

“More Jaggery”
by Aditya Desai

Once you came off of the I-295 onto Route 1 somewhere around Princeton, the shock was immediate. We usually came this way when going to my aunt’s house, saving us the hassle of driving along the crowded Turnpike and paying three tolls: one to get on, one to get off, and one somewhere in the middle just for the hell of it. Instead, Route 1 goes parallel, and even with the traffic lights, it took only about ten minutes more to reach, and at least this way we could catch some of the exotic scenery.

The first out-of-place building that came up, on the left, was the Chutney Manor, a restaurant with a large, attached banquet hall decorated with paper-mache Indian sculptures and rose-red draperies. You could have a wedding or a reception there, or both, and catering was included in the deal. The next few miles were mostly rife with car dealerships and motels—lots of motels, with continental breakfasts and even more Indian weddings during the weekend. Slowly after a few more miles, there were the standard suburbia hallmarks—CVS, Shop Rite, Dunkin Donuts, and JC Penny’s, owned by Indians, staffed by Indians, serving Indians. There was Sukhadia’s, a sweets and snacks shop, that without shame had retained the distinct pointed roof of the Pizza Hut it once was. And even though you couldn’t see it from the road, you passed a park where they filmed an entire song and dance sequence for a Bollywood movie.

After awhile I would begin to look in the cars next to us, alternating between Honda and Toyota, and I sighed in the futility of recognizing and accepting where I was. Driver after driver passes us—white face, brown face, white face, brown face, black face, light brown face, dark brown face, East-Asian brown face, more brown face. There were little rosary beads hanging from the rearview mirrors, and if you opened your window and listen hard, it was quite easy to make out Kishore Kumar blasting from the radio.

My aunt and cousins lived in an apartment community where all the units were built with a dark, rough, damp-colored burgundy wood. I watched my foot as I stepped out of the car. The parking spaces were littered with cigarette butts and empty packets of chewing tobacco. Withered in the rain, it had all begun to cake up inside the cracks of the fractured asphalt, collecting and decomposing, collecting and decomposing.

We had come up to celebrate Navratri, the Nine Nights festival of praying and dancing to Goddess Durga to mark the arrival of winter. But I only expected another weekend in Edison, New Jersey. Another useless weekend of watching the circus unfold before me—the cooking, the television, the cricket, the plans for going out and staying in, the spiked hairstyles and blue eye shadow.

But when the door opened that evening, Auntie stood before us with an enraged look in her eye. It was nothing new; she was a very emotional woman and would throw fits at the slightest hindrance to her day. But never at the threshold to her home. She was upon us like a tiger, ushering us into the second-floor apartment, saying “Come on, come in!” and waving a frying ladle in the air. A drop of oil landed onto my cheek and made a slight burn.

The shades were all drawn, darkening the home into a sullen cave. Before we even had our shoes off, Auntie was off and running her mouth: “He’s been packing all day.” “That stupid idiot.” “He doesn’t understand.” “What is he going to do for food? How is he going to live? Does he know how expensive it is?” “I haven’t raised him this far for nothing. Doesn’t he know I am his mother, that he should listen to me? What would his father say? How can he leave me here alone?”

My parents threw off their sandals with a quick flick of the ankle and managed to sit her down in the living room and assuage the fury. I drowned the ranting interrogation out, sitting on a little footstool at the door and undoing my laces. I wanted to avoid the tension as long as possible, hyped into

melodrama. As usual, Aunty's rants weren't too world-shaking. Whatever they were about, it would be assuaged quick by my mother. Once I got my shoes off, I tuned my ear back.

"Where is Karan?" my mother said.

"He said to finalize his ticket. Just like that! He's already bought it without asking me!" She said it with some forced humility. I took my coat off and rejoined them.

"Why don't we wait till he comes back, then we'll talk to him?"

"Huh?! Why should I? If he doesn't want to wait for me, have patience with me, why should I have any for him?" She was in tears.

"Calm down, don't worry. Don't worry," my father said, stroking his sister's back with a passing touch. Aunty just stared at the floor.

Now that she was quiet, the sounds of ZeeTv filled the void, restoring the home's ambience as I was acquainted. My grandmother was plopped directly across the large flat-screen TV, her eyes fixed on it despite the commotion that was happening on the couch next to her. "How are you, Ba?" I asked, but she didn't respond. She was hard of hearing, and I didn't feel the need to speak louder right now. Usually the volume on the TV was higher, inviting one of the neighbors to come to the door and complain. It got especially bad during the soaps, when the proverbial thunderclap sound effect would rumble through their surround sound system, quaking the rickety old apartment building.

"I even made his favorite tonight, ladoos," Aunty said, "because all of you were coming over. It's your favorite too, right?"

She was talking to me. I looked up and nodded at her with a smile. I hadn't eaten a laddoo for six years. Round, tennis ball-sized mounds of sugar, flour, milk, jaggery, and ghee—clarified butter. Lots of ghee. My stomach turned.

"Well, we will see," Aunty said, getting up and walking into the kitchen. Mother followed, saying she would make the tea, and within seconds I heard pots clanging. Dad looked at me from across the room and raised his eyebrows, sharing my attitude: let women be women. He would simply mention a word of kindness and instead let it be at that. Mother would try to comfort and cradle her sister-in-law, taking over the job that Ba had stopped long ago.

Though the two didn't share a bloodline, the bond was strong. My mother was from a lineage of academics and doctors, and became a nutritionist as a compromise with her parents to avoid medical bureaucracy. She was interested in nurturing, not repairing. Those maternal obsessions were matched when she married my dad and met his sister, whose profession was solely housewife, and later mother,

My grandmother instead just pondered her shows. On the glowing screen, a woman with too much make up on—solid, inch-thick black eyeliner and a quarter-sized red dot on her—scolded a younger girl for her shame and her impetuosity. The girl, with less makeup and kind of cute, held her head down. There were arguments, something about how she loved him and he loved her, and the woman interjected. My working knowledge of Hindi went only as far as greetings and pleasantries. I read the subtitles —*He loves only me!*—but both spoke at the same time, and I wasn't sure to which one that referred. The thunderclap roared again through the speakers and lighting struck through the large palatial windows of their staged house, and a fan blew the two actresses' hair back, turning the scene into a mash-up of gothic horror and telenovela.

Above the TV sat my uncle's photo, in its ever-permanent place since his death almost a year ago. The red powder dot smudged onto the picture frame's glass had dried over the course of the day. He smiled back at me, with the same jolly disposition that uncles worldwide tend to have, remaining alive in the room. But, I thought, still aloof to what his son was up to. He had a sudden heart attack, around three in the afternoon, in the middle of his afternoon nap. Karan had called me that day to let me know.

"I don't think I'm ready man," he'd said. At the time he'd meant it, I assumed, for the funeral, for moving on. But then last week when we'd talked, he had said it again, *I don't think I'm ready*.

Then two days ago Mother got a call from Aunty, and the story related to me was that Karan had booked a one-way ticket to Mumbai for the end of the month, that he had had enough of America, enough of his life and his opportunities here and wanted to go and become a Bollywood star. I split apart in laughter, but Mother just looked back at me, her morose and stern eyes telling me, "If you try any of that stuff, know that I brought you into this world and I can take you out of it." She'd told Aunty not to worry, and that *I*, as the generational brother, would talk him out of it.

Back on the television, the cute girl ran out into the rain, crying for her beloved while the older woman sneered inside and cued the cliffhanger ending. A song clip from one of the new movies played, showcasing a shirtless heartthrob dancing on a beach to a bass-filled club beat, followed by advertisements from the sponsors for products from India and fortune-telling astrologists.

Aunty's voice grew again from inside the kitchen. *What would his father say*, I heard, through a crackling voice. Ba mumbled something and drew the remote out of the folds of her sari. With her right hand she pointed it directly at the TV and with her left pressed down on one of the buttons. Nothing happened on the screen, but she seemed satisfied and placed it on the couch next to her.

Dad got up and declared we should go get the bags from the car. Once we got outside he spoke, "Where could Karan have gone?"

I thought of the many places—his friends' houses, the Afghani café he likes, his college campus, or maybe just cruising the highway. "I could call him?" I said.

"Yes, do that." He walked past me toward the car as I tried to fish my cell phone out of my pocket—I was wearing tight jeans, the kind that cost fifty dollars extra because of the rusted color and small ripped cuts in the denim. Karan had recommended them to me one day when we were at the mall. "Mad player, yo," he'd said.

I stood there in the October chill with the phone pressed to my ear. A breeze skirted the apartment parking lot, and I watched my father taking the bags out of the back of our Toyota Corolla. He was for the most part large and well built, at five foot eleven standing well above the normal Indian man's size and sporting the classic round belly to signify good financial stability.

The ring tone buzzed in my ear, but after three I let it fall to voicemail. I heard Karan's voice, deeper and more forcibly masculine than it actually was: "Hi, you've reached Karan, leave a message and *he* will call you back when he gets time." The third person reference annoyed me.

"Hey bro, we just got to your place, just wondering where you were. Your mom is waiting on you." I turned the phone off.

“Look at that.” He motioned his head behind me, and I turned to the apartment stack behind Aunty’s. At the top third floor, someone had strung up a lot of Christmas lights on their balcony. They twisted and wrapped around the metal fencing, up the walls and across the ceiling. Even at this distance in the night, the lights shone so brightly I could see the dirt and grime collected on the backs of the tacky plastic lawn chairs.

In the center, on top of a stool, sat an idol of Goddess Durga, made of the authentic white marble, her eight arms brandishing bow and arrow, saber, conch shell, lotus flower, trident, and chakra disc. Along with the blue, green, orange, red, and yellow bulbs, she was adorned with a glistening red sari that clashed glimmers with the lights. A withered marigold necklace was strewn around her face, with eyes that looked solemnly down at the parking lot, at the cars, the cracked pavement, at Dad, and me.

Two middle-aged women walked by us in faded salwaar dresses and shawls and white Nike sneakers. One kept talking about her son and how he wanted ice cream, how she kept arguing with him on the point, and he kept yelling and screaming. “Mathu ketlu khathu,” she said. *He kept eating at my head.* The other woman began interjecting about the health effects of ice cream she heard on the news. Once they came in Durga’s sightline, both stopped and nodded their heads toward the mini-Las Vegas of a balcony. Then they kept walking and resumed the conversation. “You know,” Dad said, “That probably costs so much on the electricity bill.”

Back inside the apartment, Aunty had already set out two plates on the table. “Chal,” Aunty said. “You sit down and have a laddoo; you must be hungry.”

Mother brought out cups of piping hot chai and placed them on the table. Steam rose out up in full clouds, and I could smell the cardamom and sugar still marinating in the milk.

She leered at Dad, already breaking off crumbs of laddoo and popping them in his mouth, and gave him not the look of a wife, but health specialist. Aunty rushed out with a small steel bowl.

“Here, have some jaggery,” she said, holding the sweet pebbles above my cup.

“No, thanks.” I said.

“No? Sure? Karan always asks for more jaggery in his tea.”

“Jaggery in tea?” Mother asked.

“Oh yes, it tastes great. I put it in everything since he was a little boy. He loves it.”

Mother cringed at the thought. Her love for me was a strict diet that would keep me right-minded. Perhaps so I wouldn’t run away like this, I now thought.

“You should try it,” Aunty said to me. “You can never have too much jaggery.”

“I’m fine,” I pleaded. “I don’t like it too sweet.”

“Oh, ok,” she relented. “Let me know though.”

She took pappadam out of a tupperware container, broke off a piece, and popped it into her mouth. For a while, the four of us just sat or stood, the sounds of thick slurps and brittle crunches filling the air.

“Did you see the Durga murti?” I asked after a minute or so.

“What?” Mother asked.

“Yeah, it’s been there since last week,” Aunty said.

“There, look out the window,” I motioned, and Mother went to the other side of the apartment to peek through the curtain.

Aunty began expounding how the apartment management had spoken to that tenant about putting so many lights on, but he had kept it anyway. Even a cop had come by to speak to him about it. “It’s a discrimination!” she said. “If they can put up lights for Christmas and New Years and all that, why can’t we for our holidays?”

“True,” Mother said, “It is Navratri. Why can’t he?”

“Of course.” A pause later, she yelped with her heart in her throat, “Arey! Aarti!”

I was hoping she wouldn’t remember. Every night of Navratri meant the tired fifteen-minute sing-along Durga prayer, where I mustered a feigned conviction.

Inside one of the cupboards in the kitchen was assembled the home’s personal shrine: miniature ornaments and pictures of various Gods and Goddesses looked back at us, demanding piety from their household nook. Aunty lit a cotton wick inside a steel dish, ladled fresh ghee on top to fuel it for the prayer, and set it in the center of the deities. Ba, without invitation, got up from the couch and waddled over. We waited for Aunty’s cue to begin singing, but instead we hung in silence. She cleared phlegm out of her throat, back toward us, palms folded in prayer.

“You don’t want to wait for Karan?” Dad asked.

“He knows we do aarti every night. He knows he should be here.” She sniffled a little, and I imagined a tear forming at her eyes.

I heard the keys clinging outside the front door as they slid into the lock, and the metal bolts scratched against each other. The door flew open, and there was a tense buzz in the air. Karan entered, looking solemnly at us. It was clear he hadn’t lost his resolve. His mind was sound and solid. He opened his mouth, licked his lips, and didn’t speak,

I tried to say hi, but a scornful look from Mother kept it at bay. My aunt stood staring with fierce daggers, her hands not in prayer anymore, but instead stuck under her elbows, arms crossed.

Ba cried from behind: “Where did you come from? Good, you’re back. Now get me a chair.”