

Moonrock

‘You know, I’ve got just the thing, wait’

Before he went inside to bring the *thing*, Ayush could see his grandson Neel’s eyes broadening with curiosity. The day Neel was born, Ayush knew that both are going to share a special bond. He always cherished Neel’s visits and eagerly waited for December when his son would get time to visit him and bring Neel. This time however, it was no vacation yet. Neel had fractured his right elbow and would not settle, no matter how much his parents would try to placate him.

Neel tried to get up and follow his grandpa. ‘NO! Neel’ yelled his dad quite sternly. Neel acquiesced.

Neel was involved in a fight at school. He was usually calm by nature but at the same time, full of inquisitiveness and possessiveness typical of nine-year old’s. In matters of his interests especially, he would not settle for less. And sky was one among such several obsessions. His school was preparing for the centenary celebrations of Apollo 11 moon landing, and all children at school were participating in various events. Neel was going to display his drawings and collection of miniature rocket models. He also had this globe made of glass, his vividly colored *Earth*. The boy who dropped it could have put an apologetic expression, a shocked or silent one at least. But just out of his natural behavior, he chose to laugh. *Wham!* Neel couldn’t resist. *Fa-thud!* The floor that breaks glass, can also break bones.

Ayush appeared, holding a small black box. ‘Here, open it’, he handed over the box to Neel. ‘What’s this grandpa?’

Neel opened the box and his eyes widened. ‘Wow! What-is-this!’, he looked up. His dad looked up too, then got busy with his stock pod again.

‘*This is a Moonrock – a piece of Moon*’.

‘Don’t you tell him –’ Dad thought of intervening, but saw an excited Neel after a long time – ‘Really grandpa!’ –and decided to hold, ‘*Let it be...*’

‘Yes, it fell from the Moon. I found it when I was about your age. Umm... a couple of year older I guess’

‘Oh wow! Is this real... Ouch!’

In excitement, Neel forgot his fracture. He would have to take out the white rock with one hand. ‘Tell me more about it’

This time when Neel left, Ayush felt his heart become hollower than it normally would. Along with Neel, he also parted with his *Moonrock*.

'I'm being silly. It's just a rock!' He tried to reason. He could not.

No. It was not just a rock. Not anymore. Especially after his wife's death, it had become a token. For him, it was more valuable than the wedding ring she would leave behind.

'Dad, this time you told all these made up stories about this stupid rock of yours to Neel. Had it not been for his injury and recently volatile moods, I would not have allowed it. Please grow up! I don't want Neel to have false impressions about anything. You cheered him up. Thank you. But please don't repeat this with him. It's a request.'

The parting words from his son only made Ayush feel more silly about himself. No. Not about his *relationship* with the rock. But that he had told stories to Neel in front of his son. He feared if he would get to see Neel again.

'But wait, he said, ... 'please don't repeat'... didn't he? It means he would revisit.'

Ayush felt silly again. He was thinking too much.

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Ellie and Ayush met at the university. Over this weekend dinner, she accompanied Sarah, and that's when they exchanged their first words, and glances. It was only a casual conversation, but one that Ayush still vividly remembered.

'Geology? Interesting!'

Ellie just smiled, looking amused and quizzical.

'Oh Hi, I'm Ayush'

'You like geology?'

'Yes, um I mean..., yeah sort of'

'Are you a freshman?'

'Yeah, we came to US together,' joined Sarah, 'We come from same town back in India'

'Oh, I guess'

‘No seriously, I don’t really know anything about geology. But I’m curious. Actually, I have this rock with me since I was a kid. I used to think it came from Moon. Thing is, back then in school, I always wanted it examined ...’

Ellie and Sarah looked at each other and shared a giggle.

‘No, not really...’ Ayush hesitated

‘No no no..., I didn’t mean,’ Ellie insisted as she smiled, ‘You’re welcome. I’ll do it for you. It would be my pleasure!’

‘Really! You know what? It turns blue in water...’

* * *

If 2069 was centenary celebration for Moon, 2019 was no different. Just like Neel, Ayush would exhibit his *Moonrock* during the golden anniversary celebrations at school.

‘REPRESENTATIVE SAMPLE’

– the placard read due to his teacher’s suggestion. But in his heart, Ayush held his unresolved doubt about his rock, and wanted it checked. *But where?*

Two years back when he found it in the playground, none could have been more elated about this *discovery*. Not even perhaps Neil Armstrong – after whom Ayush would name Neel – which also means *blue* in Hindi. The rock would take his mind hostage for weeks to come as he would always keep it up close with him – while sleeping, eating, and even bathing, when he would do his *water and light* experiments.

‘It sparkles in light but doesn’t glow in dark. Agh...’

When his initial excitement won’t subdue even after couple of days, his father started showing concerns about his studies. Ayush’s grades were not very good already, and now this obsession. But he thought one cannot help with a child of this age. After all, since this rock, the time he used to spend on cricket had reduced. ‘*A child will always have one infatuation or the other*’, he reasoned.

Infatuations don’t last a lifetime.

Into third week, the concern became a worry. Ayush’s preoccupation with the rock had only increased. He talked less. Not that he won’t converse at all, but he talked less.

‘Should we seek counselling?’

‘Why not stop watching the news for some days?’, offered Ayush’s mother.

‘Why? What’s the connection?’

‘Don’t you see? All these stories about *bama booms* mystery are only fueling his delusions. He listens to all this and thinks that the rock fell from Moon’

‘No, it can’t be. He hardly watches any TV, only when we dine’

‘Exactly. That’s news. Little dose is enough to leave impressions on young minds’

‘I don’t know, we can try if you feel’

Ironically, only if his parents had decided otherwise, Ayush would’ve soon learnt that the mysterious *bama booms* being heard across the globe since past couple of months were *not* in fact due to speculated meteors or doomsday planet Nibiru. That the real reason was secret weapon tests conducted by North Korea.

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Ellie’s phone buzzed. She wasn’t asleep yet. There was a message.

‘Hey Ellie, can we catch up? I brought the sample from India. Anytime you suggest... Good night.’

‘*Oh my, is he serious?*’

At their first ‘date’, Ayush presented the small black box to Ellie.

‘*Isn’t this supposed to be red?*’, Ellie thought to herself and blushed.

She opened the box, and took out the sparkling white rock.

Seeing Ayush describe the crystal with passion, Ellie won’t speak about hydrates. Engrossed, Ayush won’t notice her smile.

* * *

Neel was twenty-one when Ayush died, alone, in his nursing home.

By now, Neel was a mature, sophisticated, promising undergrad, just as his father had wished. At the funeral however, he was the old Neel he once was, ‘... and to this day, I have kept the *Moonrock* with me. It’s the best gift I ever received. It will always remain close to my heart...’

Among those listening him was Akriti, his seven-year-old niece. Later, she would come to Neel and ask,

‘Mama, can you share it with me? Just for a day, *please...*’

‘Of course, sweetie! But it’s not a Moonrock *actually* – it’s just a simple rock. Moonrock is just its name.’

‘Okay,’ she gave an expression of disappointment, ‘but I want to check.’

‘Sure sweetie, come here.’ Neel knelt and hugged her.

‘See Mama, it has some dark spots. You don’t know...,’ Neel noted her gleefully lit eyes, ‘Mama Moon also has dark spots. So, it’s actually from the Moon. No?’

Neel smiled.

‘Maybe it is. Maybe it is not. Why don’t you find out?’

‘Yes Mama, I would’, she beamed with pleasure.

As she left, Neel inadvertently felt parted.

‘But it’s just silly. Isn’t it? What is maturity?’

At home, Akriti put water on the rock.

‘See! Mama doesn’t know.’

With box beside her pillow, that night she felt luckiest of the whole world.