

My Granny's Handbag of Algorithms

by Basundhara Mitra

I love toothless smiles—in chubby and wrinkled faces alike. The endearing lack of bite inevitably evokes in me an emotional resonance of the tenderest intent. So, transitioning my personal priorities, I went ahead and invited my ninety-year-old grand-aunt to stay with me on my much-awaited month-long vacation. Not surprisingly, my friends thought I had whimsically forsaken sanity. “You’ll end up being a babysitter,” they warned. “You’re wasting your holiday and risking your peace of mind.”

It is worth it, I thought. The dazzle of the midday sun has a longer tenure. Those parties, music, and hikes would wait for me, but the soft twilight rays receded too fast. If I didn’t embrace the delicate beam now, if I didn’t savor and celebrate the light, I would let something beautiful pass by. I had thought a blast with the past would energize my present.

Instead, I got the future.

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“Stop! Wait for me!” I called after her. I had stopped for a moment to buy a bottle of water at the airport, and as I turned, I saw my grand-aunt, or *Dida* as I called her, had scuttled far ahead, clutching onto her gigantic handbag. With unbridled enthusiasm, much like a toddler clinging to a toy, she was moving forward—fast, unsteady—driven by her spirit more than balance. I knew I had to keep up. What I didn’t know was the direction it would take.

I got an inkling soon enough. Once we reached my home and erased the exhaustion of the long journey by ziplining down memory lane, I asked Dida about her entertainment

preferences. Having already subscribed to several streaming platforms, and upgraded to YouTube Premium, I had envisioned us kicking up our heels, exchanging notes on early twentieth century classics versus latest twenty-first century pop. Reservations to exotic seaside locations lay in my drawer promising to deliver timeless moments.

She replied sweetly, “Is there a computer center close by?”

“Computer center? You mean, you want to print something? You can do that from home, you know,” I assured her.

“No, not print, I want to learn computers.”

“Learn computers! Why?” That was the last thing I expected to hear. I harbored the unjustified assumption that seniors were apprehensive of advanced technology.

“Oh, I don’t have much time, that’s why,” she replied solemnly.

“I’ll need a longer brief than that!” I smiled.

“You see, I’ve heard that you all, young computer-savvy people, do something called computer coding to solve problems. I have a project, too—a step-by-step idea—to overcome distance and get closer to people who matter. I want to meet everyone I know, even if I can’t see them.”

“You mean you want to connect with family and friends? But I can install several apps on your phone, open a Facebook account. You can exchange daily chatter and photos on WhatsApp. Social media is your genie, Dida. Command and voilà, your wish will have a face!”

Looking at her tiny but shiny relic phone, I said, “I could also get you an iPhone and you could Facetime.”

“I don’t want to just connect, I need to reach people. And because my time is limited, I need to do it through computers.”

I was amused at how she used the word ‘computers’ as an umbrella—to mean software, apps, programs, and even the Internet.

To decode her game plan, Dida went and got her handbag and took out a wad of notes. She wagged them at me. “For a laptop,” she grinned.

“Will this be enough?” she then asked, a little anxiously.

“Depends on the complexity of your project,” I teased her.

She emptied out her bag slowly. Instead of the old-world necessities like tissues, keys, hankies, and medicines, she had a spiral-bound telephone book with email addresses of two-thirds of the world, a pen-drive, sheaves of notes, photographs, a list of all the software programs she wanted to learn. The unearthing continued—beginner’s guides, earphones, even a USB microphone! I finally spotted a predictable element in the hopeful array embodying her audacious dream—blue light blocking reader glasses. Her focus was clearly set.

“If I manage to learn the basics of computers, then I can learn some document-making skills, or else I will just enjoy social media and online banking,” Dida said.

“Goodness!” I thought, “She is already talking algorithmically. If-then-else—like conditionals in a program.”

Her passion was shining in her earnest eyes, and in her handbag. Technology was the flame of the youth. Or so I had always thought. But this ode to the digital world, this hunger to rein in a new-age force to redefine reality and sensibility moved me.

“I can teach you all of these,” I told her.

She immediately cut me short, “No, dear, I am literally leaping into outer space. I am excited and also scared, as I do not want to fall flat on my face. I will go very slowly...why should you waste your time? You go do new and fun things, too.”

So much for babysitting! I thought.

I was aware of her chin-up independence—a spinster by choice, she had been the principal of an all-girls’ school and the kindest feminist I ever knew. She had not only paid for uniforms, books, and tuition of several of first-generation female students but also hosted them when they came from villages and had no place to stay. Now she sought to be the student and I knew I must comply.

Next evening, we went to the nearest tech-learning center to enroll. The instructor innocently asked, “Which student have you come to pick up?”

I pointed at Dida, “She’s the one!”

I explained Dida’s need to learn. The gentleman was impressed but unsure. Even if he wanted to sign her up, he said, he couldn’t do so as it would take up a seat in a limited class, not to mention distract the children as well.

The proposition of Granny as a student would be a hard convince. I put on my negotiating shoes.

“How about you give her one-on-one lessons?” I asked. “It would be financially beneficial for you, and you would be doing business and social outreach simultaneously. It could become an inspiring story, publicity for your work.”

I waited, knowing he couldn’t refuse. He didn’t.

“Only one thing,” Granny piped in, her eyes twinkling, “it will not be home-tutoring. I will come to your office. I have to walk that extra mile, you see.”

The lessons began and Granny jumped into her cyber-space mission with the gusto of a college freshman, starry-eyed and hell-bent. Weeks of hilarious assertions followed—“I am not sure if I’m working or playing with my laptop!”

I had to resolve questions both charming—“Can the virus on my laptop infect yours if I email you?” and insightful—“Shouldn’t voice-recognition programs have an accent-based research done first?”

Like a contestant in a MasterChef pantry, she worked according to a well-defined strategy and picked up more and more ingredients along the way for her recipe.

While I was left behind. I had indulged her whims, but as a result, found my own plans of celebrating her stay helplessly waiting in line. My mind chewed itself up silently. This wasn’t what I had signed up for! My thoughtfully crafted vacation was losing its higher purpose. How was it slipping away into a déjà vu routine of dropping, picking up, and helping with homework? I had wanted Dida to be happy, not busy! My dreams of airing out her old-age community living and spritzing in spicy moments were fast dissipating into my unspoken groans—into what I called “Must we!” days. I was all heart when I had started out on this journey and now, I was all hurt. I hid my little personal devil well, but it wouldn’t stop its nagging, “She is thinking only of her own objectives, not mine.” I completely missed the irony in my thinking.

Contending with my simmering disappointment, at times I felt like blurting out my conflicting feelings...after all, she was my grandma! My respect and love for her kept me from confessing my feelings. Also, my better self had to admit that we shared a good amount of time chatting, exchanging ideas and stories; it was just that I failed to

comprehend the logic behind the singularity of her goal. The urge to do good was growing in me, yet often I fell into selfish remorse.

The vacation came to an end and I was left pouting, “What Dida, you did nothing but study all through the holidays!”

She gave me the tenderest look.

We did not meet again for a couple of years, though I received detailed emails with comprehensive news about the branches, leaves, and fruits of the family tree. She was elated that she was now on intimate terms with people who, earlier, did not have time to pick up the phone and talk.

Dida passed away last year at ninety-three. She left behind, for her entire family, unexpected treasures saved in the cloud—in Google Drive.

There were personal essays on rebellion composed in the 1940s, poems on love, family stories, priceless photographs. There was a whole book, a memoir in PDF format, entitled *Whose Light is It Anyway?*

I found several audio files dedicated to me. It contained narrated anecdotes about my parents, gone too soon. It began with the words, “I have so much more to tell you than I did.” There were clips of my mother singing as a bride, my father’s monologue in a theater group, his accountancy lectures to college students—gems she had managed to dig out from relatives who I did not even know existed.

What I had thought was intellectual yearning, was in reality a precise processing of love. She had managed to preserve her love beyond time.

This was not engraving names in heart bubbles on public property to immortalize love. This was what technologists believe they create technology for: the recognition that technology is an ally in our ability to care. Dida had left a chunk of her warmth behind.

And I had thought I was taking care of her.



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