

Tender Stoves

written by Guest Contributor | October 12, 2020



“Eat me up, my love, or else I’m going to eat you up. Fear of eating, fear of the edible, fear on the part of the one of them who feels loved, desired, who wants to be loved, desired, who desires to be desired, who knows there is no greater proof of love than the other’s appetite [...]”

– Helene Cixous, “The Love of the Wolf”

Gaya / Bombay / Baqarkhani

My grandmother was a scrupulous even if an accidental matriarch. She was a 5th grade drop-out who raised 5 kids (and 2 cows, 4 dogs, 6 chickens apart from fostering a snake and a monkey) almost alone. My grandfather was frequently transferred from one difficult district to another and received regular death threats as one of the perks of his job as a government employee working for farmers’ welfare. Born in pre-Independence India, she was married off at the raw age of 14 as was customary in certain parts of the rural hinterland. Child brides were not uncommon then; they are not uncommon now either. As a motherless child who was raised by her own grandmother, she was an unwilling transplant to a minor city where my grandfather’s family lived. When I say city, I obviously mean a hamlet on steroids. Her father was an earnest farmer and not much is known about her mother; an immigrant who died during childbirth. What she remembered vividly of her own childhood were often vignettes from her grandmother’s frugality in the kitchen trying to feed an extended family of 14 on a pittance. Growing up as further as can be from the locus of a slowly developing urban *mise en scène* in a newly freed country, she had little understanding of her own freedom. An age of colonization had ended for the country as a whole but caste system within her own village was still pervasive. Apart from that, when she hit her teens, she was carted off to my grandfather’s family after marriage, as if chattel. Again, not unusual for most women of her age then and for a lot of them now as well. In stories to me, she would narrate how people with her last name were forbidden from drawing water from marked wells. How they weren’t ‘allowed’ to buy, grow or even cook certain vegetables. Hers was a tribe of landless labourers who worked on other people’s farms and fields. Ironically, they grew produce that they were prohibited from eating. She would never fail to mention how, historically, members of her community were lapsed

cultivators known for their ability to till fallow lands often on the outskirts of villages. They had little choice except to make the barren spawning through patience and painstaking care. Here they nurtured more widely useful produce like potatoes, melons, fine grains and even tobacco.

In a culturally mixed landscape, Hindu folk of her caste would intermingle and assimilate with Muslim gentry who afforded them work and dignity thereby extending their braided existence to worshipping at Islamic shrines even. She remembered not being able to buy meat and a slightly well-off Muslim neighbor would let her sneak in for chicken curry or mutton and rice once a week right up to her teens.

Food was meagre on most days except during days of reverence when the moneyed gobs tossed out food packets as alms hoping to accrue some karmic currency in return. Long after she was married and had reached a station in life where the bleakness of her childhood no longer cast its noonday shadow, she would still ration her own meals with the exactness of a self-punishing monk. She would cook large meals for her children but ate last and the least. When her elder son, The Doctor (and this was always capitalized in her mind), who'd moved to the US visited her during vacations, she would allow herself grander condiments and shinier china that was otherwise mostly dedicated to religious festivities. Holi meant meticulous lamb marinade festooned with cloves, cinnamon and cardamom stocked in clandestine biscuit tins draped under her *tussar* silks or hidden behind Camay soap pyramids in her beloved Godrej cupboard. That cupboard held more secrets than the closet guarding the doorway to Narnia. My mother remarks that she started to forgive herself for some selective pleasures after I was born. She passed on these little culinary delights to me through a sort of emotional osmosis as she raised me alone while my mother worked two jobs. The chief among these little delights was the love for an Afghan styled flatbread called *baqarkhani* that accompanied her daily tea.

After my birth, her morning tea became an unrushed ceremony of sorts that occurred before the household was thrown into its daily domestic bedlam. She would go for a walk, fetch milk from a cowshed some distance away while gathering a small jute basket of frangipani strewn along the path. She'd make tea for herself and my mother while my mother readied herself for the school where she taught. The mother-daughter pair had several disagreements that included my mother marrying and subsequently divorcing my Romani father, who was often labeled an intruder from another country; the definitive foreigner who had no business leaving her eldest daughter a single mother at 23. However, those disagreements were parked for an hour every morning as our three generations sat on the floor in her bedroom passing around a bread basket filled with the most delicious slices sweetened with saffron-soaked molasses and ginger tea. That hour was akin a short-stay peace treaty where each side had chosen to part with their arms briefly. There were no pointed questions about how would my mum raise me alone or would my grandfather try to nudge a rifle's barrel into my father's chest were he ever to come asking for visitation rights again. Just the air shuffling the sounds of languid sips and a map of crumbs left behind in the plate.

Tai O / Hong Kong / Green Beans / Chiu Chow dumplings

In her essay, 'Hunger Makes Me', Jess Zimmerman's writes a searing paragraph—

"The secret to satiation, to satisfaction, was not to meet or even acknowledge your needs, but to curtail them. We learn the same lesson about our emotional hunger: Want less, and you will always have enough."

Violence both dilutes and amplifies remembrance at the same time. In its wake, I had learned how to fold within myself. It equaled the practice of a skilled pastry chef tucking in corners within corners, hiding the gooey ooze of cherry jam inside neat folds of well-kneaded dough. It is an exacting antithesis. I don't remember when love and abuse coalesced but I do have some anemic recollections about the hook of those moments where it was slowly becoming apparent that I was being hung out for damage. Francis Weller wrote something along the lines that grief is not a problem to be solved or a condition to be medicated but a deep encounter. I concur except my fiercest encounters with grief often have come with their own medicinal recipes. But, before the decline into the wound, there were streets, sunsets and Sichuan chicken salted by copious tears.

I arrived in Hong Kong with a skintight schedule, a collaboratively dotted digital map and some fragile vestige of hope about saving our frayed relationship. He arrived a day later and it was only much later after leaving him, I could finally admit to myself that I had enjoyed the city so much more before his arrival. He compulsively governed the activities he had lined up for us. He wanted to dissolve into the furthest exteriorities, I just wanted a leisurely yum cha at Tim Ho Wan. His whiteness deemed me too "third world" for my clichéd dreams. I wanted the fragile softness of har gow, sticky buns and pan-friend turnip cakes. He relented and we went even as we were fully eclipsed by the crowds outside. Families laughed and chatted around us. There was a sense of "home" which is odd for someone like me to register since I have never really experienced a "home". As he toggled between apps planning the future of our stay, I caught quick glances at the generous spreads laid out on tiny tables around us. He got up mumbling something about a bad cellphone network and stepped outside for a bit. Just as he did, an older gentleman leaned in and recommended I try Chiu Chow dumplings.

"Very different. Very nice. Good vegetable. Very safe."

Perhaps, he'd overheard him mocking my allergies with red meat.

The bespectacled 'recommendation' uncle was with a family of 4 or 5 and every few minutes he would say something to them that would make the women and the teens burst into peals of laughter. That is what tugged at me—the open, unafraid and almost immaculate glee on their faces as they shared anecdotes and plates.

I ordered some Chiu Chow dumplings. He came back in and thought it was a bad idea because they were not 'highly recommended' in the review he had read. I stayed my ground and was mildly amused that the other name for these sumptuous pillows stuffed with vegetables and chopped peanuts was "fun kor". Something ought to be fun on a vacation. They are especially pleasing to those who can't or don't eat meat. He dismissed them as too similar to the

har gow.

“What is the point of this”

“Familiarity. Simplicity.”

Familiarity is a form of safety, I suppose. I took my time wiping the last of Puning bean sauce off the plate. The flavours erupted unhurriedly and I refused to let his impatience with my delay disrupt the arc of my joy. Of course, the mid-morning pace had tarried. Of course, I had thrown a wrench, or in this case a couple of chopsticks, in his precise plan for the day. Of course, I was to be blamed for whatever bus, boat, train we would miss next.

I was emboldened enough to decline the remaining leg of his planned outing and insisted we detour to a small fishing village recommended by N, a local resident poet and mistress of cats. It was her ancestral village. So, we went to Tai Ho because N said the sunset at the rim of the coast was a discarnate blooming of light and water. Somewhere in between the arrival and the sunset, his moods had switched and I was reimagined again as his dartboard. His words stabbed hard. We were in public so his hands stayed to himself but on the bus back, he promised to hit me once we were indoors. There were 5 other people on that bus. No one heard. No one knew. They were all backpacking students. They passed around a packet of chips and the hummed a song by a K-pop group I somewhat knew.

Before that, as Frank Stanford would say, rain came like a hitchhiker. In the small fishing village, the rain decided to give me company through my own tears as if to help camouflage my embarrassment at being alive.

A rickety house was turned into a makeshift restaurant. We sat and I tried to reason with him about his behavior or that he needed help because I couldn't take the abuse anymore. In this empty eatery, two men who took turns cooking and serving, watched over me from a respectful distance. My head bowed for most of the conversation, I eventually raised my gaze to look away from him. It was met with a gentle smile from the owner/server who raised a plate of green beans as if to signal—I see you. You are seen.

What I would like to remember about that evening now is the delectable hint of peppercorns and soy sauce spread across the crunchiness of beans. Then the hot and sour noodles served with a conversation in broken English that was coded to let me know that I was not alone or unsafe. At least till I was tucked within the ribcage of this little greasy spoon.

On the bus back to the city's heart, I sat separately from him; clutching in my hand a packet of leftovers from a sparse meal. The heat from the grub dying out against my chest. My mind scalded by the question—how long and how far could one go only on scraps?

Demeter—the Greek goddess of harvest and fecundity—is said to have ruled over cycles of life and death as well. Among her children is Chiron, often referred to as “The Wounded Healer” —a centaur who, unlike his brethren, is a sophist of sorts. He teaches others and is enriched with medicinal knowledge.

My father was a cook, a chef on days when he had a better grasp on his self-worth. My father, a man whose inheritance to me was a strain of treatment-resistant depression. A man who loved to plan feasts for others but often forgot to eat himself. A man who wordlessly disappeared one day when he got too tired of folding within himself. The irony of being a wounded healer born to a figure symbolic of nurture is never lost on me: a psychologist who fights trauma and depression within and outside every day. I have had to reclaim the act of eating as resistance. As thriving beyond the shifting goalposts of survival because I have always been scattered thin at the threshold of existing—of trusting that I would always have a roof over my head, of believing I was worthy of unconditional love, of knowing intimately the kind of food that is more than scraps or crumbs.

When I slip into the fathomless pits of depression, the first red flag is the disappearance of my appetite. There are days when boiled potatoes sit on the countertop like bloated corpses and the whiff of fresh mint leaves dies out on the cutting board. The shamrock green of spinach turns to a moldy eyesore and rots slowly. I am unable to make myself a simple meal. I am unable to hold on to the memory of tastes and smells that have hand-crafted my personal history.

When I swim out of a crashing wave, my first instinct is to cook. To feel alive in the small shell of my kitchen as my kingdom of one. On nights—technically 3 am is early morning—I will suddenly rise from under a swamp of blankets to make a bowl of soba noodles with an elegant garnish because that is how I return to a more sacred awareness of myself.

In 'Pilgrim at Tinker Creek', Anne Dillard mesmerizes the consciousness—

"Something broke and something opened. I filled up like a new wineskin. I breathed an air like light; I saw a light like water. I was the lip of the fountain the creek filled forever; I was ether, the leaf in the zephyr; I was fleshflake, feather, bone."

I am godless by instinct, but I believe we are surrounded by a kind of compassion we often don't perceive in its fullness. I feel it best when a meal is made and shared. It is both prayer and pleasure to know how to reclaim an appetite. We are what we eat, they say. I extend it further—we should eat what we want to become. And I have eaten small morsels of happiness at precisely those times where everything around me wanted to starve me of the possibility that another season of harvest was pending.



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