

Sejal Shah

Kinship, Cousins, & Khichidi

For my mother and for Nina, Amy, Stephanie, Jen

SEVERAL YEARS AGO when my Italian boyfriend returned to Italy and to a girlfriend he had told me was an ex, I stopped eating. Even a steady diet of soap operas as a child had not spared me from a clichéd story line. I suffered in all of the usual ways. Why eat? I could spoon soup from cardboard containers where food = add hot water. If I had remembered to buy the containers. Suddenly, the prospect of going to the store overwhelmed me: all those lights, all those choices, brands, people. I lived on what was in my fridge and cabinets: orange juice, coffee, the occasional packet of ramen. I have always been thin, but that fall I dropped to under a hundred pounds. I am 5'6." In not a particularly graceful way, I fell apart.

I spent much of that year on my uncomfortable couch (older brother's old futon), watching an embarrassing number of *Party of Five* and *Beverly Hills 90210* reruns and uniformly uplifting stories on the Lifetime "Television for Women" series, *Intimate Portrait*. I sat through multiple episodes of *Behind the Music*—anyone else's fall from grace, subsequent despair, and triumphant recovery cheered me. My friends rallied and took turns showing up at my door with take out or dragging me out of my apartment to brunch. *We'll be over in half an hour*, they'd announce to my answering machine. *We know you're there*. Eating together, laughing and talking, helped me to realize that although I did miss the Italian, much of what I missed was companionship. Eventually I took up the cause; he wasn't going to call or come back, and I had a life to live. (You know: *One Life To Live*—even if I'm Hindu and supposedly have more.) I downed cans of coffee-flavored Ensure between meals, finally admitting to myself that it was too

tiring and too costly to choose not to eat. If I didn't eat—couldn't eat—I was not going to finish graduate school or write a book or even be able to finish a thought—let alone be able to repay the favor and cook for my friends.

I fell for the Italian partly because he cooked. He often called to see if I wanted to come over for dinner on his nights to cook for his host family. I lived around the corner from them, maybe four houses away. The meal I remember most: Chinese eggplants the color of a bruise, gleaming as if they had been waxed and buffed, sliced into circles the thickness of three silver dollars, sautéed with garlic and garnished with single leaves of basil, beautiful disks shining with olive oil. We polished our plates with slices of his host mother's homemade bread, punctuating food and our conversations with swallows of cold, slightly sour white wine. Nothing fancy, but I felt civilized. I was so happy with this food: it brought me back to a recent trip to Italy, the setting of a few of the happiest days of my life.

It seems to me now the most intimate kind of relationship and socializing: cooking and inviting others over to eat—although when I was younger, it just seemed to be about work: more and more work, always for women.

2.

I never wanted to learn how to cook. I saw what it did for my mother and all of the other aunts: who wants to spend their life in the kitchen, wiping oil splatters off the stove range; scouring the kitchen sink with Comet, hands in plastic yellow gloves; filling Corning dishes with leftovers?

Moms in the kitchen, making *chaa*. It was the 1980s: Everyone piled out of station wagons, those Cutlass Cruisers with fake wood paneling. We trooped into the house, shoes off without being told. Moms boiling milk, getting out the glass container with *ilaychi*, for *swaad*. The rising and falling of voices laughing-talking in Gujarati, different to my ears from English-on-the-phone, English-with-the-neighbors. Moms trying to find the *saansee* before the milk boils over, getting out the *naasto*: peanuts

and potato sticks and crisps, hot mix. They dispatched one or two of us to the backyard, out by where the scraggly grass grew at the far side of the yard to pluck a few mint leaves. The men slouched on the sofa and easy chairs, talking about whatever men talk about (Sports? Kids? Jobs at Xerox/Kodak? I never listened closely). I went to the Kids' Room: the basement or the family room, or wherever the other kids had stashed themselves or had been stashed. We sat on the floor for dinner, happily staining our hands with *cholé* and *batakaa ni shak* with *rotli*, sometimes throwing sweets at each other, *prasaad* on those Gita Sundays—*laadvaa*, *pendaa*, *barfi*. Then the girls are called into the kitchen for kitchen duty. The boys escaped to the TV: to the game (whatever game was on, it was understood that they had to watch it) or to the basement to play table tennis or pool or kickball, only occasionally saddled with watching the youngest of us. Who wouldn't want to be a boy then?

The women fought good-naturedly over who would wash the dishes, load the dishwasher, etc. I wanted to be in the living room, patting my stomach, chomping away on *dhaaran dhaar* and *valyaarie*, after dinner digestives and breath fresheners—the container passed companionably from person to person.

In a story I wrote about the Italian/Ensure/*Party of Five* period of my life, I recall a line: "Who will want to marry an Indian girl who hates to cook?" I didn't want to be anyone's passage to India. I didn't want to get married right away. I didn't want to be the woman in the kitchen, still making *rotlis* when the rest of the family is sitting down so that the *rotlis* are hot: first one to the father (husband), then to the son (brother), then to the daughter. I think the daughter was supposed to be up and helping. I wanted to sit down, legs stretched. I'm ashamed to admit it (my hardworking mother), but I wanted to slouch.

3.

I joined the Park Slope Food Co-op because I wanted to be able to walk out the door of my yoga studio (next door to the Co-op) and satisfy my craving for an overpriced Fresh Samantha

smoothie and a bar of Chocolve: dark chocolate with orange peel. I peered in at the women with good haircuts—their European clogs and handknit wool sweaters—at the mothers with babies who were different colors than themselves, at the many dreadlocked heads. The fresh-faced woman behind the desk ate tofu and noodles from a plastic container. The woman next to her worked on her needlepoint, chatted easily about kids and the neighborhood, and checked people in. You have to be a member to shop, they told me. The Co-op reminded me of Amherst, and although I had moved partly to live somewhere different and more diverse, I suppose we are drawn to what is familiar. I went to a membership meeting. Despite my irritation at the complicated work shifts and rules involved with joining the Co-op, I was secretly pleased at belonging to something in the middle of the largest city in which I'd ever lived.

My last year living in Western Massachusetts, I belonged to a CSA Farm (Community Supported Agriculture), splitting a share with friends who taught at Mount Holyoke. My vegan friend Michael, who composts religiously and grows some of his own food outside the Adirondack State Park remarked, *Everyone who joins a CSA says that it changes their relationship with food.* It did for me, as well. Some weeks I harvested more vegetables than I could possibly cook and knocked on neighbors' doors to offer an extra ear of corn or an acorn squash. I liked meeting more of my neighbors. I tried to figure out how to cook a long thin squash I had never before seen (glancing over them in the produce section of Stop & Shop), sautéed Swiss chard and collard greens, learned how to boil and mash turnips to prepare a side dish, something not unlike mashed potatoes.

© I wandered through the beds of peonies, sunflowers, fuchsia cosmos, and brown-eyed Susans at the farm greedily filling my arms, eating nearly all of the raspberries I gathered. I picked many different kinds of tomatoes and basil for a salad my friend Elliot had showed me how to make years ago, when those kinds of salads and fresh mozzarella cheese were exotic to me. They signified to me an Italophile academic culture that I wanted to be able to navigate. It was an American salad, something I would

not have learned at home. These were new words and adjectives: *extra virgin olive oil*, *balsamic vinegar*, *capers*, acquired after college, rolling carefully off my tongue, filed away under “intellectual,” “upper middle class,” “American.”

One summer at the local farmer’s market I remember stopping to talk to a young woman, her hair pushed back from her face with a blue cotton kerchief. She sat behind a table, slices of tomatoes in front of her, some purple, some yellow, some the standard red I recognized from the store. “Heirloom tomatoes,” she explained. Some of the tomatoes tasted like summer, sweet and tangy—completely unrelated to the cardboard tasting, plump, Christmas-red variety from the store. Still, I thought: *granola*. Who would possibly devote their Saturday mornings to educating the public about purple tomatoes? Only the fringe of food-eaters.

4.

My parents took us to Jackson Heights, Queens, and Gerard Street in Toronto for Indian groceries years before I ever set foot in India. The India I know lives in North America. I remember longing for an Indian section of the Upstate New York city I grew up in. I wanted a version of the Chinatowns my uncles took me to in San Francisco and Oakland whenever I visited them. It meant we existed. Sari shops and music, bootlegged videos of the latest Hindi film, the soundtrack blaring from outside the storefronts, grandfathers drinking tea and spitting tobacco on the sidewalk in front of their sons’ stores. Young girls asleep on a stack of Kashmiri rugs near the cash register, coconut-oiled braids flung to one side.

During the last couple of years I lived in Massachusetts, I found my family of friends through food. We ate together on a regular basis: Vietnamese *phở* or Jamaican red peas and rice from Springfield, *bi bim bop* at the Korean place on Route 9, South Indian food in Queens, *sambar-idli* with coconut and mint chutneys from the Haymarket in Northampton, asparagus and mushrooms marinated in soy sauce and garlic, cooked on the George

Foreman grill of good friends, eaten on their screened-in porch. Food became a language, a way of sharing experiences and talking, something more appealing to me than always going out for a drink. We lounged and lingered at each other's homes, we discussed food in great detail, we wanted seconds even after we were done with ice cream and tea. We extended Saturday night into Sunday and made brunch plans. I thought of the Gujarati Indian community I grew up in, where food was part of the point in getting together. Growing up with parents who don't drink, and who socialized around food, religion, conversation, I associated alcohol with American life. I associate food with family.

On my last visit to New York City before I moved there, some friends and I drove down to Flushing and then took the train to Jackson Heights. Flushing shocked me, reminding me briefly of the Shanghai I had visited fifteen years earlier. I hadn't known what an Asian/Asian American city it is. On the train between Flushing and Jackson Heights, the seats were filled with people who looked like us—various shades of brown, we marveled silently to each other. We ate our way through Chinese food, then South Indian food, tearing pieces of a paper-thin, buttery *dosa* filled with potatoes, and then *pani puri*: finally, Gujarati food. I loved being able to take my friends from Western Massachusetts to my food. Before driving back to Northampton, we ended up in a Malaysian restaurant, marveling at the mix of East Asian and South Asian food. We wanted to stay and stay, and talked about canceling our Friday appointments, calling in sick to work. I wanted to be able to eat the food of my childhood. I know it's easier to just learn how to make it than to live at a close proximity to Gerard Street, Jackson Heights, Edison, Waltham, my mother.

© On the way back to Route 91, crossing the Throg's Neck Bridge, we already began to reminisce about dumplings, various pieces of meat I don't want to remember as the only vegetarian in the group, savoring the new sensation of sucking up the tapioca balls in bubble tea, of being satiated, reveling in our stash of Bollywood DVDs and still pressing our finger tips lightly to our eyebrows. All of us had gotten our eyebrows threaded in Jackson Heights, on a break from eating. We had left the country without

a passport, and returned with expressions of perennial surprise stemming from somewhat severely, somewhat delicately arched eyebrows. We decided against *mehndi*, but I think we wanted some outside marker of this inside trip, something to match the spread of our stomachs, some physical articulation of the well being we felt, that lift and expansion in our hearts.

5.

The opportunity to move to NY came up unexpectedly and I jumped at it. I rented a room in a good friend's Brooklyn apartment, about eight blocks it turned out, from one of my cousins. I met these cousins four years ago in Bombay, where they had lived while Suketu worked on a nonfiction book about the city. The Mehtas are not a branch of the family I knew while growing up—as second/third cousins our paths crossed only at large family weddings, if at all. My closer relatives kept telling me I should meet him, the other fiction writer in the family. I was apprehensive and a little shy about meeting a relative by email and showing up at his apartment in India. I did it anyway. Suketu and his wife graciously hosted me for a couple of days. I still remember meeting them in the morning: *Hi*, they said. *Coffee?* Suketu made a spicy corn and mushroom dish for dinner that night. I still remember it, his cooking and chatting with me. He teased me about what a slow eater I am. It's something else that my relatives do—tease me.

I was sitting at Ozzie's, a coffee shop on 5th Avenue in Brooklyn across from my apartment, trying to write, when Suketu walked by. Having never lived near any of my extended family, it's the only time I've ever just "run into" one of them. Ozzie's, a cafe with lots of tables for writers to park themselves for hours with their laptops and cappuccinos, boasts one unbroken wall of windows adjacent to the sidewalk. We waved at each other in surprise, and Suketu came in and chatted. *Come over for dinner soon*, he said. *My in-laws arrive this week*. Lots of people say come over, and lots of people don't follow up. We all know how it is: life gets in the way. But Suketu did call and I did walk over

for dinner: delicious, spicy South Indian food that his mother-in-law had cooked. This is how I know we're related. I realize, in writing this, that kinship for me involves food.

One rainy afternoon when I was sick, Suketu came by with *khichidi*, a mix of yellow lentils and rice that my mother always made when we weren't feeling well. I had just been heating up instant tomato soup (another comfort food) when my cousin called. My cough, dramatic, phlegmy, inserted itself like static into our conversation, making it difficult to talk. *You sound miserable*, he said. *Yeah*, I said. *What can you do?* What kind of food would make you feel better? he asked. I thought about what my mom would make, food that seems too labor-intensive to me when I'm sick. *Khichidi* or *upama*, I guess. I'll bring some over later, he said. That's sweet of you to offer, but you don't have to do that. You can prevail upon your own family, but second cousins are under no obligation to do anything. No problem, he said. I'll just stop by on my way out—I'm meeting friends for dinner.

Khichidi delivery, Suketu said, when he buzzed the door. He presented me with a plastic bag holding a yogurt container filled with *khichidi*, and a small bottle of spicy garlic pickle—good for the taste, he said, and to chase the cold away. Underscoring family, proximity, a way of expressing caring. I was sitting talking with another writer friend from India and he said that he doesn't think that the word exists in American English: you are either a cousin or a sister, a cousin or a brother. But in Indian English (including what I grew up speaking), what you say is: cousin-brother, cousin-sister.

Suketu and I are distant enough relatives that our kinship has something to do with choice. We met as adults, share none of the childhood memories I associate with my first cousins. Suketu cooked up some *khichidi* that I didn't know how to make and brought it over. This is how, in some specific and fundamental way, I recognize that he's Indian, that I know that he's family. I know he would laugh at this, but it is true.

My cousin loves to cook. But if he were not feeling well some day, I would like to be able to bring over some food—though he happens to be married to a good cook himself and has a sister of

his own living nearby. That's not just what an Indian girl would do, it's what a cousin-friend does, what a cousin-sister would do. I'm leaving Brooklyn soon to return to the Pioneer Valley. I will remember that *khichidi* and garlic pickle. Will remember that I want to cook for others, to invite them to my house, to my apartment, to feed them. And isn't that what love is: feeding and being fed?

6.

After five years in The Land Of Mediocre Indian Food, my comfort food of choice is Chinese. I want sautéed greens and straw mushrooms; I want dragon skins: deep-fried tofu skins stuffed with vegetables and long, thin, sprouts from The Great Wall. It's a restaurant in Florence, Massachusetts, in a strip mall that reminds me of places near where I grew up: sad fluorescent lighting in the parking lot, a nondescript storefront sandwiched between a drug store and a liquor store. It's the best Chinese food in the area, away from the tourist-happy, storybook Main Street of Northampton. The Indian restaurants in the area left me hungry. I was disappointed after half-heartedly spooning lukewarm coconut soup at one, after paying one or two dollars for "papdum and condiments" (tamarind chutney, mango pickle, onion and tomato: really the equivalent of a basket of chips and salsa at a Mexican restaurant).

My friend Karen had me over for dinner a couple of years ago. *Nothing fancy*, she said, *I'll just throw a veggie burger on, and you can hang out with the kids and see John*. We sat down. The metal Indian spice tin (*duubo*) that is usually filled with round steel containers of *geeru*, *thanageera*, *erther*, *hing*, *meetu*, *murchu* instead had an equally colorful mix of American condiments: mayonnaise, ketchup, mustard, and was passed around at the table. My mother presented me with a *duubo* when I moved into my first apartment: a round stainless steel container, like a tin filled with Christmas cookies, except with smaller round containers inside with no lids: six around the edges and one in the middle. I could imagine my grandmother presenting a similar tin to my mother

when she got married and left to set up her own household—something in the gesture suggested this. If I feel around the edges of the *duubo*, I find my name engraved in Gujarati.

Like my mother, Karen grew up partially in Kenya. We are Indian through the diaspora, and each permutation, each immigration and variation interests me. She also grew up in New Hampshire, the daughter of Goan Kenyan immigrants who themselves grew up in Zanzibar. Karen has never been to India. I told Karen that her *duubo*, filled as it was with American “spices” was the perfect image for a book cover. How can we not adapt to the new country? I remember the feeling, visceral, jolting, and the laughter at the familiar and unfamiliar placed together in this way. All the familiar condiments and the familiar stainless steel container. Karen, the mother of two young kids, has an admirably practical manner. The visual combination of ketchup and *duubo* struck me as indelibly and particularly American.

7.

In the year I lived in New York, I never actually made it back to Jackson Heights; although I’ve been meaning to, it’s on my list. Park Slope isn’t known for its Indian food: when I don’t feel like cooking, I grab a veggie burger with chipotle mayonnaise on the side downstairs at Bonnie’s Grill, or a Baja Burrito from La Taqueria, on 7th Avenue.



Agha Shahid Ali, the wonderful Kashmiri American poet who lived in Amherst for many years, used to throw extensive dinner parties, often cooking for twenty or more. Shahid was the consummate host and cook. I once offered to help cook. *You American-born Indians*, he said, *are the worst cooks!* Not unlike many of his poems, this comment took my breath away. *Well*, I said weakly, *I can chop things.*

Throughout my childhood I thought baklava, a Greek dessert made with pastry dough and chopped nuts and honey, was Indian food because my mother made it. I remember helping my mother lay down the Filo pastry sheets in layers, using a brush (a special “food brush” my mother told me—), dunking the brush in a bowl of melted butter, drizzling, then painting the sheets until they shone, the color of light. I remember the sound of the brush, not unlike the ghee-filled *chumachee* across a stack of *rotlis*, a paper noise—quiet, soothing. The sound of her bangles falling back and forth down her arms.



All the food we were teased about while we were growing up has become chic now. At parties, people ask me if I know how to make naan, and remark in detail what usually works for them. One of my best friends from graduate school, a white guy, makes the best saag paneer I have ever eaten (sorry Mom).



Even now, I find it difficult to eat alone—it’s not how Indians eat, I think. It’s hard to enjoy food without talk. Eating is communal: what is food without sharing, without laughing, without pressing seconds on each other? I have had to learn to eat by myself in order to survive, but eating that way has always felt counterintuitive to me. Every day, the problem of what to make. Why can’t I take a pill and be done with it: all of the day’s nutrients and fat and carbohydrates and protein and calcium. More time to run around, read, go to book signings and parties. More time for the important things. I never found such a pill. Instead, I found that if I didn’t eat, I was simply too tired to walk from work to the parking lot. I had to rethink what the important things are.



So I’ll turn the TV on to *Friends* or *Entertainment Tonight*, and go back to the kitchen to cut up potatoes, onions, for cholé. Energy, for yoga class, for tomorrow’s run. To just be able to teach my

class well. Sometimes I'll talk on the phone. The background noise helps. I'm older now: I have to cook. I have to eat.

I'm leaving New York in a few weeks, but I plot my return. Like many of my Asian American friends, I'm hesitant to live in the Midwest or the South, the wrongly perceived homes, I know, of terrible Indian food. I'm returning to Massachusetts. Still: how can I say that I don't want to live in a place with mediocre Indian food? Unless I become a better cook—until I become a better cook—any place I am is suspect.

NOTE

I want to thank Kirit N. Shah—my uncle and the first writer in the family—for emailing me the standard dicitical and italicized transliterations of the several Gujarati words in this essay...even though I decided not to use many of them. The transliterations in the essay are mostly my own—a combination—neither completely standard nor “correct,” except to my eyes and sensibilities, and I think, to the piece.

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