

Echoes of The Protector

A crack split her grandmother's typewriter.

Nonie imagined ink bleeding out of the gash.

Aran's hands covered his mouth, eyes widening as he gasped and shook his head.

They glittered with laughter.

"I'm sorry—how clumsy of me."

It was teal blue, paint chipping at the bottom-left corner to reveal ribbons of cold steel.

Anaya cackled, her rosebud mouth hideously contorted.

"Nonie is the one who needs to apologize. She actually brought that ugly thing to *our house*." Her long-lashed eyes narrowed vindictively. "I guess she didn't have clothes to put in her suitcase so she brought *that* instead."

Venu cleared her throat angrily.

Nonie's oldest cousin was the only one not smirking—she looked bored to tears.

“Leave her alone! Can’t you see the waterworks are about to start? Then we’ll all get a shelling and that’ll delay this *stupid process* even more.”

The reading of *Aachi’s* will.

The twins, tall and beautiful like Grecian statues, gave Nonie one last withering smirk before sweeping out of the kitchen.

Venu followed them without a backward glance.

Nonie sank to her knees beside the typewriter that had been knocked down from Auntie Saroja’s gleaming marble kitchen island.

She looked around her at the sparkling appliances, the gold knobs on the forest green cabinets, and the enormous silver fridge that could swallow her with perfect ease.

She missed *Aachi’s* old-fashioned kitchen with its worn sandstone floors, quaintly painted cracked tiles, and ancient gas cooker that needed five tries to turn on.

It was cosy and full of character.

Like Aachi, leaning back in her egg-shaped cane chair by the doors to the back garden, keeping a shrewd eye on the clothesline.

A shrill cry escaped Nonie. Before she knew it, she was bent over the typewriter, blinded by a warm flood of tears.

Strangely enough, it wasn't Aachi's face that surfaced in her mind as she sobbed.

It was the chipped mug filled with amber tea; a teaspoon of condensed milk slyly stirred in.

A gold-rimmed pair of spectacles that couldn't quite hide the sparkle of the eyes behind it.

An oversized Persian shawl that could cocoon all four of her grandchildren when they were little but always wrapped Nonie closest to its wearer's heart.

The long, lonely days stretched before Nonie.

Days without Aachi's impish chuckle, her delicious midnight feasts inspired by Malory Towers, and the funny typewritten poems she would send her family members on their birthdays.

Nonie had always gotten letters hidden inside origami hummingbirds, lilies, and lanterns.

When they were ten, Anaya had complained that only Nonie got pretty knickknacks. Uncle Toby had smiled the whimsical grin he had inherited from his mother.

"Aachi once had a younger sister called Nonie. She was a special needs child, and your grandmother loved her a lot. Unfortunately, she passed away when Aachi was eighteen. I think our Nonie reminds her of her *nangi*."

"Is Nonie a special needs child?" Asked Anaya, her eyes innocently wide.

"I think she's just needy," quipped Aran, "She's always at Aachi's feet begging for a babyish story."

But Aachi's stories were never babyish, they were alive with heart and humour. Nonie remembered how Aran used to laugh

boisterously, holding his sides. Anaya would ask for minute descriptions of the beautiful ladies, how they wore their hair, and what their gowns looked like.

But Nonie would read the story in Aachi's waving hands and knowing smile, certain that no matter how many twists and turns it took, the ending would always give her peace.

Just like her endless cups of tea, origami presents, and kiss goodnight.

Now all she had left was her grandmother's typewriter.

Cracked—broken. Just how her heart felt.

Aachi had remembered her, even while she had been fighting for her life at the hospital.

After the funeral, when her aunts and uncles were packing and closing up the house, Nonie had a visitor.

It was Aisha Auntie, wheeled in by her handsome grandson, who had smiled shyly and retreated with lowered eyes.

Aachi's childhood best friend had said nothing, just stretched out her frail arms, and Nonie had found herself sobbing into the old lady's soft cotton hijab.

Mrs. Aisha Marzook had always made Nonie laugh with her insatiable determination to ferret out Aachi's love cake recipe and her animated retellings of childhood scrapes involving coconuts, cockroaches, and cartwheels.

This time, her grey eyes were dim and sorrowful.

"Rajathi..."

Little Princess.

Aisha Aunty was an avid reader of Penguin Classics and had introduced Nonie to her favourites.

Their shared love for Frances Hodgson Burnett's heart-stirring tale inspired this olden-days nickname.

Nonie's parents had died in a crash when she was very young, and she could relate to Sarah Carew on an aching deep level.

"This is for you."

The typewriter was wrapped in Aachi's thick, sweet-smelling scarf.

"Your grandma asked me to keep this safe and sound for you when she first got sick."

Nonie held it close against her thin chest, "She thought of me."

"Always."

Aachi had been abroad for six months for treatment, and seventeen-year-old Nonie, who had lived exclusively with her grandmother since she was five, had felt like an unmoored boat in a stormy sea.

When she returned, Nonie was only allowed to pay her short, unsatisfactory visits.

"She said you would do great things with it. I've read your writing, and I completely agree!"

Nonie smiled, remembering the spark of pride in her grandmother's eyes when her short story had won first place in a prestigious local competition.

“Lorraine could act out a story like a play and keep her audience entranced, but you have a way with words that make them live on the page.”

Nonie said nothing, the choking sensation had begun again.

She would never again witness the range of expressions flitting across that beloved face, never again hear the musical laugh that made all her childish worries melt away.

“Darling, I know this hurts. I know you feel lonely and abandoned, but you are *not* alone.” The old lady in the wheelchair looked intently into her eyes as Nonie sat on the ground at her feet.

“The Merciful God who placed you under the tender care of your grandmother for twelve years is still with you, protecting you. He knows everything in your heart.”

She paused, her voice breaking.

“And the echoes of your Aachi’s love will always be with you. Make her proud, be her legacy of light and kindness in this world.”

The words lightened something in her.

Though the pain still squeezed at her heart, wringing it out like a damp washcloth, it was less unbearable.

But now, bent double like a poor, beggarly thing, Nonie felt like every hope she had ever held had been futile. Blown like ashes in a scorching wind.

Yesterday she had accidentally heard Anaya on the phone with a friend.

“Yes, my mum thinks marrying her off is the best option.”

Nonie’s heart had plummeted. Her cousin only used that tone when she was talking about her. Condescending and falsely sympathetic by turns.

“Yes, it won’t be easy! Nonie is so prim and plain, like a little Aachi Amma.” She snorted. “She’s such a mood killer.”

Nonie had crept away before her legs turned entirely to jelly.

Anaya’s words followed her like a volley of poison darts.

“I *know* she’s only seventeen. But *Ammi* is determined that she won’t be a burden on our hands. *Thaththa* has a soft spot for her but she’s sure to convince him to give Nonie away with a generous dowry.”

By the time she reached her room, Nonie felt like she had walked through a graveyard of dreams.

She had never wanted much, just a chance to make her loved ones proud.

She had been a good student with a small circle of down-to-earth friends. Nothing exceptional, but never stirring up drama for anyone.

Then everything changed when Aachi fell sick and Nonie had to vacate the Estate House and move to the city.

Her beautiful socialite aunt had worn the expression of a martyr when introducing her shy, countrified niece to visitors.

She’s a little wallflower.

Aunty Saroja had praised her lavishly for making her bed and volunteering to wash the dishes.

She had sweetly requested that Nonie show Aanaya how to fold the duvet, iron out the creases in her uniform, and sweep the stubborn corners of her room.

But her cousin never seemed to learn, so Nonie found herself doing Anaya's chores every day of the week.

She hadn't minded, she liked to feel useful to someone.

But after that call yesterday...

Nonie felt her chest constrict at the betrayal.

Aunty Saroja was no longer willing to put up with Nonie, slave as she did. She would much rather sell her off.

And there was no *Aachi* to protect her.

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A long, cool shadow fell over Nonie.

She caught a whiff of jasmine and cardamom before a light touch on her shoulder made her jump.

“So, you’re Aunty Lori’s storybook girl.”

Nonie blinked rapidly, chasing her tears away.

A woman knelt before her with a tender, quizzical smile.

Her features were too sharp to be strictly pretty, but her large dreamy eyes thrilled Nonie. They were a lustrous grey-green, like Anne Shirley’s.

Not beautiful, but *interesting*.

That’s what Aachi had always told her whenever relatives had compared her to Anaya.

“You may not be a Bollywood beauty, Nonie, but your doe-eyes and dimples will capture the heart of some lucky boy!”

“I never have tissues when I need them!” The stranger clucked her tongue, rumpling up her stylish bob. “My five-year-old is more organized than me, let me tell you...”

She wagged her finger at Nonie, lapsing into a lisp. “*Amma*, he said this morning, *don’t tell me you’ve put a SPOON in my lunchbox again...when you’ve made MAGGI NOODLES!*”

Luckily, that crisis was averted!”

The knot in her chest eased as she pictured the small fellow lecturing his parent. She loved children.

“I’m Lakshmi by the way. Your grandma’s lawyer.”

Nonie reeled as if the woman had stuck her.

Her back smacked sharply against the bar stool behind her.

The terror she felt was undefinable. All she knew was that Aachi was dead, and this strange woman had the power to act on her behalf.

Yet another person who could enslave Nonie.

Dimly, through the haze of fear and grief, she realized that Lakshmi had never stopped chattering.

With the primal instinct of listening for danger, Nonie forced herself to focus.

“Your grandmother ...she loved all forms of beauty and hated all forms of oppression. I wouldn’t be who I am today without her.” The bright grey eyes were luminous with unshed tears. “It’s likely I wouldn’t even be alive.”

Nonie stared at her.

“What—what do you mean?”

“I know it sounds cliché but I had a wicked stepmother.”

Lakshmi looked down at her hands.

“My mother died when I was an infant and my father was a prominent businessman, always away from home. I barely saw him.”

The animation had faded from her face and voice.

“I didn’t mind so much. We lived a comfortable life. I had many hobbies and would play with the neighbourhood kids. But things changed when my father remarried.”

When she paused for a shaky breath, Nonie realized she had been holding hers.

“She isolated me from everything I loved. She wouldn’t let me play with anyone or join school activities. I would be slapped for the smallest mistake in my studies, locked in cupboards for forgetting to remove my shoes before entering the house...”

Lakshmi’s tears spilled over and Nonie felt her heart ache for the girl she had been.

“I often thought of running away. Then the fear of being caught would be so terrible that I would want to disappear altogether.”

I felt that after Aachi left, thought Nonie, but at least I had someone like her... who truly loved me. Who wouldn’t let anyone hurt me.

“This went on for a year. I was twelve years old and tired of life when I met my Miss. Honey—your grandma.”

Lakshmi smiled in the middle of a sob, and a surge of love for this stranger squeezed Nonie’s heart.

“She was my Grade 8 class teacher, and she saw at once that I was depressed.” Lakshmi laughed a little. “She got the story out of me. Then, instead of approaching my stepmother, she

marched straight to my father's office and gave him a piece of her mind!"

"She did that!" Nonie gasped.

"And it worked," Lakshmi sighed. "She was so smart and well-spoken, thatththa *had* to listen. She was a force to be reckoned with. And things changed after that...I was left alone.

Eventually, that woman left and my father's *next* wife was kind and meek. Just the way I like it!"

Nonie smiled for the first time in what felt like centuries.

A dead mother. An absent father.

An evil stepmother!

But Lakshmi was so bright, polished, and *kind*.

The crushing pain she had been through had strengthened her into a diamond.

Nonie no longer wanted to curl up and disappear. She wanted to be someone who mended those invisible cracks in others.

Someone who lifted unfair burdens from bowed shoulders.

“I wish I could be like Aachi!” blurted Nonie, “I want to—to help children who feel lost. I want to be a teacher and a storyteller...”

She trailed off, blushing.

“Why can’t you?”

“I...Aachi isn’t there anymore. And my uncle’s family doesn’t want me. My aunt wants to...get me married. I don’t think they’ll let me finish school—”

The dangerous flash in Lakshmi’s eyes stilled her tongue.

“That’s not going to happen, Nonie.” The woman kneeling before her suddenly looked every inch the lawyer. “You are going to continue with your studies. And will be independent of your aunt and uncle.”

“That’s —not —possible!”

“It *is* possible.” Lakshmi dimpled. “Because the Estate House was written to you in your Aachi’s will. It’s *yours* and so is a good portion of the income generated by the plantation.”

Nonie felt the echoes of Aachi's love reverberate in her heart.

And a greater Love that encompassed her past, present, and future.

That night, when they sat down for dinner, Nonie was no longer treated like a dubious curry no one cared to approach.

"Just think," gushed Auntie Saroja, a strange flush staining her cheeks. "In a few years, when we come down to the Estate House for the holidays, *Nonie* will be our host!"

Nonie smiled whimsically.