

The Lesson in Dhansak

Clip-clap, splosh and flop as my 1950's Clarks shoes hit the cobbled street, trickling wet-grey with morning rain. We walk, all three. I swing in the middle, attached like an appendage to my Father and Uncle. I am that flesh-link between older and younger brother.

Little brown monkey. That's what they call me at school, when innocent cruelty burgeons in the playground. But I don't mind. I am rich with who I am and shine like gold with innocent smiles and playfulness as I remember my father's advice.

"Water off a duck's back. Sticks and stones will break your bones, but names will never hurt you. These are your daily mantras."

He reads Rudyard Kipling to me and says, "If you had been a boy, I would have called you Kim." He tells stories of his childhood and youth, shows photos with crinkly edges, of the black and white Blue Train, steaming through the Nilgiri Hills. One of him, standing in front of the Taj Mahal. He looks young and eager, as if his youth holds no sticks or stones ...as yet.

My father says my Grandmother loves us all, but she won't leave her tea plantation or the Parsee orphan she has adopted and has to bring him up. Another one and that makes nine; nine children. A wondrously large number of brothers and sisters, all depicted in the black, white and greyness of colourless paper that arrives in folded blue aerogram envelopes. Eagerly awaited fragile containers of news and anecdotes, that fall in gentle spirals, like a shower of silver eucalyptus tree leaves over our family days.

My mind wanders into the mysterious labyrinths of a child's thoughts and I hear the clip clap of cobbles talking to me from under my heels. Father and Uncle hold my hands tight as we climb the incline of this narrow Bristol street. How old am I? Seven or eight? Age is irrelevant at this moment in my life. I can only think of my Uncle's wedding in a few days' time and how excited I am at being a bridesmaid. I'm proud of my brand new white Clarks shoes and take care not to scuff them on the uneven cobbles.

We pass each immigrant family's home, up the hill, along rows of shabby terraced houses. Silence and subdued sadness pervade, each house displaying the same drabness, the same conformity of stacked red bricks. Prison red, a reminder of the Home Country, where rioters ended in painful squalor. Doors are closed against the damp, windows sparkle in a determined effort to maintain dignity in this not so foreign land. A few are draped in brightly coloured silks: a last defiance, a show of identity. Others reflect back at us, empty like vacant eyes. I am oblivious to their hidden pain as I swing, little brown monkey.

We continue up the narrow streets, towards Auntie-Ji's shop where my Uncle will collect spices, vegetables and provisions for the wedding meal. Auntie-Ji is not really my Auntie, but my Uncle's Aunt-By-Future-Marriage. Complicated for my childish brain but she is family, that much I do know, part of that extended network of relations so essential to Anglo-Indian life in 1950's Britain. I was about to discover my cultural difference and the reason behind my school friends' jibes and chants.

Father explains carefully about adding 'Ji' when addressing my elders, a sign of respect. He says no shouting; instead, a voice soft like wet mist on tea plantations.

"Your voice is a snake," he explains. "She lies coiled under a tea bush and is quiet, or slips gently, rustling the undergrowth as she slithers through plantations and eucalyptus forests. But," here his voice becomes stern, "when the cobra rises to strike, her hiss and fangs will frighten and kill. The victim's death is painful. Remember the power of your voice when you talk to people."

I will be the rustling cobra at this Anglo-Indian wedding where I will meet, greet and be presented to many people from the Home Country. They are my family now, a large sprawling generation-filled mangrove tree, Indian roots spreading from their feet, crossing the oceans to where they left and lost everything after Independence. Generations' memories locked in crinkly-edged paper that comes with the flutter of blue aerogram envelopes tainted on their journey by ink-stained fingerprints. Precious word-blue jewels defiled by lack of care and respect.

We enter Auntie-Ji's shop. It is old and dark. The wooden floor is immaculately clean, apart from where some spices have taken on a mind of their own and fallen, creating ingrained stains of yellow, orange and red. It is my first entrance into this closed, pungent world of my Parsi ancestors. Jute sacks filled with rice and unfamiliar fruit and vegetables lie against the walls. The counter is laden with brown paper bags of spices and trays of pastries and sweets.

My father approaches the counter and introduces me to a sari-clad woman towering behind the high wooden edifice.

"Auntie-Ji, here is my daughter."

I curtsy. She laughs. The shop customers laugh. I smile. Father is proud. Warmth surges inside me at this welcome and acceptance, as if I belong here amongst the vibrant odours enveloping me like a soft, olfactory pashmina.

The shop is a meeting hub for the community, where the best *lassis* in Bristol are served, or so the customers say. Gossip and memories of the Home Country are bandied about in spice-scented air. The lilting sounds softly entwine themselves around us, like a clinging mist of emotions. Sari-clad women and some younger girls in western dress stand around in clusters, commiserating tut-tuts accompany genuine sorrow at tragic events. Joyful laughs and tears flow when births and marriages are announced.

“Did you hear about Mrs Engineer’s son? He died in the riots when they took his business away.” The tut-tuts rise gently into the dusty air, mingling into a human masala, another ingredient in life’s cooking pot.

Old and older men sit on chairs, smoking *beedis* and drinking *lassis*. They wear unfashionable suits that have stood on Indian platforms and seen countless trains go by with clockwork precision. Some suits have slouched an eternity over Raj accountancy books, leaving their owners stooped, as old men are from carrying burdens all their lives. They are the formerly once-valued employees of the great Empire, greasing and oiling the many cogs of the colonial giant’s economic machine, toiling tirelessly out of loyalty and devotion to their King.

Others wear traditional clothes, defiant in their newfound cultural ownership, painful nostalgia hugging brown skins that have shed Waziristan and Afghan blood or have sweated in Burmese jungle battles. Ex-British Indian Army soldiers, like my Father, but these are too old and cast aside when the services were disbanded at India’ Independence. Betrayal’s bitterness hangs around them as moustaches twirl between nicotine-stained fingers and the stabbing pain of old battle wounds are constant reminders.

“You have brought her up well, Thomas. Little girl, would you like *jalebi* or *barfi*?” asks Auntie-Ji.

“It’s her first time,” says my Father. “She doesn’t know anything yet. There’s nothing Indian in Salisbury. May I take her around the shop and show her things, Auntie-Ji?”

“Of course you can, Thomas. We will start making up the packages for the wedding while you show your little one some of Home.”

My uncle remains at the counter as Father takes my hand and leads me first to the line of jute sacks. He shows me unfamiliar fruit and vegetables that fill me with wonder. Mangoes send up their sweet aroma. It will cling to my memory for many years to come. We move to the large brown bags. Different combinations of spices and masala exhale threads of odours that weave themselves into the air like a brightly woven silk sari. Mangoes and masala enchant me; transport my mind to new and exciting horizons. I dream of elephants in tea

plantations; of the Blue Train in the black-and-white photo now bright with colour; I hear the locomotive's groan and smell the scent of burnt coal and smoke; words from The Jungle Book spring to life from the paper, I feel foliage fronds touch my skin; I hear the *bulbuls'* chorus and peacock cries accompany *muntjacs* barking from deep within the forests. I tremble with the physical sense of belonging to the surrounding world.

"Life is like *dhansak*," my Father says. I turn my attention to him and listen carefully, knowing he will explain this new word.

"Dhansak is our Parsee dish. We came from Persia to India a long time ago and brought the dish with us. *Dhansak* must have the four tastes of life: salty, sour, bitter and most important of all, sweetness. Now, lick your finger and dip it in here."

I'm not supposed to lick my fingers or stick out my tongue, but I do as he asks and lower it into a bag of brownish granules. They glitter like yellow diamonds on my finger.

"Now taste and tell me what it is," my Father says.

"Salt!" I exclaim. I have always seen salt as a fine powder so I'm surprised. The strong flavour fills my mouth.

My Father takes what looks like a green lemon from one of the sacks. He cuts into it with his penknife, just enough to let the juice trickle. It is a lime, the first one I have seen. He lets a few drops fall into my upturned mouth and I jerk back, grimacing.

"So? What is it?" he asks.

"Sour," I manage to say as the juice rasps my mouth. Then salt comes through the sourness and together, they become palatable. I beam, surprised. "I can taste the salt as well!"

"Good. Now the bitter." He moves to a large paper bag on the counter. It holds ochre-coloured, irregular grains. "Try this. It's *methi*, fenugreek."

I take a few grains, pop them into my mouth and chew. Bitterness invades my taste buds. I wince. Then the salt and sour lime infiltrate the bitterness. It is pleasant, the flavours blend, each one taking the strength out of the others' characteristics. I smile again as I begin to understand what my Father is trying to show me.

"Thomas, what on earth are doing to that poor girl?" Auntie-Ji calls over from behind the laden counter. "Lyndi, come here, little girl. Your father is torturing you!" she exclaims. My Father grins.

"*Dhansak*, Auntie-Ji, she must know. So please, now give her the sweetness." He is laughing as she hands me a piece of jalebi. Sticky rose-water and honey syrup drizzle down my fingers as I bite into the orange pastry. Sweetness runs into my mouth and mingles with the salt, the sour and the bitter.

“And now. What is the taste?” he queries.

Each element has combined to create a balance of flavours on my palate. Sweetness has catalysed them, reuniting the disparate into one, transforming each taste into something complimentary, entire.

“*Dhansak*,” I say. I understand.

The sari-ladies look on affectionately. They laugh discreetly, elegant hands raised before their mouths, as is their way. The men, old and older, smile benignly with approval from chairs floating in a blue *beedi* haze. My father is full of pride and stands straight amongst them.

Then he kneels and gently takes my hands in his.

“Lyndi,” he says, “Life is like *dhansak*, never forget that. There will always be the salt, the sour, the bitter and then the sweetness. But remember that it’s the sweetness that brings them together and one cannot do without the other in life.”

My Father died when I was fifteen. This young and eager man had seen the salt, the sour, the bitter at such an early age. But he accepted it all in the knowledge that sweetness would always come and life would taste of *dhansak* again. Salt would lose saltiness; sour would soften; bitter would linger as an afterthought on the palate and in memories.

Today, as I open the spice drawer to prepare *dhansak*, those images return, the pungency and strength of each spice odour teasing out the threads from my silk sari of memories. As I bend over the pan, as I grind spices together in the mortar, as I add the masala to softened onions, then add the salt, the lime, the fenugreek and finally sweet mango, I hear his words. I feel the brightness of those soft voices enveloping me with a spice-sack lilt of aromas. I smell the blue *beedi* haze and see the worn suits beneath tired faces who smile. They and my father are here by my side as their warmth infuses spice-blood into my world.

I remember mangoes and masala, I remember the lesson in *dhansak*. I remember them all. They are within me and I am them.