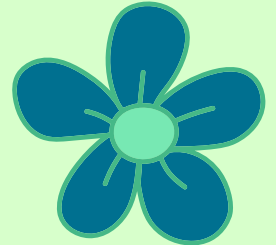


Wildflower Post

Newsletter



TODAY'S WRITER

Shlok Pandey

Shlok Pandey is a 17-year-old Indian writer from Mumbai, a student in a completely different field, who practices writing and reading in the very little spare time he can manage from his studies. His stories have appeared in the Wise Owl Magazine, Setu Journal, The Drift and Dribble Miscellany and his poems have appeared in/ forthcoming in The Crossroads Review, cloudymoon lit mag, The Utrecht Pigeon Magazine, Poetic Practice and aesterion magazine.

The Stepdaughter

SHLOK PANDEY

Life is never easy, not even for small nine-year-olds. Ayesha perfectly felt and understood this harsh reality at the tender age of nine, which adults dream of as the stress-free days. She lived in a luxury three-bedroom apartment in the coastal city of India called Mumbai. She deeply loved her father and felt that he was the best part of her life. The only decision of her father's that she never liked but lacked the guts to openly tell him about was his marrying her stepmother, Rose, two years ago, after her own mother had run away with someone when she was six and a half. Rose was a film actress, and her father was a film director; they both met while shooting for a film just a few months after Ayesha's mother ran away. She fell in love with him, and he decided to move on and marry her. Rose moved in with her daughter, Amanda, who was a year younger than Ayesha.

Ayesha never really liked her stepmother. The reason behind this was that Rose always told her that she was her mother, but she made Ayesha realise that she was only like her mother and failed to be her mother. She was never that warm, and her smile was never real—the forced one that she had to put on, just as she had to bear to live with Ayesha if she wanted to live with Ayesha's dad, Rahul.

When Ayesha wanted a snack, Rose would hand her a packet of crisps, but when Amanda wanted something to chew upon, an avocado toast was prepared in the kitchen by a servant on Rose's order. When they went to the beaches in the summer, Rose would be very happy to see her husband splashing with Amanda in the shallow end, but would look with a not-so-happy face towards her husband feeding Ayesha a big cone of chocolate ice cream with his own hands.

One Christmas morning, the children opened the gifts that Rose had packed for Amanda and Ayesha in vibrant wrapping papers. Amanda went first, opening a box labelled "Dear Amanda." She fell in love with her gift, a vibrant and sparkling purple frock with fantastic frills. Ayesha, when she opened it up, her clothes had no price tags. They would never have, as they were the ones Amanda had worn once or twice; they were also costly when bought for Amanda. Ayesha faked being happy, her lips barely making an ugly smile.

"Do you like my dress?" Amanda asked Ayesha.

"Yes. It will make you look like a princess," Ayesha tried to reply without jealousy.

"Mom, why can't she have a new one like me?" Amanda asked her mother.

Rose didn't reply but did give a side look towards Amanda, the look that told her to shut her mouth when guests come.

Ayesha gifted Amanda a beautiful pen, knowing how much she loved collecting bodies of elegant, royal-looking pens.

Amanda gifted Ayesha her purple frock; she knew Ayesha would look breathtakingly beautiful in it.

“I can't keep it,” Ayesha said, glancing at her stepmom, who just kept looking down.

“Yes, you can,” Amanda thrust it in her hands and hugged her tight.

Some stepsisters aren't stepsisters.

Rose stood up and walked away, and she didn't talk to Amanda lovingly that day.

Ayesha was very happy that day. She also saw how her dad looked at her all the while; he was also sad for her. He and Rose were talking loudly that day, and she overheard them in their bedroom. He must have taken a stand for her; she trusted him. Furthermore, he loved her a lot, she knew.

One day, her dad was away shooting in a different part of the world. Rose became horribly sick. She came home early that day from shooting a TV film and couldn't even bear looking at the plate of lunch Amanda had handed over to her. She ran towards the bathroom and puked. Furthermore, she kept on vomiting a lot until she could barely walk, her legs trembling. Ayesha, sensitive as she was, was always told by her dad that no person can ever in their lives repay what and how much their parents do for them. Ayesha stood there all the while behind her, and she gave her a hand and helped her walk towards her bedroom.

Rose lay in bed all day. Amanda had called her father, and a doctor was called. The doctor said she had food poisoning, prescribed medication, and said she needed complete bed rest. Amanda, once in a while, came in to check on her mom, hugging and kissing her, and she even made a get-well-soon card for her. Ayesha sat on a chair beside the bed, looking to see if she required anything. One time that evening, both Ayesha and Amanda were sitting beside their mother, worried for her. Rose sat up immediately and was about to stand up, but she couldn't control it, though she tried her best, and vomited a lot on the bedroom floor. It stank, and Amanda got disgusted by it. Yet, Amanda told her mom that she would help her clean it, to which Rose said no. But Ayesha, in a matter of some seconds, went and quickly grabbed a cleaning cloth and a bucket of water. She started cleaning all of it, though she was horribly disgusted by it, but it was her duty as a daughter, as all the servants had left. And it was the least she could do for her. She cleaned it all up.

At around 9, Ayesha came in and gave Rose a very watery vegetable broth.

“I made supper,” she announced proudly.

Rose drank it. It was hot. It had too much salt, and it had very huge chunks of vegetables unevenly cut, which she didn't like, but it had effort and love; she understood. She didn't sleep that night, but was it just her poor health or something else? Realisation, maybe, or guilt?

Dad came soon. Rose had recovered. But she was unusual.

Ayesha was amazed to see Rose's changed behaviour towards her. Rose started reading bestselling children's books to her at night. She started sitting beside her at dinner; she started making her snacks, just as she did for Amanda; she brought Ayesha occasional gifts; and, best of all, she started having talk times with her—the thing Ayesha had grieved the most since her real mom left her. They started bonding with each other until Rose started loving both of them equally. Ayesha never understood until her teenage years that her care and love on that food poisoning day made Rose a mom, rather than just a stepmom.

Not all children can; children are one of the best teachers one can ever have. They are always purer than adults. They always teach you what years cannot.