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10th grade

Foothill High School

*of honey and spice*

This is what I know of India:

1. Summers spent on dirty rooftops. My cousins and I go up here every afternoon of our visit. The streets of Jaipur glitter below us, and there is dusty air and peeling paint and laughter.
2. Baba's singing. His music fills the space between us on car rides to school. His voice is rough like crumpled paper and thick, gravelly, but it carries a certain sweetness to it too. I don't always understand the words; my Marathi isn't strong enough, but I like to listen anyway.
3. My mother's beauty. Baba has a picture of her from when they were young. She is in black and white and the corners of the photo are creased from time, but you can see her there, dark eyes and fair skin and elegance.
4. Language, a little from both sides of my family. When I was younger, I spoke a tangled conflation of Hindi and Marathi, all muddled into one. I pull the two apart as I get older, learn the differences in their sounds. Hindi is softer, lighter, has more shape to it. Crushed velvet and honey. Marathi is harsher, sharper, has more jugular sounds. Edges and corners and spice.

I don't know much else.

I'm seven when I learn my culture is something to be ashamed of.

It's lunchtime, late summer, and I'm sitting at the shaded tables near the cafeteria. I'm with Taylor, the first friend I made after moving into town, and a few other girls I don't know too well. They all have inside jokes I don't understand and shared memories without me. I try, but it's hard for me to fit in.

I have homemade aloo paratha for lunch that day, one of my favorite foods. I watched my mother roll spiced potato and dough into thin, circular sheets the night before, every movement patient and deliberate. She let me help her make the last few, but mine were obviously amateur, bumpy instead of smooth, more paint-splatter shaped than round.

"What is that?" Taylor asks me when I open my lunch box. Her voice is curious, not very kind. She leans in closer, wrinkling her nose. "It looks weird."

Embarrassment crawls into my stomach. "It's called aloo paratha," I tell her in a tiny voice. "My mom made it."

She wrinkles her nose again, and her freckles stand out darker from the movement. "Looks gross."

A little heat rises in my cheeks. I want to tell her it doesn't taste gross, but I don't. I'm too embarrassed to say a word. The conversation moves on to another topic after a few short moments, but the shame still sticks there, thick and heavy. I realize I've found another reason I don't fit in here.

I don't bring Indian food to school again for years and years.

ii.

I hate speaking in Hindi and Marathi when people are around. I don't want to be Indian in public.

At home though, my parents always have me speak to them in honey and spice. Baba actually makes me repeat my words in Marathi every time I speak to him in English.

"Why?" I whine after one such moment. It's elementary school, just a few months after the Taylor incident, and I hate the terrible *weirdness* of the Indian syllables that roll off my tongue. "I only need to know English. I'm American." I don't say it, but it's implied: *Not like you.*

My words must hurt him, but he stands firm, and eventually, I repeat myself in Marathi.

iii.

When we were little, my older sister and I spent our weekends choreographing dances to Bollywood songs. Or rather, she choreographed, and I followed her lead. We would spend hours twirling our hands and shimmying our hips and mouthing lyrics we didn't fully understand.

I remember this when I'm in sixth grade, and my mother pushes me to join the Bhangra Club. Bhangra is a type of Indian dance, different from the Bollywood moves my sister and I spent our summers practicing, but it's reminiscent of old times all the same. Mamma wants me to participate, just like Aashna did when she was in middle school. I don't know how to say no to her, how to explain that I'm embarrassed, that I am insecure and care what people might think in a way Aashna never did, so in the end, I give in and join.

Our big performance is the talent show. It takes place during school, and all students attend. I wear salwar kameez and red lipstick and nervousness, and when I peek out through the

curtains to see the crowd, I spot my two best friends sitting in the front row. I tell myself to breathe, that they won't make fun. No one will make fun.

The boy I have a crush on is the MC for the talent show. He has chestnut-colored hair and dark chocolate eyes and I am as in love as an eleven year old can be. When he announces us, I walk onto the stage with all the confidence and poise I can manage.

The actual performance isn't too bad. The audience loves the exoticness of our costumes, the clacking of the wooden instruments, and I hear my friends clap and shout my name as we dance. I think I enjoy those five minutes, actually. It's just the moments after I hate.

Nate, the MC, approaches me once we finish. I'm sitting backstage, drinking a bottle of water, exhausted from the dancing. "That was fun to watch," he tells me.

I smile and force myself to speak; I always forget how to when he's around. "You think so?"

"Yeah," he says. Pauses, laughs a little. "A little weird, but entertaining." He says it matter-of-a-factly, nothing cruel in his tone, but his words stick in my mind, and it's all I can think about. Color flushes my cheeks because he's *right*, it is weird, and more than that, I'm weird for being a part of it.

I swallow hard and smile, like I'm not bothered, but thoughts are spiraling in my mind. I shouldn't have agreed when Mamma wanted me to join. I shouldn't have; I'm not like Aashna; I care what people think. I don't want to be weird. I want to be liked.

Sixth grade is the only year I'm in Bhangra Club. When my parents ask me why I quit, I don't know what to tell them. I think I recognize even then that it's not about the dance and it's

not about the boy; it's something bigger, something worse. The need to be like everyone else. Shame I can't get rid of. I want to unzip the skin they gave me.

iv.

Middle school passes on, and things at home start to change. Mamma and I fight constantly now. She is demanding, wants too much. I'm never good enough for her. My sharp mouth doesn't help things, either. Baba is the glue, the unlucky mediator, that keeps us from falling apart, holds us together.

When my mother is angry at me, and this is often, her careful English slips. There's a more obvious accent. Rounded vowels, forgotten *r*'s. Words squished together, off tempo. When I'm angry too, I'll point it out. Correct her pronunciation, make her feel stupid. It's cruel, another reminder of her otherness, and sickening guilt crawls into my stomach the moment after, when she falters in speech.

In a way, I'm projecting my shame onto her. Making her feel she should be embarrassed of her accent because I'm embarrassed of my culture. It's awful, wrong, and I don't know how to apologize for it, how to make it right, so I never do.

v.

One day, late in the winter of my freshman year, a boy tells me I look "exotic". He's handsome and tall with bright eyes and white skin, and for some reason, his opinion matters to me. "You're pretty for an Indian girl," he adds too, dimples cutting into his cheeks.

This is masked prejudice, not a compliment, but something like validation still flushes my cheeks. I give him a “thank you”, and it’s months before I regret saying it.

That’s the worst part for me. Not his words, but how I take them. For years, I let myself feel small because of the color of my skin. It took a boy to tell me there was some semblance of beauty to be found in my exoticism for me to feel worthy again, if only for a moment.

vi.

Spring rolls around. Soon, I see white girls like Taylor walking down the halls with henna-painted arms (“*I got it done at the fair!*”), talking of music festivals and bindis and cherry-picked pieces of the very culture they made fun of me for belonging to.

The sight makes me sick, but there’s a part of me that wonders, *If they like Indian things, why can’t I?*

I think that’s when I start to realize the blame doesn’t rest with them, it rests with me. Their closed minds and prejudices are meaningless in this. I’m the only one responsible for my shame.

The problem with remorse is that it comes after, when the wrong has been done and can’t be made right. I feel it once too much is already lost.

When I can’t read the Hindi of my childhood journal entries, swirly loops of writing in a language that doesn’t belong to me anymore, when my grandmother calls to speak to me in Marathi and I have to ask her to repeat herself, because the edges and corners and spice of her words sound foreign in my ears, *then*, I finally understand what I’ve done.

This is the price of my shame. If I push my culture away for long enough, I might actually lose it.

vii.

Diwali is on a Thursday this year. Mamma spends hours in the kitchen making my favorite snacks, most fried and dripping oil and carrying the promise of heart failure if overeaten.

On the day of, I pack some chakli in a ziploc bag and bring it with me to school. I share the snack with my friends during lunch, and most of them love it. But the inevitable also happens, and someone tells me how strange my food looks.

This time, I don't freeze up like I did all those years ago. I smile instead and tell her it tastes amazing.