



Dahl

by Lasantha Rodrigo

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It was dark when Arjun got into his brother-in-law's turquoise van with two heavy suitcases. Sparrows began chirping as early morning sunrays filtered through the canopy of leaves on either side of the road. For a tropical island, the morning was unusually cold, and the midnight blue backpack still on his back felt, all of sudden, heavier than when he bade adieu to Mulberry Street that was home for nearly two decades. He was going to miss the morning scent of dew on jasmines. As the vehicle drove away from his frosted buttermilk home, the figure of his waving Mom occupied his peripheral vision long after Mulberry Street was a thing of the past. When Arjun boarded the Sri Lankan Airlines plane with twenty three dollars in his worn-out leather wallet and Mom's sad smile imprinted on his mind, he instinctively tried to wipe away tear trails that had not dried up. He knew they clung to the brownness of his skin.

That was eight years ago, and his circumstances were far from what he envisioned them to be. He lay on a lone, white bed in the middle of the United States - the Midwest, the Broadway attraction a distant dream slipped from his grasp for good. There was a nurse, coloring her nails a peachy pink, somewhere in the kitchen. And Brad was still his, one of the few sureties in Arjun's life. All of a sudden after all these years, Arjun couldn't bear the physical distance from Mom, golden dunes and cerulean waves of the Indian Ocean whirling in his mind. It's been a long time since he heard her voice: that voice of forgiveness, of encouragement, of reason, of mercy. His hand was limp, and he examined it with clinical detachment. He never called Mom, their communication existing only through emails, but maybe it was time to call her now. When Brad asked how his day went, Arjun usually told him everything including orange-red lady bugs on the window pane and the smell of curry from his Indian neighbor's saffron-scented kitchen on the other side of the dry wall. Brad had said he should call Mom and invite her for a visit and that he would pay for the ticket. Brad was probably busy at work, teaching tongue-pierced, green haired undergrads who couldn't care less about Socrates.

Arjun looked at the cordless phone by his bedside for a minute. With some hesitation, he picked it up and slowly dialed his Sri Lankan home number from memory. It would be way too early in the morning in Sri Lanka, but some things, as he had learned, could not wait. Through the darkness of the dawn, Mom's phone would wake up neighbors, he thought, but he couldn't wait. The phone rang six times before she picked it up. When he heard the faint, soft "hello," Arjun was on the verge of tears.

"Hi Amma"

"Arjun!?? Is that you???"

"Yeah. How are you? Were you sleeping?"

"Yes, but never mind that. What a surprise to hear from you!"

“Well, I... I...”

“Are you okay, Putha?”

“Yeah. Would you like to come for a visit? You are not teaching, are you? You said the Montessori was closed for break.”

“Visit you in the U.S.? Putha, I don...”

“I can send you money for the ticket. Brad is my roommate. He’s, well... he’s a very close friend. You’ll like him.”

“Br... well, I don’t... why all of a sudden?”

“You must come, Amma. I will explain later. Will you come? Brad will take care of everything.”

“I’m no... Can I think about it and email you? Is there anything you wan...”

Mom always worried about Arjun; he was a sensitive kid. When he hung up, Arjun was convulsing. His sobs were loud enough to be heard by Radha in the saffron-scented kitchen who was stirring a thick and creamy tikka masala curry. The smell was seeping through dry wall into Arjun’s nest. The delicious aroma made him hungry, but it was difficult to eat solids anymore: he could only eat soft baby food. When he was home, Brad fed him with a loving sense of discipline. “Carrots now,” he’d say. “I boiled them for you.”

“I know, babe. Difficult to chew, though.”

“Pudding, then? I got your favorite butterscotch flavor.”

Arjun would eat with pretended enthusiasm. When Brad got paid, he always brought him ice cream. Strawberry and mango were Arjun’s favorite flavors.

“And we have ice cream today. Can you guess what flavors?”

Arjun would imitate the Church Lady from *Saturday Night Live*.

“Could it beeeeeeeeeeeeee SATAN??” And they would laugh until they cried.

Arjun’s thoughts took him back to the time he was only two years old, living in his Grandma’s big mansion. There were discolored bronze vases and figurines in every corner. When his maternal Grandma housed her youngest daughter’s family from an illicit marriage, Mom fed Arjun and Sha, his elder sister, from her own hand. With one plate of soft, cotton-white rice and a couple of curries that were cheap to make like dahl and sprats, Mom fed Arjun and Sha alternately, mixing rice with the two curries and forming it into bite sized balls. Arjun *had* to have dahl and refused to eat without it. When Mom fed, it was always tastier, he remembered with a wistful fondness.

Eight years ago, Arjun had come to the U.S. on a full ride to study theater. He wanted to be a Broadway star. Then he discovered his brown body and his fascination with whiteness; male whiteness. It was in a chat room that he met Brad four years ago, and Brad stayed by him despite the purple legions

that were becoming more pronounced.

Would Mom understand his urgency in wanting to see her? What would she say? How would she feel? Would she understand what those purple lesions meant? It was too much to think about, and Arjun dozed off with the cordless phone still in his grip.

At the Chicago airport, Brad waited near gate seven, holding a sign with a name that seemed, and probably sounded, alien to many who passed by. As passengers came into view one by one, he put on a forced smile on his pale white face. His palms were sweaty, and he brushed away dirty blond hair from his eyes. Towards the very end of the long line of disembarking passengers, a woman in a white sari and flat shoes visibly hurried her pace and came up to Brad, smiling with South Asian reservation. Brad took her bag and led her through crowds of people looking at flat screens on the wall, trying to figure out where they needed to be. Once they were in the car, Brad kept his eyes firmly fixed on the road, but he knew she was studying him. He felt he had to say something.

“How was the flight?”

“How did you meet my son?”

“We... well, through a mutual friend.”

When the Persian indigo Toyota Camry pulled into the two-door garage, Arjun stirred in his bed. Then he heard footsteps outside and within a minute, the sound of a bunch of keys jingling and the front door opening. The sounds were getting closer and closer, the thud of Brad’s heavy shoes and alongside, slow and deliberate sound of familiar flat shoes that hardly disturbed the floor. In a plain white sari with graying black hair, Mom came into view followed by a nervous Brad, counting tiles on the floor. She was thinner, older. Arjun wanted to get up, but he was on an IV.

She sat by him tenderly and quietly, her heavy eyes trying hard to disregard purple spots and bumps on Arjun’s face. She felt his black hair as if to make sure he was there in person.

“I brought you dahl, baby. I will feed you from my own hand.”

Lasantha Rodrigo is a final year Ph.D. student in English Studies (creative writing focus) at Illinois State University. Originally from Sri Lanka, his creative work has previously been published in Sri Lanka, India, and the United States. Lasantha draws from trauma theory, queer theory, and post-colonial theory in his creative endeavors to unsettle his readers, and finally draw from them a thoughtful and humane response. He earned his BA from Pacific Lutheran University, WA and earned two MAs from St. Bonaventure University, NY and University of Rochester, NY respectively.

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