother, like everybody's grandmother, was an old woman. She had been old and wrinkled for the twenty years that I had known her. People said that she had once been young and pretty and had even had a husband, but that was hard to believe. My grandfather's portrait hung above the mantelpiece in the drawing room. He wore a big turban and loose-fitting clothes. His long white beard covered the best part of his chest and he looked at least

a hundred years old. He did not look the sort of person who would have a wife or children. He looked as if he could only have lots and lots of grandchildren. As for my grandmother being young and pretty, the thought was almost revolting. She often told us of the games she used to play as a child. That seemed quite absurd and undignified on her part and we treated it like the tales of the prophets she used to tell us.

She had always been short and fat and slightly bent. Her face was a crisscross of wrinkles running from everywhere to everywhere. No, we were certain she had always been as we had known her. Old, so terribly old that she could not have grown older, and had stayed at the same age for twenty years. She could never have been pretty; but she was always beautiful. She hobbled about the house in spotless white with one hand resting on her waist to balance her stoop and the other telling the beads of her rosary. Her silver locks were scattered untidily over her pale face, and her lips constantly moved in inaudible prayer. Yes, she was beautiful. She was like the winter landscape in the mountains.

My grandmother and I were good friends. My parents left me with her when they went to live in the city and we were constantly together. She used to wake me up in the morning and get me ready for school. She said her morning prayer in a monotonous sing-song while she bathed and dressed me in the hope that I would listen and get to know it by heart. I listened because I loved her voice but never bothered to learn it. Then she would fetch my wooden slate which she had already washed and plastered with yellow chalk, a tiny earthen ink pot and a reed pen, tie them all in a bundle and hand it to me. After a breakfast of a thick, stale chapatti with a little butter and sugar spread on it, we went to school. She carried several stale chapattis with her for the village dogs.

Now answer the following questions :

1. How has the author described his grandmother ?
2. What impression did the author get looking at his grandfather's photograph ?
3. Do you think the author's mother was a religious person ? Why do you think so ?
4. The author says that he and his grandmother were good friends. Did they do anything together ?
5. Why did his grandmother carry chapattis when they went to school ? What does this tell you about her ?

Life was comfortable for the author and his grandmother. Do you think it will continue to be so ?

## II

My grandmother always went to school with me because the school was attached to the temple. The priest taught us the alphabet and the morning prayer. While the children sat in rows on either side of the veranda singing the alphabet or the prayer in a chorus, my grandmother sat inside reading the scriptures. When we had both finished, we would walk back together. This time the village dogs would meet us at the temple door. They followed us home, growling and fighting each other for the chapattis we threw them.

When my parents were comfortably settled in the city, they sent for us. That was a turning point in our friendship. Although we shared the same room, my grandmother no longer came to school with me. I used to go to an English school in a motor bus. There were no dogs in the streets and she took to feeding sparrows in the courtyard of our city house.

As the years rolled by we saw less of each other. For some time she continued to wake me up and get me ready for school. When I came back

she would ask me what the teacher had taught me. I would tell her English words and little things of western science and learning, the law of gravity, Archimedes' principle, the world being round etc. This made her unhappy. She could not help me with my lessons. She did not believe in the things they taught at the English school and was distressed that there was no teaching about God and the scriptures. One day I announced that we were being given music lessons. She was very disturbed. To her, music had lewd associations. It was the It was not meant for gentle folk. She rarely talked to me after that.

When I went up to University, I was given a room of my own. The common link of friendship was snapped. My grandmother accepted her it with resignation. She rarely left her spinning wheel to talk to anyone. From sunrise to sunset she sat by her wheel spinning and reciting prayers. Only in the afternoon she relaxed for a while to feed the sparrows. While she sat in the veranda breaking the bread into little bits, hundreds of little birds collected around her. Some came and perched on her legs, others on her shoulders. Some even sat on her head. She smiled but never shooed them away. It used to be the happiest half-hour of the day for her.

**Now answer the following questions :**

1. The author and his grandmother were very close to one another. How do you know this ?
2. When did their relationship change ? Why ?
3. There were some things about the author's school that his grandmother did not like ? What were these ?
4. What happened to their relationship when the author went to the university ?
5. What did his grandmother do with her time ?

The distance between the author and his grandmother grew wider ? What do you think will happen next ?

## III

When I decided to go abroad for further studies, I was sure my grandmother would be upset. I would be away for five years, and at her age one could never tell. But my grandmother could. She was not even sentimental. She came to see me off at the railway station but did not talk or show any emotion. Her lips moved in prayer, her mind was lost in prayer. Her fingers were busy telling the beads of her rosary. Silently she kissed my forehead, and when I left I cherished the moist imprint as perhaps the last sign of physical contact between us.

But that was not so. After five years I came back home and was met by her at the station. She did not look a day older. She still had no time for words, and while she clasped me in her arms I could hear her reciting her prayer. Even on the first day of my arrival, her happiest moments were with her sparrows whom she fed longer and with frivolous rebukes.

In the evening a change came over her. She did not pray. She collected the women of the neighbourhood, got an old drum and started to sing. For several hours she thumped the sagging skins of the dilapidated drum and sang of the homecoming of warriors. We had to persuade her to stop, to avoid overstraining. That was the first time since I had known her that she did not pray.

The next morning she was taken ill. It was a mild fever and the doctor told us that it would go. But my grandmother thought differently. She told us that her end was near. She said that since only a few hours before the close of the last chapter of her life she had omitted to pray, she was not going to waste any more time talking to us.

We protested. But she ignored our protests. She lay peacefully in bed praying and telling her beads. Even before we could suspect, her lips stopped

moving and the rosary fell from her lifeless fingers. A peaceful pallor spread on her face and we knew that she was dead.

We lifted her off the bed and, as is customary, laid her on the ground and covered her with a red shroud. After a few hours of mourning, we left her alone to make arrangements for her funeral.

In the evening we went to her room with a crude stretcher to take her to be cremated. The sun was setting and had lit her room and veranda with a blaze of golden light. We stopped halfway in the courtyard. All over the veranda and in her room right up to where she lay dead and stiff wrapped in the red shroud, thousands of sparrows sat scattered on the floor. There was no chirping. We felt sorry for the birds and my mother fetched some bread for them. She broke it into little crumbs, the way my grandmother used to, and threw it to them. The sparrows took no notice of the bread. When we carried my grandmother's corpse off, they flew away quietly. Next morning the sweeper swept the bread crumbs into the dustbin. (Khushbant Singh)

**Now answer the following questions :**

1. The author decided to go abroad. Why did he think that his grandmother would be upset ?
2. How did his grandmother behave when she saw him on his return at the station ?
3. What changes came over her in the evening ?
4. Was her illness of a serious nature ?
5. Why did she refuse to talk to her family members ?
6. What did the author and his family see when they went to take her for cremation ?
7. What was strange about the behaviour of the sparrows ?

**C. Glossary :**

- mantel piece : shelf projecting from the wall above the fireplace
- revolting : expressing protest.
- criss-cross : crossed lines forming a kind of pattern
- hobble : walk as when lame
- stoop : bent forward
- rosary : a string of beads used for prayer.
- lewd : indecent
- monotonous : unchanging, with no change of pitch.
- scriptures : sacred book (here, the Guru Granth Saheb, the holy book of the Sikhs)
- shroud : a piece of cloth or a sheet wrapped round a dead body

**D. Let's write :**

**Write the answers to the following questions in about 50 words each :**

1. How does the author describe his grandmother ?
2. The author and his grandmother were good friends. Give examples to support this statement.
3. How did the author's grandmother behave when he was going abroad ?
4. The author's grandmother was a religious lady. Do you agree ? Why ?
5. How did the sparrows behave when grandmother died ?
6. The author and his grandmother shares a very close relationship. This changed when they moved to the city. Why did this happen ?

**E. Activity :**

- I. There was a change in the relationship between the author and his grandmother. Some of the following are the reasons for this change. Tick all the correct answers.**

- (a) The author went to an English school.

- (b) He went to school by bus.
- (c) There were sparrows in the city.
- (d) His grandmother could not help him with his lessons.
- (e) The school did not teach anything about God.
- (f) She didn't like western science.
- (g) She liked music.
- (h) When he went to the university they had separate rooms.

**II. Grand mothers are the pillars of the family. They create bonds that hold the family together. Discuss.**

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