

A Devoted Son

by Anita Desai

(Adapted story. Intermediate level)

When parents work hard to give their children a good education and the best start in life, it is right that their children are grateful. And when parents grow old and sick, it is right that their children take care of them, and make their last years comfortable and peaceful.

Rakesh is a son to please any parent. He knows his duty, he knows what is right...

When the results appeared in the morning papers, Rakesh read them, in his pyjamas, at the garden gate. Then he went up the steps to the veranda where his father sat drinking his morning tea, and bowed down to touch his feet.

'You did well, son?' his father asked, smiling and reaching for the papers.

'At the top of the list, Papa,' Rakesh said quietly. 'First in the country.'

The whole house went wild with excitement. The family sang and danced. All day long, visitors came to the small yellow house at the end of the road, to congratulate the parents, clap Rakesh on the back, and fill the house and garden with the sounds and colours of a festival. There were flowers and sweets, party clothes and gifts, anxiety and temper and happiness, all in a colourful rush

of proud feelings and shining views of a bright new future. Rakesh was the first son in the family to receive an education, and his parents had gone through such hard times in order to afford the fees for school and medical college. Now at last all their suffering seemed to be worth it.

To everyone who said to him, 'Varma, congratulations on your wonderful son,' the father replied, 'Yes, and do you know the first thing he did when he saw the results this morning? He bowed down and touched my feet.'

This moved many of the women so much that they raised the ends of their saris and wiped away their tears. Meanwhile the men reached out for the betel leaves and sweets, and shook their heads in wonder at such excellent behaviour.

'One does not often see such behaviour in sons any more,' they all agreed, a little enviously perhaps.

Leaving the house, some of the women said, 'At a time like this you would think they'd serve the very best sweets.' And some of the men said, 'That old Varma is too proud! He needn't think we've forgotten that he comes from the vegetable market himself, his father used to sell vegetables, and he's never seen the inside of a school!' But there was more envy than dislike in their voices and this was not surprising - not every son in that poor suburb at the edge of the city was going to shine as Rakesh shone, and who knew that better than the parents themselves?

And that was only the beginning, the first step in Rakesh's climb to the top, when he became both famous and wealthy. He went to work in the best hospital in the USA (that was what his father learnt to call it - not America, which the uneducated neighbours called it). The American doctors said wonderful things about him, and all this was passed back to his proud family. What was more, he came back, he actually returned to that small yellow house, right at the end of the road where the rubbish lay about in smelly piles just outside the neat, well-kept gardens. To this place Rakesh returned, and the first thing he did on entering the house was to bow down and touch his father's feet.

His mother mainly took pleasure in the strange fact that he had not married in America, as all her neighbours had warned her he would, because wasn't that what all Indian boys went abroad for? Instead he agreed, almost without argument, to marry a girl she had chosen for him in her own village - a plump and uneducated girl, it was true, but so calm and obedient that she just became another daughter of the house, seemingly too lazy to even try and make Rakesh leave home and buy his own house, as any other girl would probably do. What was more, Veena was pretty - really pretty, in a plump way that only turned to fat after she had their first baby, a son, and then what did it matter?

For some years Rakesh worked in the city hospital, where he quickly rose to the top, and was made a director. He then decided to leave and open his own clinic. When it

was built, he took his parents in his car - a new, sky-blue Ambassador - to see it. A large sign over the door showed his name in big red letters. After that he seemed to become a little less famous - or maybe it was only that everyone in town had grown used to him at last - but it was also the beginning of his fortune, because he now became known not only as the best but also the richest doctor in town.

However, all this did not happen overnight. Naturally not. It was a lifetime's work. By now Rakesh's father had become an old man and had retired from his job selling lamp oil in a shop, which he had done for forty years. Rakesh's mother died soon afterwards, with a sigh of happiness, because it was her own son who took care of her in her last illness and who sat rubbing her feet at the last moment - not many women had had a son like that.

Even the most envious neighbours had to agree that not only was Rakesh a devoted son who managed to obey his parents, please his wife, show concern for his children and his patients, and keep his many friends happy, but he was also an excellent doctor. How one man could do all this - a man whose parents had never been to school - no one could understand, but all respected him for his fine qualities.

It is a strange fact, however, that success, if it continues too long, begins to shine less brightly. The once-proud father no longer took any interest in his famous son's work. After his retirement and the death of his wife, the old man very quickly went to pieces, as they say. He fell ill so often, and with such mysterious

diseases, that even his son no longer knew whether he was ill, or just pretending in order to annoy everybody. He sat on his narrow bed for most of the day, and developed another annoying habit of stretching out and lying absolutely still, allowing the whole family to think he was dead, and then suddenly sitting up and spitting out a big mouthful of betel juice at them all.

He did this once too often. There had been a big birthday party in the house, for the youngest son, and the celebrations had to stop suddenly when Veena discovered, or thought she discovered, that the old man, stretched out on his bed, was dead. The party broke up and the laughter turned to tears, until the old man sat up and Veena received a mouthful of red betel juice right on the front of her new sari. After that no one much cared if he sat up on his bed, spitting, or lay down flat, grey as a dead man. Except of course for that jewel among jewels, his son Rakesh.

It was Rakesh who brought him his morning tea and sat on the edge of the bed in his pyjamas, to discuss or, rather, read out the morning news to his father. It made no difference to him that his father's only reply was to spit. It was Rakesh too who, on returning from work at the end of the day, persuaded the old man to come out of his room and take the evening air in the garden on the veranda. On summer nights he ordered the servants to carry the old man's bed onto the grass, and he himself helped his father down the steps and onto the bed, for a night under the stars.

All this was very pleasant for the old man. What was not so pleasant was that Rakesh even began to control what his father ate. One day the father ordered Veena to make soojie halwa, a rich sweet, and was really sick after eating it. Later, Rakesh marched into the room, not respectfully, but with the confidence of a famous doctor, and said firmly, 'No more halwa for you, Papa. We must be sensible, at your age. If you must have something sweet, Veena will cook you a little kheer, that's light, just a little rice and milk. But nothing fried, nothing rich. We can't have this happening again.' The old man, who was feeling weak after a day's illness, opened his eyes wide at these words. He stared, shocked, at his son - he couldn't believe what he had heard. A son who actually refused his father the food he wanted? No, that was impossible. But Rakesh had turned his back, and did not notice his father's look. Veena went silently out of the room with a secret smile that only the old man saw, and hated.

Halwa was the first thing to go. Soon everything fried was forbidden, then everything sweet, and finally everything, everything that the old man enjoyed. The meals that arrived for him twice a day were simple, to say the least - dry bread, boiled vegetables, and if there were a bit of chicken or fish, that was boiled too. If he called for some more, Rakesh used to shake his head sadly, saying, 'Now, Papa, we must be careful, we don't want another illness, do we?'

The old man bribed his grandson to buy him sweets in the market, but Rakesh found out and was violently

angry with him. The old man sighed, and lay down in his dead-body position. But that worried no one any longer.

There was only one pleasure left to the old man now (his son's early morning visits and readings from the newspaper could no longer be called that) - his visits from neighbours. Old Bhatia from next door sometimes came to see him. If Rakesh were at home, he used to help his father into the garden, and leave the two old men under the tree, chewing betel leaves and discussing their illnesses enthusiastically.

'At least you have a doctor in the house to look after you,' sighed Bhatia one day.

'Look after me?' cried Varma, his voice breaking with anger. 'He - he does not even give me enough to eat.'

'What?' said Bhatia. 'Doesn't give you enough to eat? Your own son?'

'My own son. If I ask him for one more piece of bread, he says, no, Papa, I have weighed it myself and I can't allow you any more. He weighs the food he gives me, Bhatia - that's what it has come to.'

'Never!' said Bhatia in horror. 'Is it possible, even in these terrible times, for a son to refuse his father food?'

'Let me tell you,' Varma whispered eagerly. 'Today the family was having fried fish - I could smell it. I called Veena to bring me a piece. She came to the door and said no...'

'Said no?' Now it was Bhatia's voice that broke. 'No?'

'She said no, Rakesh has ordered her to give me nothing fried. No butter, no oil-'

'No butter? No oil? How does he expect his father to live?'

'That is how he behaves, after I brought him up, gave him an education, made him a great doctor. Great doctor! This is the way great doctors behave to their fathers, Bhatia.'

But complaining to an old friend like Bhatia did not help much. Varma was now eating so little that he soon became really weak and ill. Rakesh made him take all kinds of medicine, instead of the natural foods that Varma wanted. The old man began to feel frightened and helpless. He begged Rakesh not to make him take any more medicine.

'Let me die,' he cried. 'It would be better. I do not want to live, if all I get to eat is your medicine.'

'Papa, be reasonable.'

'I leave that to you,' the father cried. 'Let me die now, I cannot live like this.'

Rakesh left the room and the old man heard him say, laughing, to someone outside the door, 'Lying all day on his pillows, fed every few hours by my wife's own hands, visited by every member of the family daily - and then he says he does not want to live "like this"!''

The medicine he had to take was not completely useless. It kept him alive - long after he stopped wanting to live.

In the evenings, that summer, the servants used to carry out his bed, with him on it, and put it carelessly down on the veranda. In answer to his complaints, they said the Doctor Sahib had told them he must take the evening air, and the evening air they would make him take. Then Veena, that fat, smiling, silly woman appeared and piled up his pillows so high that his back ached.

'Let me lie down,' he begged. 'I can't sit up any more.'

'Try, Papa, Rakesh says you can if you try,' she said, and went off to the other end of the veranda to listen to love songs on the radio. So there he sat, like a dead body, cold and stiff, watching his grandsons playing cricket on the grass and terrified of getting a ball in his eye.

At last the sky-blue Ambassador arrived, the cricket game stopped at once, and the doctor, the great doctor, all in white, stepped out. Someone ran up to take his bag, others to walk up the steps with him. His wife turned down the radio, and called out to offer him tea or a cold drink. But he did not reply or even look at her. Always a devoted son, he went first to the corner where his father sat stiff and silent, staring at nothing.

'Papa,' he said lovingly, sitting on the edge of the bed and reaching out to rub his father's feet.

Old Varma put his feet under him, out of the way, and continued to stare straight ahead into the dusty yellow air.

'Papa, I'm home. How are you feeling, Papa?'

Then Varma turned and looked at his son. His face was so old and tired that it could not communicate to the famous man exactly what his father thought of him.

'I'm dying,' he whispered. 'Let me die, I tell you.'

'Papa, you're joking,' his son smiled at him. 'I've brought you some new medicine. You must take it - it will make you feel stronger again. Promise me you'll take it regularly, Papa.'

There was a pause. Then Varma spat out some words, sharp and bitter as poison, into his son's face. 'Keep your medicine - I want none - I won't take any more. None. Never,' and he knocked the bottle out of his son's hand with a movement that was suddenly grand and effective.

His son jumped. The bottle smashed and the thick brown liquid stained his white trousers. His wife let out a cry and came running. All around the old man was noise once again.

He gave a push to the pillows behind him so that they fell off the bed and he could lie flat on his back again. He closed his eyes and pointed his chin at the ceiling, saying as firmly as a sick old man could, 'God is calling me - now let me go!'

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