

My Nani

By Sandhya Nankani

Nani, with her strong and independent mind and feminist streak, makes me eager to be an old lady.



When my sister was a little girl she asked my mother the name of a certain old lady. "Call her Nani," my mother responded off-handedly. Hereafter, to my sister, all old ladies became "Nani." This name was extended to my father's mother, who was not really an old lady at that time and who is, in a strict sense, not really my "Nani" but my "Dadi."

When I learned how to talk, I also began to call my paternal grandmother Nani, despite her repeated protests. "My friends will laugh at me," she would say. "How will I tell them that you call me Nani?"

Some things never change. The name stuck. In my book, my "Dadi" is still "Nani."

I remember the Nani of my childhood — in her pastel chiffon saris and chignon buns, always at my grandfather, Dada's, side. Dada, the man who adored his wife to no end and always wanted her beside him. Dada, cigarette hanging on the edge of his lips, the man who loved to go on long sunset drives in the small West African town of Kumasi where he lived for most of his adult life. Dada, dressed in well-pressed white and beige shirts and pants, wearing shiny, polished black shoes. Dada, hair combed back, clean-shaven and wearing his signature dark glasses.

Nani had a refrigerator down the hall from the room she shared with Dada. In it, she stored all sorts of goodies. Whenever we visited, my sister and I would vanish from my mother's watchful eye and sneak to Nani's room. She would hold our hands and lead us to the icebox. There, she would bestow upon us a bar of dense chocolate. Locally made *Golden Tree* chocolate, wrapped in sparkling aluminum and tempting red paper, it tasted of freshly crushed cocoa beans picked in Asante land.

Near the end of Dada's life, my grandparents moved to India. At that time, my sister and I were living with Meme, my maternal grandmother, in Pune, where we were attending Catholic school. Nani and Dada rented an apartment below ours. In the evenings, after I

had finished my homework, I would run across the street to sit in Dada's lap.

Nani would come in and feed us barbecued liver on wooden skewers and fried *magaz*, brain – "E be good for your blood. E go make you strong. You want to chop?" she would say – and hummus made out of channa dal, doused with olive oil and sprinkled with red pepper and emerald coriander.

Some memories are so clear that you have to wonder whether you perhaps invented them.

After Dada passed away, Nani – who had never liked to eat meat – turned vegetarian. She didn't ever cook the liver or the brain for us again. What I remember after that – Nani dressed in her all-white salwar kameez, saris, and pant suits, with her still-black hair put up in a bun, making typical Sindhi sweets for us to eat.

Monthal, a sweet meat made of besan (gram) flour, melted sugar, and condensed milk is her specialty and pride. Stir the dough over fire, add crushed pistachios and almonds, form into a circle or a square and there you have it. "Mint mein thay sagati," is her motto. "I can make it in a minute."

Nani is also famous for her *lolo*, a bread thicker than chappatti, crisp and fried in melted sugar. Her *malpuda*, another sweet bread, fried until chewy, is to die for. And her *satpudas*, white, concentric circles of crisp, flaky dough sprinkled with crystal white sugar – they melt in your mouth.

In this day of low fat and non-cholesterol regimens, Nani's cooking does not receive the enthusiastic reception it once did. But, Nani is a woman of all ages. She too has become health conscious, squeezing her fried foods dry of excess oil. She presses her *lolos* against folded paper towels and holds them between her palms. "See," she says, "So much oil e dey come out." Her face glows with excitement. She has found a way in which she can feed her 13 grandchildren without inflating their arteries.

Nowadays, Nani leads a shuttle lifestyle. She rotates abodes, alternating between the homes of her six children, traveling from Ghana to New York to Los Angeles to Washington, D.C., to Casablanca and then to India every few months. Nani has never really lived in India – she left Sindh around the 1947 Partition for Ghana as a young bride and didn't return to India until the 1960's. Her first language, then, is Sindhi and her second, English. Nani can read jars of condiments and medicine containers, directions of the VCR, and road signs. This winter, she even read cover-to-cover the family newsletter that my cousins and I published. You can't get more cosmopolitan than that.

But, Nani's roots are simpler. She was born and raised in Hyderabad, Sindh. It was there, in school, that she first learned to read and write English. Nani practiced her English by speaking in broken, Ghanaian-style, pidgin English with the vegetable vendors, the cook, the housekeepers, my grandfather's employees, and all other Ghanaians she came into

contact with as a resident of Ghana between the 1940's and the 1980's. Somehow, when we, her grandchildren were born, this English became our primary mode of communication with her. It never occurred to anyone that Nani could teach us Sindhi.

So, I lived 20 years of my life not knowing that I could communicate with Nani in any other way. Sure, I could understand Sindhi, but I never chose to extend that understanding to my speech.

Many times Nani would say to me, "Talk to me in Sindhi. Otherwise how you go learn your language?" I would laugh in response.

A few years ago, I spent three months working in Bombay as an intern at a local newspaper. During this time, I ended up living with my father's aunt who was staying in the city for the summer. Auntie Sundri, as I called her, has always reminded me a great deal of Nani. Apart from the fact that they are good friends, she too has spent the larger part of her life in Ghana, she too has always spoken to me in her broken English, and she too was in many ways as cosmopolitan as my Nani. Living in close quarters with her, I decided that the time had come for me to learn how to speak my mother tongue. My impetus - here, there was nobody around to mock my mistakes, improper accent, and inconsistencies.

Later that summer, when I met Nani in Pune, I told her that henceforth, I only wanted to speak to her in Sindhi. Making the transition was difficult, to say the least. Many times, my tongue would stick in my throat and lumps of "ummmm" and stones of "you know" would emerge instead of the eloquent thoughts I wanted to share with her. Often, she would respond to my pidgin Sindhi with her what-now-seemed-to-me fluent English.

The comfort zone that we had established with each other over the past 20 years was not easy to break. Still, I persisted, because inside, I felt that the fruits of these attempts would be worthwhile.

Nani loves to talk. On the phone, to strangers, to her children, and if possible, to her grandchildren too. Ask her one question and you can have her running for an hour, turning back the reels of time to remember the day when this or that happened, to remember so-and-so's sister's brother's aunt who said this or that, to remember how on May 16, 1976, such and such took place. Nani never forgets a date, a name, or a place.

Until recently, I did not know how to turn on the tap of her memory. Gradually though, I have begun to learn how to use the key of my language (that had always been at my disposal) to unlock my grandmother's thoughts.

I am continuously amazed with my discoveries.

For example, I have shared a bed with Nani in the past and so, I know very well that she is an early riser - always up before sunrise. I have also been the sleepy audience of Nani's

early morning exercise routine – she lifts her legs high, spreads them, joints them together again, rotates them on an imaginary bicycle, folds her knees, lifts her arms, breathes in, breathes out. There's more, but my mind, in its slumber, does not remember.

Nani is visiting my family this summer. A few weeks ago, I was driving her to Manhattan when we got stuck in traffic on the West Side Highway. As we waited for the roads to unclog, she started to tell me all the prayers she chants every morning when she wakes up. Then, she told me how 18 years ago, soon after Dada's passing, a whistle began to wake her up at 3 am each day. At first, she was scared by the strange sound in her ear. But, she never told anyone about it; like many of her thoughts, she kept this one to herself too. It took her some time, but at last, Nani told me, she figured out that this was her internal alarm calling her to wake up and meditate.

"I don't know how to sit there with my eyes closed and meditate," Nani said. "So, I chant the name of all the gods – Ram, Krishna, Durga, Jagadambe, Sairam, Guru Nanak, Dada Shyam ... They are all the same."

If I couldn't speak my language, I would never have known the chain of events that led her to change her sleeping patterns.

That day, Nani and I also talked about marriage, compromise, stubbornness, about issues of power and control within male-female relationships, about the need to adjust to changing times, about her philosophy on life.

"All this time, I never knew what I was missing," I find myself thinking these days, after every conversation I have with her.

Nani, with her strong and independent mind and feminist streak, makes me eager to be an "old lady." In her, I do not see old age as a fearful prospect, but as a peak toward which I must aspire. Tonight, at dinner, I asked her how old she is. I don't know why but I was shocked to learn that she is 75. It's hard to guess this from looking at her or from being a witness to the energy, inner strength, resilience, and zest for life that she exhibits.

Last month, I turned 25. To celebrate my birthday, my family went to dinner at a Korean restaurant. Nani came along, dressed in her white and gold embroidered satin salwar kameez, and sat next to me. In good humor, I asked her if she wanted to learn how to eat with chopsticks. Within sixty seconds, Nani had picked up the technique. She ate the rest of our four-course meal with chopsticks!

I was surprised, but looking back upon this tiny incident, I tell myself now that I should have known better to expect anything less from my Nani.



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