

Eclipse

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It was all about the biggest solar eclipse in a decade.

Grandpa invited the family to his backyard to see *how the moon shadowed the sun*, in his words. He sat on his favourite armchair, his walking stick with its gold-plated handle on his side. He was wearing his medicated dark eyeglasses that he claimed cost nearly half the worth of his old Benz. Last year, he went through a complicated cataract surgery that had doctors guessing whether he could ever see again. When the anesthesia wore off, on a day that coincided with his 90th birthday, Grandpa requested the two surgeons who worked on his eyes toast to his sight because he had one last assignment to do.

Papa stood at Grandpa's left side, a cigar stuck in between his darkened lips. It was the third one he'd had in a row. His baseball cap masking the crevices on his forehead had shifted slightly revealing the characteristic puffy sleep bags under his eyes. Holding his hands in hers, was his Adele, who could never stand on her own whenever they were together during family gatherings. We always believed those years that she nursed some form of anxiety but they've been together for quite some time and these days, we believe against reason that it had to be love. She was wearing the darkest eyeglasses for the show but we all knew that concealing her eyes had nothing to do with the electromagnetic rays from the sun. Standing beside Adele was Papa Dee, my godfather and Papa's best friend. He was always at our family gatherings. How could he not? My late Grandma would always say Papa and Papa Dee met while they were in the womb. Grandma and Papa Dee's mother became friends during their antenatal classes at a birthing clinic. What a shocking coincidence that they were born on the same day, she often told.

"See...it's almost happening. The moon will soon cross the sun," my brother, Osupa whimpered excitedly. We watched him fumble with the water bowl that he placed delicately on a stool for his sole view. He remarked that his biology teacher had advised to not look directly at the sky when the

moon comes in between the sun and the earth. *You may never recover your sight*, he warned. Reflective watching through water is the safest way to see the eclipse, Mr. Biology teacher had lectured. Osupa had earlier put on a show of running in and out of Grandpa's store in search of a bowl that wasn't leaking. The search seemed to excite him, the fact that leaking bowls mocked his plans to watch from water reflection. Osupa was only ten. The year he was born, there was a partial solar eclipse six days after his birth, which incidentally was the day of his naming, a reason Grandpa named him Osupa. That naming day, Grandpa and Grandma had invited friends and family to see the miracle of nature with the underlying belief that Osupa's birth was important in the larger scheme of the world's history. Mama and Papa were present as part of some deep mystery. I was there too, a little girl of six then. I was probably the most excited as I got the chance to play with Taju, the boy from two houses away. Then I was an only child, living in a mansion and a visit to Grandpa's house meant a bit more fun, eclipse naming celebration day or not. So busy were Taju and I picking small stones on the ground and slamming them on a 3-legged tennis table in the backyard, pretending they were balls, that we didn't even partake in the ceremony. Still that day remained with me because that was the last night Mama lived with Papa under the same roof. By morning, Mama was gone. I later came to interpret that as part of the complications from the birth of an eclipse. Two months after, she came for me.

"Everyone come out and see. It will be quick and won't last that long," Grandpa called. Mama joined us in the backyard, walking across everyone. She took her position at some distance away from where we stood as the sky began to darken.

"It's so big in my bowl," Osupa cried, wide-eyed as he gazed at the reflection of the moon.

"Keep quiet, now," his mother Adele shushed him up. Silence. Then the sun dimmed. We ran our eyes through the dimming shadow. Darkness reigned. Grandpa let out a chuckle at the wonderment of the moment.

I could see Papa Dee's hands edging slowly, close to Adele's backside, rubbing her, comforting her, perhaps to make up for the inconvenience of the day. The sun had been biting hard much earlier and what a hot day it was. Everyone had been around an hour earlier before the eclipse and he must know how difficult those family meetings were for Adele. How she needed solidarity. Some saving.

"Is that it?" Papa's voice blared as light slowly returned to chase the shadows away. Papa must hate the eclipse because of the memories it brought, the scars, the separation. Yet he had to do it because Grandpa loved it and always gathered family and friends to witness every eclipse. *Never miss an eclipse. It's always the end or the beginning of something*, Grandpa would say. *Every family must witness it together.*

"What did I miss?" Uncle Bode asked as he joined us. As was characteristic of him, he was rushing in from work as it was always the case that he never made it in time to share in the auspicious moments of family gatherings. Uncle Bode was the reason Mama came. He never let her stray far away from the family. All those years, he always said it was for me but I knew it was for her too.

"Everything! It happened so fast!" Osupa said.

"Oh, no! Not again!" joked Uncle Bode. "I was on my way when the skies turned dark and bright almost immediately."

"Always on the way at the moments," said Grandpa meditatively, his goggled gaze still trained to the departing moon.

"Wonders," Adele whispered.

“Wonders, indeed,” Grandpa retorted. He removed his eyeglasses, stood up to leave but hesitated. “A family watching an eclipse together is necessary. We see things through shaded eyes knowing that to look with our eyes naked may be dangerous.” He said this staring at me. I believed he saw something in my eyes that made him say this. He probably saw the drama playing out in my sober delirium: Papa Dee dashing his leg against a stone and letting out a painful cry just when Uncle Bode confronted Adele to reveal the truth of Osupa’s true father; Adele sending a vengeful gaze at Mama as though asking her to reveal the truth of who my real father was as Mama began hastily making her exit; Papa standing alone amidst the unfolding chaos of unvoiced confessions unable to ask the questions that he long knew the answers; Grandpa pointing me to his medicated dark goggles to say every family required one to stare at the eclipse.

“The eclipse is gone,” Osupa said, his voice yanking me out of the delirium of contrived confessions. I noticed everyone was laughing, as always, as one big family.

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