



The Envelope

(Short Story)

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“You promised you won’t go there anymore,” expressed Ebemhal in frustration while tending her little garden which didn’t look so healthy. “Why can’t you just acknowledge that they won’t give you anything for the rest of your life?” I am telling you. “Not to mention that you are no more in your young and healthy days. Why don’t you understand? It’s not as if we are going to die without it. We are just as well off without it.”

Despite assuring her ailing husband, Ebemhal knew deep in her heart that they were in a very indigent condition and that the meagre but much needed money of the old-age pension money would do a lot to help in such a situation.

Ibopishak set himself in his resting chair which was irreducibly torn on all sides except the seat. Then, he picked up his five-year old grandson who had been drawing what looked like a superhero, on a sheet of paper, gently set the child down on his lap and sighed in desperate surrender.

“I just went to inquire at the bank. The Pradhan was positive for the fourth time that the money was already in my account. And, for the last time, my balance is still null. If only my children were alive..”

“We agreed we won’t talk about them, didn’t we?” Ebemhal retorted. As much as she thought about her son, it grieved her more hearing people mentioning them, even to offer their condolences. Ibopishak seemed hurt himself but remained silent.





Ebemhal faced away from her husband and instead proceeded tending her garden in hopes to temporarily take her mind off her late children.

It had been nearly five years since they died. They died in a road accident on their way back home from their family shop, 'Ema Electronics', in the bazaar. As chance had it, it was the only and eventually the last time she had accompanied him to the shop on repeated insistence that he would need her assistance on that particular day. The day happened to be *Ningol Chakouba*, a favourite Manipuri holiday but a busy day for shopkeepers. On this day, married women go to have a grand feast with their parents and siblings as part of their culture and tradition. In celebration of this holiday, the parents and/or brothers who are usually the hosts of these feasts are pre-requisite to prepare fancy gifts and presents for the women. And, electronic products have become more and more likely to be the fancy gifts.

The first couple of years after the fateful incident were torture for the old couple. Their friends, relatives and local acquaintances were of no help. They rather made the hole in their hearts larger every time they ask of the deaths, aggravating their barely healing wound.

When they were alive, their son ran the shop in Paona Bazaar and his wife stayed at home as a good housewife. She was well mannered and loving; nothing like the kind who takes great pleasure in splitting up well-knit families and puts great effort until she rises above and puts a damp between the rest of the family members. They were not rich, to say, but had an income that sufficed their daily expenditure and supported a modest home. All in all, they once made a very happy family, that had been growing more and more attached with each other with the arrival of the child, being the epitome of the love between them and providing a sense of amusement with his vigour and playfulness. They had great love and profound respect for each other. And, the people around them respected them as well.

Now, the old couple are left with only their grandson as their sole hope and reason to live penniless and starved. And, the respect they used to get from people went away with the money and property. As the old Manipuri saying goes, "people (or love of people) follow money". All the property they used to have had been sold off bit by bit in treating his ailing husband who had to be hospitalised on and off due to his several heart attacks he had had in the past five years. They had also sold off their house and had been living in a hut in an isolated corner at the back of their old house. They were as isolated from the house that used to be their home, a house full of love, as they were from the community.





In the happy days when no one in the family had had even an inkling that they would turn out like they had, spending a hundred rupee in a month was a trifle. Everything was getting more and more expensive each day. There were many who sincerely wondered what they could ever do a mere sum of hundred rupees. This old couple once belonged to this group. Now that the only person earning in the family sold vegetables, for a living, at the front of the gate of what used to be their home, the allowance of a sum of hundred rupees for Ebemhal and two hundred a month for Ibopishak offered by the old-age pension system seemed a lot to give up.

Their grandson had started attending school last year in a nearby private school. But they could hardly afford to pay the tuition fee of 300 rupees a month. On the other hand, they had to keep up their social standing as well as they could. People of only the poorest family and those who are not interested in studies send their offspring to public schools. The old couple had not yet realized that they now were grouped with these people.

The old age pension allows a couple of hundred rupees a month to each unemployed senior citizen of India with no one to care for. Through corruption and ill-will, one could hardly get anything in an interval as long as four or five months. They had received a sum of twelve hundred with great effort and persuasion the last time. And they had used the money to pay off their grandson's tuition fees. The physically demanding effort that they had to put into in order to get the pension money was one of the reasons why Ibopishak's health had been had been facing a faster decline.

This time also, in spite of his wife's requests, he had been going here and there asking around if they had gotten the money yet, to and from the Pradhan's house and the bank. Every time he got back home, he would be fatally tired and out of breath. This angered and scared Ebemhal to death every time. She would rather stay hungry than see her ailing husband in this critical state. She didn't want to think for a second of the worst case scenario. In the worst case scenario, she would be left alone with her innocent grandson who had been most unlucky at such a tender age. And what would happen to the child if she couldn't bring herself to calm down when thinking of what would happen to her grandchild when she...

As Ebemhal, completely lost in thought, was weeding her little potato vine that had comprised of not more than ten plants or so, she was knocked out of her mind when she heard something fall. She reflexively turned back to see her surprised grandson with his buttocks on the mud floor as he looked at the man in front of him. The man, still in his chair, looked to be in deep sleep with his mouth slightly open.





“Pupu! What happened? Why did you make me fall?” the grandson implored curiously with a tone of slight anger. He kept pushing and pulling at his grandfather’s sleeve, surprised at how powerless his grandfather’s arms seemed to be. “Pupu, Pupu! Are you asleep? What...?”

Ebemhal suddenly looked away before any thought about what was actually happening just behind her had a chance to dawn upon her, as though she could manipulate the tragic truth into something with at least any hint of hope. She froze, and everything around her stood still for a moment before a cool gentle breeze passed over her and the garden. The breeze brought her some sort of an idea along the lines that for the hardship now imposed upon her, she deserved to be rewarded. She instantly shook away such petty thoughts of foolishness, deemed it disrespectful to her husband and grandson and quietly tried to retain her senses, completely unaware of the single tear that had fallen down her left wrinkled cheek. Slowly gaining back her senses, she began to feel her muddy hands once again and she could hear sweet chimes of cattle-bells from afar. She could also see that the sun was setting and the clouds were now red, and as she stared forward, she could also see a man with a familiar posture walk towards her hut with an envelope in hand.

