



# 2

## A Devoted Son

Rakesh is as devoted to his parents as he is committed to his work. An ideal son, surgeon and husband, he comes up in life the hard way. When at the peak of success and fame, he loses his mother and watches his old father going to pieces. How does he balance his professional obligations against his personal duties? Let us find out.

### I

THE results appeared in the morning papers. Rakesh scanned them. Then he went up the steps to the verandah where his father sat sipping his morning tea, and bowed down to touch his feet.

“A first division, son?” his father asked, reaching for the papers.

“At the top of the list, Papa,” Rakesh murmured. “First in the country.”

The family whooped and danced. The whole day long visitors streamed into the house to congratulate the parents and to slap Rakesh on the back. They filled the house and

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**scanned:** examined carefully    **whooped:** made a lot of noise in celebration

the garden with the sounds and colours of a festival. Rakesh was the first son in the family to go to school and then medical college. At last the fruits of his parents' sacrifice and his own labour had arrived, golden and glorious.

To everyone who came to him to say "*Mubarak*, Varmaji, your son has brought you glory", the father said, "Yes, and do you know what is the first thing he did when he saw the results this morning? He came and touched my feet. He bowed down and touched my feet." This moved many of the women and men in the crowd and they shook their heads in wonder and approval of such exemplary behaviour. "One does not often see such behaviour in sons any more," they all agreed.

And that was only the beginning, the first step in a sweeping ascent to the heights of fame and fortune. The thesis he wrote for his MD brought Rakesh still greater glory. He won a scholarship. He went to the United States of America where he pursued his career in the most prestigious



**ascent:** climb/going up    **MD:** Doctor of Medicine    **prestigious:** reputed

of hospitals. What was more, he came *back*. He returned to that small yellow house in the shabby colony right at the end of the road. And the first thing he did on entering the house was to slip out of the embraces of his sisters and brothers and bow down and touch his father's feet.

His mother gloated over the strange fact that he had not brought home a foreign wife as all her neighbours had warned her he would. Instead he agreed, almost without argument, to marry a girl she had picked out for him in her own village. She quietly slipped into the household and settled in like a charm and gave birth to a baby boy.

For some years Rakesh worked in the city hospital. He quickly rose to the top position as director and then left the hospital to set up his own clinic. He took his parents in his new car to see the clinic when it was built. He now became known not only as the best but also the richest doctor in town.

However, all this was not accomplished in the wink of an eye. It was the achievement of a lifetime. At the time he set up his clinic his father had grown into an old man having retired from his post at the kerosene dealer's depot at which he had worked for forty years. His mother had died soon after, and it was Rakesh who ministered to her in her last illness and who sat pressing her feet at the last moment—such a son as few women had borne.

It had to be admitted that Rakesh was a devoted son and an exceptionally good-natured man. He had managed somehow to obey his parents and humour his wife and show concern equally for his children, his patients and his friends. He had also emerged an excellent doctor, a really fine surgeon.

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**gloated:** expressed joy and satisfaction over one's own success (used in a derogatory sense) **in the wink of an eye:** very quickly / 'in the twinkling of an eye' **ministered:** attended to (like a nurse)

How one man — and a man born to illiterate parents, his father having worked for a kerosene dealer and his mother having spent her life in the kitchen — had achieved, combined and conducted such a range of virtues, no one could understand, but all acknowledged his talent and skill.

### Write

Answer the following questions.

1. Rakesh's success was greater than his father had expected. How?
2. (i) What was special about Rakesh in the family?  
(ii) His great achievement was the consequence of  
(a) \_\_\_\_\_ and, (b) \_\_\_\_\_.  
Find appropriate phrases in the text and fill in the blanks.
3. What pleased Varmaji particularly about his son's behaviour on the morning of the results?
4. Give examples of Rakesh's humility, obedience and professional success after his return from America.
5. What does "a range of virtues" refer to in the case of Rakesh?

## II

It is a fact, however, that talent and skill, if displayed for too long, cease to dazzle. Having retired from work and having lost his wife, the old father very quickly went to pieces. He developed many complaints and fell ill frequently. Even his son could no longer make out when it was something of significance and when it was merely a peevish whim. One minute, he sat huddled on his string-bed and the next, stretched out suddenly and lay absolutely still. The whole family flew around him in a flap, wailing and weeping, and

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**cease to dazzle:** lose their charm and attraction **went to pieces:** lost control over himself; was broken completely **peevish whim:** unreasonable annoyance **in a flap:** in a state of nervous excitement/confusion

then suddenly he sat up, stiff and gaunt. And he did this once too often.

It was Rakesh who brought him his morning tea in the old man's favourite brass tumbler. He sat at the edge of the bed and discussed or, rather, read out the morning news to his father. It made no difference to him that his father made no response. It was Rakesh, too, who, on returning from the clinic in the evening, persuaded the old man to come out of his room, and take the evening air out in the garden. On summer nights he saw to it that the servants carried out the old man's bed to the lawn. He himself helped his father down the steps and onto the bed, soothing him and settling him down for the night under the stars.

All this was very gratifying for the old man. What was not so gratifying was the strict supervision of his diet. One day the old man asked his daughter-in-law to make him a dish of *sooji halwa*, and ate it with a saucerful of cream. Soon after, Rakesh marched into the room, not with his usual respectful steps but with the confident strides of the famous doctor, and declared, "No more *halwa* for you, Papa. If you must have something sweet, Veena will cook you a little *kheer*, just a little rice and milk. But nothing fried, nothing rich. We can't have this happening again."

The old man who had been lying stretched out on his bed, weak and feeble after a day's illness, gave a start at the very sound and tone of these words. He opened his eyes and stared at his son in disbelief. A son who actually refused his father the food he craved? But Rakesh had turned his back to him and was cleaning up the litter of bottles and packets on the medicine shelf.

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**gaunt:** weak and haggard (on account of illness)    **gratifying:** pleasing/satisfying  
**start:** sudden, quick movement (out of fear or shock)



*Halwa* was only the first item to be crossed off the old man's diet. One delicacy after the other went—everything fried to begin with, then everything sweet, and eventually everything, everything that the old man enjoyed. The meals that arrived for him on the shining stainless steel tray twice a day were frugal—dry bread, boiled lentils, boiled vegetables. If he called for another helping, Rakesh himself would come to the door, gaze at him sadly and shake his head, saying, “Now, Papa, we must be careful. We can't risk another illness, you know.” The old man tried to bribe his grandchildren into buying him sweets. “Run down to the shop at the crossroads and buy me thirty-paise worth of *jalebis*, and you can spend the remaining twenty paise on yourself. Eh? Understand? Will you do that?” He got away with it once or twice but then was found out. Rakesh came storming into the room. “Now, Papa, are you trying to turn



**delicacy:** good, delicious food    **frugal:** scanty/not lavish

my little son into a liar? Quite apart from spoiling your own stomach, you are spoiling him as well—you are encouraging him to lie to his own parents. You should have heard the lies he told his mother when she saw him bringing those *jalebis* wrapped up in a filthy newspaper.” The old man sighed and lay down in the corpse position. But that worried no one any longer.

There was only one pleasure left for the old man now—visits from elderly neighbours. These were not frequent as his contemporaries were mostly as decrepit and helpless as he, and few could walk the length of the road to visit him any more. Old Bhatia, next door, occasionally came out of his yard, walked down the bit of road and came in at Varma’s gate to collapse onto the stone plinth under a tree. If Rakesh was at home, he would help his father down the steps into the garden and settle him on his bed under the tree and leave the two old men to chew betel-leaves and discuss the ills of their individual bodies with combined passion.

“At least you have a doctor in the house to look after you,” sighed Bhatia.

“Look after me?” cried Varma, his voice cracking like an ancient clay jar. “He does not even give me enough to eat.”

“What?” said Bhatia, the white hairs in his ears twitching. “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 weighed out the *atta* myself and I can’t allow you to have more than two hundred grams of cereal a day’. He weighs the food he gives me, Bhatia—he has scales to weigh it on. That is what it has come to.”

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**corpse position:** like a dead body    **decrepit:** old and weak

“Never,” murmured Bhatia in disbelief. “Is it possible, even in this evil age, for a son to refuse his father food?”

Old Varma nodded. “That is how he treats me—after I have brought him up, given him an education, made him a great doctor. Great doctor! This is the way great doctors treat their fathers, Bhatia.”

### Discuss

1. Was Rakesh obedient and attentive to his ailing father? How do you know?
2. Read the following sentence.

Varmaji was old and unhappy.

Now read these:

- (i) His own son had become his enemy.
- (ii) He feared he would never recover from his illness.
- (iii) He had lost his status and importance in the family.
- (iv) He was too unwell to appreciate the sincerity of the intentions of others.

Which item above, according to you, combines meaningfully with the sentence given at the beginning?

### Write

Answer the following questions.

1. Did Varmaji find his son’s talent and skill fascinating in his old age? If not, why?
2. What made everyone uncertain about the old man’s complaints?
3. What was it in Rakesh’s behaviour that greatly surprised and shocked his father one day?
4. What gave the old man happiness in the midst of his unending misery?
5. (i) What did he tell Bhatia about his son?  
(ii) Was his complaint justified? If not, why?



## III

There was cold comfort in complaining to neighbours and, on such a miserable diet, Varma found himself slipping, weakening and soon becoming a genuinely sick man. Powders and pills and mixtures were not only brought in when dealing with a crisis like an upset stomach but became a regular part of his diet supplanting the natural foods he craved.

The quantities of vitamins and tonics he was made to take were not altogether useless. They kept him alive and even gave him a kind of strength that made him hang on. It was as though he were straining at a rope, trying to break it, and it would not break. It was still strong. He only hurt himself, trying.

In the evening, that summer, the servants would come into his room, grip his bed, one at each end, and carry it out to the veranda, there setting it down with a thump that jarred every tooth in his head. In answer to his agonised complaints they said Doctor Sahib had told them he must take the evening air, and the evening air they would make him take. Then Veena, his daughter-in-law, would appear and pile up the pillows under his head till he was propped up stiffly into a sitting position that made his head swim and his back ache. "Let me lie down," he begged. "I can't sit up any more."

"Try, Papa. Rakesh said you can if you try," she said, and drifted away to the other end of the veranda where her transistor radio blared cinema tunes.

So there he sat, like some stiff corpse, terrified, gazing out on the lawn where his grandsons played cricket.

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**supplanting:** replacing/in place of    **jarred:** hurt    **agonised:** miserable  
**blared:** played noisily



The sky-blue Ambassador drove in smartly and the doctor, the great doctor, all in white, stepped out. Someone ran up to take his bag from him, others to escort him up the steps. “Will you have tea?” his wife called, turning down the transistor set, “or a cold drink? Shall I fry you some *samosas*?” But he did not reply or even glance in her direction. Ever a devoted son, he went first to the corner where his father sat gazing at some undefined spot in the dusty yellow air that swam before him. He did not turn his head to look at his son.

“Papa,” Rakesh said, tenderly, sitting down on the edge of the bed and reaching out to press his feet.

Old Varma tucked his feet under him, out of the way, and continued to gaze stubbornly into the yellow air of the summer evening.

“Papa, I’m home.”

Varma’s hand jerked suddenly, in a sharp, derisive movement, but he did not speak.

“How are you feeling, Papa?”

“I’m dying,” he croaked. “Let me die, I tell you.”

“Papa, you’re joking,” his son smiled at him, lovingly. “I’ve brought you a new tonic to make you feel better. You must take it, it will make you feel stronger again. Here it is. Promise me you will take it regularly, Papa.”

“Keep your tonic,” he said bitterly. “I want none—I won’t take any more of your medicines.” And he swept the bottle out of his son’s hand with a wave of his own, suddenly grand, suddenly effective. Rakesh jumped, for the bottle was smashed and thick brown syrup had splashed up, staining his white trousers. His wife let out a cry and came running.

The old man gave one push to the pillows at his back and dislodged them so he could sink down on his back, quite flat again. He closed his eyes and pointed his chin at the ceiling, like some dire prophet, groaning. All around him was hubbub once again, noise and attention.

ANITA DESAI  
(b.1937)

*[abridged and slightly modified]*

## ACTIVITIES

### COMPREHENSION

#### **Write**

Answer the following questions.

1. (i) Rakesh’s father was given more medicine than food. What good, if any, did so much medicine do him?  
(ii) “He only hurt himself, trying.” It implies that
  - (a) his struggle for survival was painful to watch.
  - (b) the medicine made his condition worse.
  - (c) he hurt himself, and no one else, trying to survive.

(d) he did hang on with the help of medicine, but his life was miserable.

Mark the right item.

2. (i) What did Rakesh tell the servants to do every evening in summer to help his father?  
(ii) Why was Varmaji against it?
3. Give examples from the text to indicate  
(i) Rakesh's importance and popularity at home;  
(ii) his exemplary devotion to his father.
4. Rakesh had brought a new tonic. What did Varmaji do that upset everyone?
5. The last paragraph suggests the following.
  - (i) Varmaji regains his status and importance in the family.
  - (ii) After a prolonged illness, the end has come.
  - (iii) Everybody believes that Varmaji will recover at last.
  - (iv) In spite of everyone's best efforts, the inevitable is about to happen.
  - (v) The patient groans in pain, but the attention he receives pleases him.
  - (vi) Life is a series of struggles from beginning to end.Mark the relevant item(s).

### **Discuss**

Say whether the following are 'True' or 'False', and why.

1. Rakesh belonged to a cultivated and prosperous family.
2. Varmaji discussed the morning news with his son with great pleasure.
3. Rakesh's mother was not too sure of her son returning home after his stay in America.
4. Rakesh was unkind when he told his father that his behaviour towards his grandson had been less than perfect.
5. Rakesh owed his achievements to destiny rather than hard work.
6. Varmaji misunderstood his son most in matters of food and medicine.
7. The family did its utmost in taking excellent care of its ailing head.

**WORDS IN USE**

I. For each italicised item in list A, two or more meanings are given under list B. Mark the right item in each case.

<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>
1. Guests <i>streamed</i> into the house	came one after another/ rushed/slipped in
2. This <i>moved</i> many	made them change places/ affected them
3. She settled like a <i>charm</i>	magic spell/beautiful idea/ inspiration
4. to <i>humour</i> his wife	impress/indulge/joke with
5. in <i>disbelief</i>	believing that it wasn't true/ was unable to believe
6. a <i>frugal</i> meal	scanty/poor/inexpensive
7. she <i>let out</i> a cry	uttered/stifled/released
8. <i>stormed</i> into the room	walked in angrily/loudly/ quietly

II. **Cold**, which is the opposite of **hot**, can be used in a number of ways.

Study the following sentences with 'cold' in each. Discuss their meanings in small groups. You can look up the clues given in the box for help.

1. There was *cold comfort* in complaining to neighbours.
2. I have got *a cold*. I need medicine.
3. Who would want to invite *a cold fish* like him to the party?
4. He got *cold feet* at the last minute.
5. According to the police, it was murder *in cold blood*.
6. Don't give an old friend *the cold shoulder*.
7. He *blows hot and cold* about self-employment as a better choice.

- keep changing one's opinion (about something)
- someone aloof/showing no emotion
- afraid or reluctant to do something
- planned, deliberate and callous
- deliberately treat someone in an unfriendly way
- little or no consolation

III. Fill in the blanks in the following words using **a, e, o** or **u**.  
Check your answer by referring to the text.

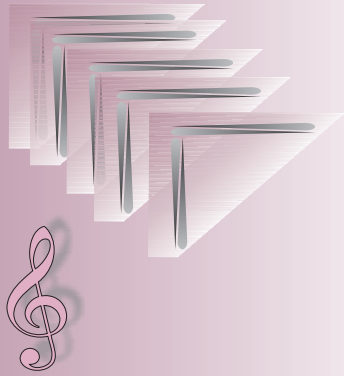
divisi __ n	m __ rmured	p __ rents	fr __ its
bow __ d	exempl __ ry	b __ haviour	embr __ ces
gl __ ated	ceas __	min __ te	g __ unt
resp __ nse	bl __ red	fr __ gal	asc __ nt

### **COMPOSITION**

Write a letter to a friend describing your intimate relationship with your grandmother, who is very old and often unwell. She tells you stories, but would often prefer to hear one from you. She eats little, and is unhappy about the number of pills she must take everyday. She needs help in coming out of or going into the room. She is a very interesting person.

- Remember that you are writing an informal composition, talking about personal matters and sharing your thoughts with a close friend.
- It's a personal letter. The language you use should be informal, simple but grammatical.
- Use words and phrases appropriate to the idea you want to express.
- Mention date and place on top and write *Your friend/Yours as ever/Yours affectionately* at the end.





## The Arrow and the Song

Nothing that we do, think or say is in vain, though we may not guess the consequences immediately. Just as the arrow shot in the air will fall to earth somewhere, so the actions we perform or the thoughts we express will leave their mark, unseen by us.

I shot an arrow into the air,  
It fell to earth, I knew not where;  
For, so swiftly it flew, the sight  
Could not follow it in its flight.  
I breathed a song into the air,  
It fell to earth, I knew not where;  
For who has sight so keen and strong  
That it can follow the flight of song?  
Long, long afterward, in an oak  
I found the arrow, still unbroke;  
And the song, from beginning to end,  
I found again in the heart of a friend.

H. W. LONGFELLOW  
(1807–1882)

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**the sight:** the eye    **breathed:** hummed; sang

## ACTIVITIES

### Discuss

1. There is nothing apparently common between an arrow and a song. In what ways do they seem alike in this poem?
2. Why do you find it easier to remember a song than a prose piece?
3. Which do you find more enjoyable—songs in your own language or songs in English? Any reasons for your preference?

### Write

Answer the following questions.

1. “It fell to earth ...” refers to both the arrow and the song. Which reference is literal and which is metaphorical?

The use of a word or phrase is called **metaphorical** when it indicates something different from (though related in some way to) its literal meaning.

2. In addition to ‘fell’, which word has been used metaphorically in the second stanza? In what way is its use non-literal?
3. Which phrase in the poem is parallel in meaning to “still unbroke”?
4. (i) Find in the poem pairs of rhyming words.

*Example: air – where*

- (ii) Write four rhyming words against each word below.

earth \_\_\_\_\_

song \_\_\_\_\_

found \_\_\_\_\_

heart \_\_\_\_\_