Boiled Milk and Masala Skies

Escaping the slums was like entering a parallel universe. In many ways, I was. My world consisted of moldy floors and patches of fallen hair and beds of tangled wire and sheets. Suddenly I was given tiles and vaccines and foods that weren't rice. My bhai[1] and I were given a Papa with a kind smile who spoke Punjabi instead of Hindi, familiar and foreign. We were told his wife Emma was our mother and I cried at the color of her skin. I had never seen a white person before. Everything was alien, everyone was scary. I feared the mattress I was given would swallow me whole. I thought my nausea at new foods would never end. I missed the old because the new hurt.

After our adoption, our new family wanted to show us more of India than prisons for orphans and the slums we called home for the beginning of our lives. I had never been in a car before I met them. I would cry and puke and scream to be let out. I didn't know where they were taking me and I couldn't feel the dirt ground beneath my toes. The new foods they forced into me sloshed in my stomach and bubbled their way out. I began to be scared of my own body.

One day, after being in the van for three excruciating hours, I started sobbing and clawing at the seat beneath me. My bhai followed suit, always loyal. Papa sat in the front talking to the driver while his wife entertained her son. Papa's mom, from her seat beside me, finally snapped. Putting a finger up, anger in her eyes, Grandma said in Hindi, *If you don't stop crying, we will pull over and drop you off on the road.*

It felt like both a threat and opportunity. The road meant homeless and homeless meant the orphanage, the place with bars on the windows and demons disguised as Nuns. I feared them and I feared her. Despite this, I stopped crying. Vomit painted my teeth for the rest of the drive. My bhai held my hand until I fell asleep.

Grandma gave me gifts that I never could have imagined. Most were scary, foreign. I was afraid to reject them, scared she would reject me.

Ice cream was strange to me. I had never come across frozen food before. A green glob in a cup seemed like a trick, a test, something I had to earn. I sat obediently for the blazing sun to melt it down like curry before slurping it off the spoon, an item that carried my food better than my fingertips ever did. The metal was cold and tinged my food with silver. I enjoyed the new taste of sugar but missed the taste of my own fingertips. I drank the lukewarm liquid quietly and chewed the soggy pisata[2] that gathered at the bottom. Grandma berated me for playing around, for disrespecting her offering, which I didn't understand.

I was experiencing things that felt wrong.

Something about dairy was distressing to me. Cheese felt disgraceful. Cheese was mold, it swam in bacteria. Why would I consume something that had covered my walls?

Milk felt like theft. On her family farm in Punjab, grandma milked a cow and I asked why she was allowed to. Papa told me the cow was okay with it and I told him to ask again.

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[1] brother
[2] pistachios

Grandma snapped at him for indulging me and gave me a cup. I didn't want to drink something stolen because I knew what that felt like. I didn't ask to be adopted and the cow didn't ask to be touched. I brought her weeds and flowers plucked from the fields to apologize for my Grandma's crooked hands. Grandma scolded me for taking from the Earth. I didn't know how to say that I was trying to give back to it.

When my bhai and I got malaria, I was secretly happy. Papa and Emma's home wasn't India but mine was. Being in a hospital meant staying in India longer. But Papa had money so we got better and they bought tickets to America. When I got malaria the second time, I thought I was being punished for leaving. India would rather me die there than lose me. I was angry when the doctors won again. I wanted to become part of India.

Airplanes were worse than cars but I was given bags to puke in. My Grandma gave me dahi[3] to strengthen my health. I asked her what it was and reached for it with my hands. She hit my knuckles, thrusting a spoon towards me instead. She said it was curdled milk and I cried. She fed me dahi until I threw it back up.

Over weekends and school breaks Emma dropped me off at Grandma's house. She said it was because I was the only female grandchild so Grandma wanted to spend more time with me. I thought it was because she didn't like having me around.

Grandma didn't ask to take care of a child but she did anyway. She sat through *Bambi* nearly every weekend for two years, peering at the screen above her Sikh crosswords. Sometimes she braided my hair with black yarn, like she did with her own. Sometimes she twisted our hair into buns that bulged from the wool. *Make me look young*, she explained. She covered her head when we walked to the playground and she held my arm while I walked across balancing beams. I was too scared to ask to hold her hand. Whenever we came home, she would pour me a tall glass of milk and make me sit at the table until I finished it. Sometimes she gave me bowls of dahi instead. At the center of the dining table was a silver platter holding salt, paper, a container of sugar, and a tub of aam ka achar[4]. I wanted to pour that down my throat instead, let the preserved mango juice and hot peppered oil lather my tastebuds.

I knew what it was like to be hungry, to eat dry rice and drink air. Grandma knew this. She saw the dehydrated food and tiny sippy cups of dirty water that was given only at dinner. I knew she would never let me go hungry again. I didn't like the food but I knew not to be picky.

Her aging eyes studied my movements, watching my throat clench as I choked down the substance of another's body. I sent a prayer to the cows each time.

The glasses of milk began to increase. She wanted me to drink one with every meal so I did, but my disgust for it never went away. *Milk will cleanse skin,* my grandmother insisted. *Milk will pale you. Look, look how white I am*.

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[3] Yogurt
[4] Spicy pickled mango

I didn't understand milk so I didn't question it. I believed her but it scared me to drink it. She wanted me to pour something disgusting down my throat, hoping it would bubble in my stomach acid and seep through my skin. She wanted to purge me of my brownness.

Eventually she began to boil the milk, thinking it would help the taste. I didn't know why you would boil something that was cold. Why make it cold in the first place? Why was my melted ice cream wrong but her hot milk correct?

Like chai[5], she tried explaining, *but without chai.*

My skin didn't lighten, the flaws in her logic becoming too clear for her to ignore after years of milk diets. Grandma angrily moved on to lemon scrubs, placing me into the bathtub with a pile of halved lemons and salt. The lemons were the perfect sponge, capturing the crystals to deposit across my skin with sour juice. *Acid cleans,* she informed me, dragging the citrus down my dark knees until they glowed red. She recited Sikh prayers as she grated my skin, as if Vaheguru[6] could help polish away my melanin. I struggled to comprehend what was wrong with me. I spent the first four years of my life being terrified of anyone who wasn't brown, only for Grandma to spend the next seven trying to take my brownness away.

For my ninth birthday, Emma bought me a Bratz Doll. The dolls in America didn't look like me and part of me thought she wanted to take my brownness away, too. I asked Papa if she wished she had a white daughter. *You ask ridiculous questions*, he replied.

Grandma saw the Bratz and scoffed. After she visited her brother in India, she brought me back a doll in a Punjabi shalwar kameez[7]. It wasn't dark, but it looked more like me than the Bratz. A year later, she presented me a doll in a bridal lehenga choli[8]. *This will be you*, she told me. I don't know if she wanted me to have something that resembled me or if she wanted me to resemble it.

I didn't understand how someone could love me and hurt me. I didn't understand how someone could hurt me and not know it. I loved Grandma for her warmth, that was disguised in delicious meals and Indian soap operas and hated her for burning me with acids and bases.

When she gifted me Fair & Lovely[9] for my eleventh birthday, I wondered for the first time how her mother raised her. Did she lose her brownness too? Was brown equal to dirty? Did Grandma want me to be clean? Was it hate or fear?

I often forget that Grandma experienced the same culture shock as me. I viewed her as an enemy when she was a victim of the First World. It was easier to think of her as evil than acknowledge that she was displaced, that she sacrificed a life to give hers to others. I wanted to hate her for what she did to me because it seemed simpler than to face what she gave up for me.

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[5] Tea (masala chai is black tea boiled with water, milk, and spices)
[6] God
[7] Traditional outfit consisting of a trouser (shalwar), a tunic (kameez), and a scarf (dupatta)
[8] Tradition attire consisting of a long, ankle length embroidered skirt (lehenga) and a blouse (choli) that exposes your midriff
[9] Skin bleaching cream

It's embarrassing how fast the smokescreen cleared after asking her about her old life. Pre-America. She told me stories of chopping up onions carefully balanced on her knees and chasing headless chickens around on roofs. It must have been strange to catch your dinner, watch it paint your walls with its DNA. *Family is hungry*, she shrugged.

She told me that America is too quiet. India is loud with people and America is loud with machines and it makes her lonely. She fills her house with Sikh prayers and masala chai but there's a staleness that she can never cover up.

Grandma told me about her husband, who died just months before our adoption. She told me about being fearful of an arranged marriage, how hesitancy blossomed into love. She told me about cooking for him, caring for him, working three jobs to feed him and their three sons after he got sick. She worked graveyard shifts at a donut shop in London, kneading dough and pretending it was roti[10]. The kids she took care of at the daycare loved how she always smelled of sugar. She told me it made her happy that it disguised the smell of curry. Papa and his brothers would get beat up for being foreigners while walking to school. She told me how she purposefully packed donuts in their lunches to erase their identity. They looked Indian, but they smelled English. That was survival.

Her husband dropped from 185 to 125 pounds. *Heart disease*, my aunt told me, because grandma couldn't utter the words. *How cruel to damage such a kind heart*. By this point, they had settled down in California, London no longer able to offer the American Dream.

When he finally lay in a hospital bed, the waiting game began. Grandma struggled with Vaheguru during this time.

There is a Vaheguru, but he don't tell us when we die. We know what we want, we might know how we will die, but we don't know when we start to die. The doctors don't know either. How could they? my grandma asked. *They aren't Vaheguru. They say one hour, maybe two. But a day goes by, and another and another.*

Outside the hospital, Papa was preparing for his wedding. He was the first in the family to not have an arranged marriage, and my grandmother was angry he chose to marry a white woman. The fact that they celebrated love while she was losing hers made it worse. Her husband encouraged her to attend Papa and Emma's wedding, so she went with a change of clothes and went right back to the hospital after.

I asked Grandma if anyone was there to take care of her. No one should grieve alone, or fear grief alone. She nodded, tracing the gold wedding ring that still adorned her finger. Her brother, who worked eighty hours a week two hours away, told her*, I don't know how, but I will come.* He herded the rest of the family for her, knowing she wouldn't reach out. Her sister brought a stack of roti and saag[11] at one in the morning and filled the waiting room with the smells of India. Papa and Emma joined too, spending their honeymoon crying into cold chai and picking apart roti over hymns. Two days before her husband died, there were fifty people at the hospital praying for him.

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[10] Thin, round flatbread

[11] Vegetable dish typically made by cooking down spinach or another leafy green

I asked Grandma if we could make saag. I didn't know her husband but I needed to honor him. His memory was shadowed by my adoption. I needed to thank him for his sacrifice, apologize for his loss. Part of me needed to honor her, too. I met her when she was still in the second stage of grief, my adoption delayed her chance to mourn.

Her hand patted my shoulder and she nodded. We aren't ones to hug, but I could feel the weight of her gratitude piercing through her fingerprints.

She talked about laundry as I chopped up garlic and spinach.

Everybody laundry, I have to do all. Yesterday when I try putting in the clothes, the machine breaks. I use it so much it stops. I put so much it stops. It's just like our body. If you put so much and load it up, you will not survive.

I wondered how much pain she's held, how much laundry she's folded for others and how much is wrinkled and piled of hers. I let my garlic hands fold the roti and hoped that was enough.

When I got surgery in high school, Grandma insisted on being there. I tried arguing but it was futile. I didn't want her to take up more space in a hospital but that's who she was. Her grandchild was going to get knocked out and cut into and she wasn't going to let that happen without her there.

She didn't get wrinkles until my father died, Papa told me the morning of the surgery.

Will I give her more?

Probably.

Grandma didn't have a phone. Technology wasn't a part of her life before America. The absence of it was normal. She sat silently on BART to the hospital with nothing but her purse buckles to keep her hands busy. She gave me a pat on the calf before I was wheeled away and then sat in the waiting room alone. American magazines couldn't offer her anything and the cafeteria didn't have her masala chai. All she had was a cushioned chair and a ticking watch.

I felt guilt as the doctors put me under. When I woke up, it was to her blurry face and a body of pain. After three doses of meds, the nurse handed me my clothes and said recovery is done at home. My anesthetic limbs couldn't hold the material so Grandma dressed me, hooking my bra as the nurse held me up and pulling sweats over my goosebumped legs. My foggy brain couldn't process embarrassment, but it was overwhelmed with shame. This was worse than her doing my laundry.

High off painkillers, I pictured her husband. I wondered how many times she sat besides his bed, adjusting his morphine and chatting with nurses. I wondered how many times she undressed and dressed him, if she stole heated blankets from doctors and piled them on him, leaving herself exposed to the hospital air. I wondered if hospitals haunt her but her love for me took precedence.

My therapist said I'm too gracious. She doesn't think Grandma deserved my affection and that confused me. *There were good parts*, I insisted.

Was acceptance a survival mechanism? she asked. *If you wanted, could you have escaped her?*

I told her of course not. She's our foundation. *If we lose her, the family will crumble.*

The family did crumble, though, even with our strong leader. When I think back to those times, when my adopted parents were arrested for domestic disputes, the legal battles and fights for custody and child support, I remember Grandma being integral to my survival.

Do you forgive her? my therapist asked.

No.

Then why the compassion?

I don't hate her anymore. But I fear that one day she'll find out I did.

Grandma never understood my writing career. Art fields are reserved for white people, they aren't sufficient for supporting a family, especially not an immigrant one. Part of me is glad for this because I don't have the strength to explain my memoir to her. She has no idea that I hated her half of my life and I don't want her to. When I visited her last Thanksgiving, I feared she could look through me, see the secrets I was exposing, the open wounds that don't belong to just me. She's the last person I ever want to hurt.

My family crumbled but Grandma held my bhai and me up. She housed us while our parents slept in jail cells, she hosted holidays so we always had a warm home to be in while our parents celebrated on their own, in love with the new freedom divorce gave them. She taught me to cook, giving my hands something to do that wasn't punching walls or scratching arms. She made sure I never went hungry. She was stability when all I felt were earthquakes.

Despite this, my therapist said, *You have the right to hate her. She was stability, but she wasn't safety.*

I had a habit of cherry picking, even in our sessions. I am selective with the wrongs of the past but erase the now. I don't know if I have the right to hate her but my therapist said I do. She provided me a home when I needed it, but she let the villains in my life into that home. She chose her own before me, she put me in danger.

Part of me wants to hate her, but I don't know what hating her means anymore. I never had grandparents, never understood the role they played in people's lives. I had a mom and father before Emma and Papa but Grandma was her own entity. The status of grandmother was her own creation, one that I desperately latched onto. She kept me connected to my roots. She was from a different state of India but her India was something. I lost everything, but I had her, an extension of my country.

She was the closest thing to home I had. I think I was the closest thing to legacy that she had.

Curry's like the sky. Look, she pointed at some floating salt granulates, *look, stars*.

The jeera[12] and adarak[13] reminded me of the ash in Delhi. The air that filled my lungs with smoke, that distorted the city and saturated buildings. My insides are painted with the dust

[12] Cumin
[13] Ginger

and smog, a hue that I carry with me, that I refuse to forget as I breathe in America's industrialized air. My grandma's house smelled of jeera and dalchini[14] and Linen Sky Febreze Air Freshener and the garage faintly smelled of basketball rubber.

It wasn't always enough. She gave me a piece of India but being with her was like living through postcards. I craved the air of the slums, festered with animal remains and polluted waters and masala and rose petals. I never understood how such dangerous things could bring me such comfort, but I knew they did.

I asked Grandma where she prefers to breathe.

Home, she replied. *I always remember the smell of home*.

[14] Cinnamon