

# My Mother's Eggplant Story Her Summer Nighttime Reassurances A Tale Which Helps Us Breathe More Easily

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## Le conte aubergine de ma mère; ses mots rassurants d'une nuit d'été, un conte qui nous aide à mieux respirer

*Et maintenant, comme la nuit d'été se déplace au dessus de Calgary, le conte qui m'entoure est illuminé comme la machine à photocopier Canon que ma fille m'a tant décrite que je la vois moi-même. Moi, en quête d'une image juste pour tout expliquer. Un légume, peut-être pour nous dénouer et possiblement ces adultes cachés aussi. Silents. Se rendant invisibles, prises dans les plis diaphanes du conte. En volant, ils s'évadent, disparaissent, se dé-placent, quittant ce bureau avec les couloirs en dédales, pleins des yeux qui scrutent la trajectoire de leurs vies, des couloirs pleins des bouches qui exposent des secrets, leur message qui n'est jamais articulé, la trans-plantation, l'im-migration, de l'Orient qui rencontre l'Occident qui rencontre l'Orient ... Une aubergine – l'image, je veux dire – opaque, mais reluisante, pourpre dans le paysage vert des prairies d'Alberta. L'aube s'en vient. Tant à dire. Avant la fin de la nuit, ma fille et son amie, les nettoyeuses de nuit. Je vole dans la nuit, pas un oiseau, mais une aubergine. Je vois l'affiche ... Air-Canada – 32 destinations ... déplacée tout comme moi, l'aubergine volante. Mon mari, un pilote autrefois, pas pour Canadian, mais pour Air India. J'ai appris de lui il y a longtemps ... Je survole des territoires des zéros sans fin, le rêve collectif du paradis des finances que nous avons tous, paraît-il. Et ce que mon mari rêvait avant qu'il ne s'écrasse, son rêve de vol, d'évasion, vers un pays "nouveau," des possibilités nouvelles. La liberté de prendre son essor dans ce lieu d'Amérique du Nord. Son rêve et celui de ma fille et de son amie, Devika, la nettoyeuse de nuit. Ce rêve, un cauchemar collectif? Une bombe, un volcan prêts à déclencher. Déplacé, comme les rêves de Columbus, mal conçus, erronés, mal-nommés, les Indes. Et ce pays au nord si riche aussi, tant a ramené. Et ces premiers peuples de l'Amérique du Nord maintenant sans terres, sans maisons ...*

*Et nous, les gens aux peaux foncés, dans la diaspora. Tant de teintes,*

*elles ont, ces aubergines. La "pureté," l'essence de l'Inde ... introuvable dans la diaspora. L'unique recherche de pureté dont j'ai entendu parlé est celle effectuée par les Nations Arayennes, réunies près de la frontière d'Alberta et ces gens recherchent la pureté du blanc. Et c'est libre, ce pays, d'après ce que l'on dit. Et nous, les nettoyeuses de nuit, non seulement des immeubles, mais des histoires, ne sont pas intéressés par cette perversion de pureté qui pollue. Ce dont nous rêvons c'est de nettoyer les cauchemars de l'histoire collective qui hantent, blessent, tuent, nous rêvons d'une nouvelle histoire qui remet le monde dans un nouvel ordre, appelons-le la guérison.*

*Et je me demande comment elle, la nettoyeuse Devika et ma fille Usha – ouvrières à temps partiel parfois la nuit, parfois le jour – occupent le même espace non seulement l'immeuble où elles travaillent toutes deux dans des emplois précaires, mais en tant que figures de la représentation où elles sont serrées hors proportion, changeant leurs corps et se déplaçant (jusqu'à ce qu'en perdre leur subjectivité) lorsque les autres cherchent à comprendre le pays d'ou elles viennent. L'Inde? Le Kenya? L'Angleterre, peut-être? Toujours d'ailleurs. Et la force de la géographie se concentre dans l'étrangeté. Ne pas appartenir. Le corps pressé par le poids de huit cents millions personnes. Des regards indifférents qui posent tous la même question ... J'essaie de penser à d'autres histoires, des histoires sans clôture, alors tu me demande de la raconter encore une fois, l'histoire que tu as tant entendu, parce que dans la narration et l'écoute, nous sommes consolées suffisamment pour dormir ...*

And now as the night moves in this summertime daylit night sky – Calgary,  
the story all around me is lit by the florescent light above the Canon copier  
the one my daughter has described so often I see it myself, as if I've been there too:

me on a quest  
a search for the right image  
the one that would explain it all.

A vegetable perhaps, which would  
untangle  
us, and perhaps them, those adults hidden away, closeted. Silent  
and still. Trying not to be seen,  
entangled,  
caught in the diaphanous

folds  
                  of the story.

And by flying, they

                  escape.

Disappear

dis-place:

                  leaving this office with its endless  
                  halls filled with eyes which follow the trajectories of their lives,  
                  hallways with mouths speaking of secrets, “don’t tell anyone else”:  
                  the message passed on. And the message that is  
                  unspoken.

                  Trans-plantation.

                  Im-migration, now, of the East meets West meets East, middle or far, far away  
                  from – an eggplant. The image, I mean.

                  Aubergine? Perhaps because of its opaque yet luminous, shiny skin,  
                  purpled now in the green poplared landscape of the apsen grasslands of Alberta.

Daylight approaching. Dawn. And so much left to tell. Before this night

                  disappears, and my daughter and her friend, the night cleaner, with it,  
                  whirled off into that story which threatens to capture,  
                  eat them up.

                  I take wings in the night. Not a bird. An eggplant.

                  Aubergined. I see the shape of a billboard in the twilight sky as I dip down,  
                  closer to the edges of

                  downtown, coming over the industrial wasteland (is it? perhaps destroyed now,  
                  but wasted? yes, but that’s another story).

                  And now, zooming closer to the billboard, banking slightly so as to be able to  
                  read the sign, checking up on the competition, “Air Canada–32 destinations,”  
                  and behind those letters,

                  a parrot in a jungled landscape. It too  
                  displaced, like me, the flying

                  eggplant. My husband once a pilot, not for Canadian, but for Indian  
                  Airlines. I learned it from him, at the control panels long,  
                  long ago.

                  Far away from these lowrise buildings, only acres away from the open fields  
                  on one side, and on the other, the downtown buildings. The Bankers’ hall

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stretching ever higher towards that  
territory of endless  
zeroes, that collective dreaming,  
financial heaven they say we can all possess. Maybe through a lottery,  
we, the mud lotuses able to rise up and out of the junkheaps in the  
foreground. And what my husband dreamed before he crashed—

his dream of flight

an escape, to and in the “new” land,  
the new possibilities.

The freedom to soar in this North American place. But  
that dream, implanted in him and now my daughter,  
and I discover,  
planted too in her friend, Devika, the night cleaner.

That dream possibly a collective  
nightmare.

A bomb waiting to go off.

Or a volcano, erupting?

Mis-placed,  
like Columbus' dreams,

mis-taken,

taking away from:

the mis-naming, the Indies, the bountiful Indies of spices, and silks, and  
gold—all treasures. And this place, bountiful too: so much to  
take back—to the northern European home-land, this land and its  
people, the first peoples in Canada, North America, now made  
homeless, their claims, their land?

And all those Colombian, and his navigator, Amerigo Vespucci's terrible  
dreams—those post-Columbian North American  
dreams: histories of torture, and death, and  
endings—this North American place, not an  
escape, but another movement into

death, and burials, of the dead  
and the living.

And did my husband, while flying those Arctic routes up from Labrador, Goose Bay,  
suspect, coming back to Mont Jolie, the town on the edge of the Saint Lawrence? Did he  
suspect that story buried in the Tundra might circle round, finally  
trap him on his last flight,  
a death in the mountains near another coastline,  
those uncertain air-currents above Princeton.

He, who knew only air and flight, suddenly  
mountained,  
grounded –  
dead.

But his skin, my friends say, looking at the pictures in the family album, is so  
dark.

How could such a dark  
man have such a white child. My daughter, not  
brown like him.

Aubergines, I say now,  
rudely, come in different  
colors: the purple, almost mauve, as well as the eggshell. We're  
aubergines: eggplants if you like. Unless you're on a quest for the "pure" – India, its essence,  
or whatever country it might be called in what has become a diaspora, a cluster,  
the immigrants, looking for the new land,  
escape.

Even now, as we speak, you and  
I know that search for the pure, only this time, white, happens  
in a small town near the Alberta border: the Aryan nations meeting.

And it's a free  
country, after  
all,  
they say.

And we,  
the night cleaners now  
not only of buildings  
but stories, you explain aren't interested in that

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perversion called "purity", that –  
not clean, but defiling. What they,  
the night cleaners, and now, you and I are doing is  
dreaming of cleaning the nightmares,  
that collective history which is haunting and hurting and killing

dreaming a new story, a story which puts the world back together again,

a new order perhaps, call it  
healing.

So that parrot in the billboard picture with Air Canada comes to speak, or since it is silent, to make  
an image,

to imagine another place,  
somewhere much more exotic than this wild west,  
our stories of cowboy heroes, and native legends—all being  
overturned now, I know by the Meech Lake discussions, that small lake  
twenty minutes away from the Parliament Buildings in Ottawa, and  
Elijah Harper, the new hero who saved Canada,  
he with his Eagle feather, that  
bird of flight, and  
day and night.

And me, and you – the Indian too, East Indian. Born here, in Canada,  
or perhaps moved here: now, the displaced Indian in those  
Western stories or  
mis-stories, mystories,  
the mistakes which  
misplaced us all in those  
misbegotten bloodied histories which they have cleaned up, and  
cleaning up, lost us.

And which that night,

that longest night, my daughter Usha, and Devika, at the Canon copier,  
begin to talk about, and talking about, tell me, and now on  
the shortest night of the year, this summer solstice I want to work on  
with you,  
night cleaning, so that while those others are sleeping, we'll

change the  
story, place it in the Canon copier,  
duplicate it, and  
    make it plural—stories—make it include all of us (even if we now  
    wonder, “who are the *we*?”).

So maybe that Canon copier story, like Salman Rushdie’s pickled chutney,  
  history, will  
  seep into  
  their dreams, so that waking, will be different.  
And then the waking  
  dreams will alter slightly, ever so slight, and eventually,  
  we’ll curve it,  
  put the world back together,  
  in the story, at least, and hope the story  
  seeps. Leaks quietly  
  into the dreams.

And the parrot, here, billboarded,  
    trapped with its 32 destinations, who’s been silent so long, yearns to speak:

“So what are you doing now, Columbus?  
Still sailing west to find the east,  
beginning that now five hundredth year of  
‘dis-discovery’ –  
covering up, no recovery  
no recovery no  
recovery.”

And that parrot speaks to us, beckons, calls to us of  
    another escape,  
        another lottery now: which of the thirty-two destinations promises a yield of more –  
                happiness perhaps – or the end of those  
                nightmares which keep me up all night, sleeping now only in the days.

Reading now and writing to keep the night away.

And the parrot, beckoning, speaks all this in a barely discernible whisper,  
    only a glimpse. Which is, I suppose, what it’s like to be a symbol:  
    your skin, or

your name, or  
you – in some quite definable way – come to speak, of another place,  
even *if* your parents are from here, and you too,  
born at the Holy Cross Hospital. And *if* they ask you, “where are you  
from?” and you answer,  
“Calgary,” they say, “no  
really, where are you really  
from?” you have become  
a piece of the map, an  
elsewhere,  
a pointer to something else that says  
not from here, a  
transplant, like the  
displaced  
eggplant, me, flying over the periphery of downtown,  
swooping down in the night sky between  
the magpies and the Peregrine falcons, once on the AGT building, those birds  
who have declared that building their own,  
the building’s cliffs the heights of their environment. Not  
quite fitting, those falcons? Because they’re an endangered  
species?  
And why the AGT, both in Edmonton and, for so long, in Calgary?

And the parrot, why does it continue to speak of  
elsewhere? There on the billboard in Alberta, not of pet-shops, but of  
escape into and  
from our public dreaming.

**The Winter Nighttime Story – The Endless Hours In The Morning  
Which Threaten To Make Us, The Canadian Airlines Worker and the  
Night Cleaner, Disappear**

And we think about this eggplant story my mother tells and think of those who can see themselves in the billboards, not as parrots, say in that ad by the competition, “Air Canada – 32 destinations”. Not as background, but people. You say, “well, what about the Benetton ad?” I ponder, liking it, sort of, but with a trace of a doubt: even with its “united” rainbow of colors, one of each, it’s hard to see myself there, in the picture. If I enter the frame of the picture, then I have to leave myself



behind. The Benetton difference becoming a surface feature: ethnicity a blend, a blur of multiple colors in a cultured, fashion palette. But without the differences which define us. And which possibly, too, divide us. And so used to being absent, outside of the picture, I disappear. Into the night, now a time of safety as well as terror.

And that's what we finally whisper – together, here in the space lit by the green light of Canon copier machines and the hum of florescent lights. Here we begin to tell each other those deepest fears of appearing and disappearing like magic. Not always speaking. Just waiting, standing, comforted in the shelter, the silence created between us.

A silence broken with your story for immigration, you see yourself re-enacting Scheherazade, Her Arabian Nights: her story or her life. You and I from places bordering the Arabian Sea. You, like Scheherazade deciding to live, not to die, you a character speaking a part in a statistical story: the impossibility of being in the rural, then in the third world, and now in the first, feeling you've discovered a hole, a leak into a fourth world caught in the first. This fourth world without pictures on the billboard, no-one wanting to fall into that hole, an absence full of poverty and of unnatural death. What we're both afraid of – falling into. The workplace. The "being part-time" struggles. A gap between us disappearing and then appearing again, a difference that merely being Asian doesn't join.

And your silence – about the hearing, the immigration one. How you feared that you would fall off the planet. No going back now. Nowhere to go: not the green fields, the rice paddies with the women re-planting each of the seedlings. Vibrant faces. "A relief from the heat of the city of Bombay," you thought when you returned there. But no going back, back to that British styled colonial building where you'd seen files stacked, truly, to the ceiling, the fan's blades chopping the hot air, your uncle on his bicycle, and you drinking the bottled water they've brought you, in case you had lost your immunity. The water a carrier of disease: from typhoid, to T.B., to elephantitis. The monsoon's deadly bounty. But no going back, to stay, there in Gujarat, because there's nothing left, no way to make a life. Even if the World Bank has a small office. Your village a model one, apparently for the development agency buying up North American agri-business. The Holsteins and the Jerseys. The Million Dollar Cow Project. And the villagers paying back with interest, the loans. "The poor, who can least afford it," prophesied your grandmother, are paying for the rural development projects." Not far from the

tribal area: the Kolcha, Kotvalias, and the Varli, now with irrigation equipment. Gifts bought with development money. The eucalyptus tree, more gifts, draining the water table. Short term gains. Pain. Drought and poverty. The making of death, too much death, even in the green fields, greened by the monsoon, and for now you've decided. Said no to death. Not yet.

Which is, I explained, exactly how I felt too. A sense of desperation that I might follow my father's erratic path into death, that inexplicable anger he radiated. An anger ignited, burning up now in you and in me. And his joy, shadowed, receding in that anger: the two of us taxiing the car down the abandoned runway near High River to see what it felt like. "What did I think of it?" he asked. I was almost six. I wasn't sure what to think, an airport in the midst of this field on the prairie. The absence of people, the absence of anything but fields for miles. An absence full of death. He died several months later flying in the mountains off the coast of B.C.. Bad Weather. Bad timing. Or death by cultural displacement, I think now.

And we both, you and I are shelter now, for each other, in the moment of this telling, this telling so near the time of his death, on the solstice. Another December. The longest night of the year. Me, afraid to go home: wondering what I'll find this time: another break-in, perhaps or me, in an accident. Joining him now, in death. Seeing his blue body (Krishna? I wonder, telling you. Is that why it's blue? or cold maybe? cold in the mountains?) that blue body now appearing on my skin, where I would wear a choli, hidden by a sari. I lift up the folds of the story to show you.

And then remind myself of the upcoming flight to Toronto, but that night at the Canon copier, we mirror each other, our lives doubled, doubling again in the telling. Twin selves. Nighttimed constellations. The space between us, our differences, momentarily disappear. And I note the beginning of that slippage between: me, becoming a preposition, "to" across another gap, or perhaps a participle, "ing" and now a displaced modifier, what I have always dreaded, wondered how it was possible to move across time and space, those points in our lives unconnected. Our stories beginning with those points where the connections cease to take hold – place – and the plot how to grasp onto what's present, where we are now or were, and what that means, and what's next. Moments of fear accumulating, those momentary losses of identity in airports and long office building corridors. "Who are you – now? Where are you from? No, really from? You're not from here, from Calgary."

**Summer Solstice:  
Me, Collecting Not Only Dust, But  
Stories, Dropped Off By Phone, Passed Along by Friends,  
Me, Not The Devouring  
Mother, Kali, But  
Kali, The Protector,  
The Collector**

And I wondered, curiously, how she, the  
night-cleaner Devika, and my daughter, Usha –  
both part-time some-  
    times night,  
    sometimes day  
    workers –

occupy the same space, not only at the building where they work.  
Both part-time workers in an uncertain future,  
    a cycle of employment,  
    unemployment.

Both figures in that world of representation where they get  
    squeezed out of proportion,  
    change their bodies and  
    shift (and even  
    lose their subjectivity) as others seek  
    to understand that place they came from.

India? Or was it Kenya? England?  
Always somewhere else. Why not here?  
I was born here. My daughter, no – she was born in  
Mangalore, a small fishing village then, when I'd  
travelled to India to study, then to stay, then to  
return again to Canada, beginning a movement, a migration,  
back and forth. The house where we lived in Mangalore now  
gone. And the night cleaner, Devika – she was born in a  
small village up in the hills in Gujarat state.

And that pressure of geography is really about

foreignness, and not belonging:

all at once, the body pressed with the weight of over eight  
hundred  
million  
people.

Indifferent gazes ask the same question.

I try now to think of other stories, ones with no evident

ending, just a gentle drifting off into sleep,

what we've almost

forgotten, and so you ask me to tell it

again, the story you've heard so many times before, because in the telling and your

listening, we are comforted, able to

sleep.

We begin to stretch out

the space of the imagination so that we might

fit, the sari's diaphanous

folds, so that possibly one other person, say a young child

from Silver Springs, sad, because they have again

called him "Paki"

again, and the teachers don't listen,

pretend not to listen until his father,

calls, speaks out, saying,

"listen" and now the principal and the teachers all tell him,

"yes, yes. Come back if

they say it again, come back."

But he, not listening finds himself

disappearing: out of story,

out of dreaming which is where

you can find yourself,

see yourself mirrored, and

seeing, know that you exist, that you are

placed. And placed,

no longer have to

hide,

no longer have to

dread, and fear that dropping off into

nightmare, not sleep.

“And Pakistan,  
after all,”  
he reasons,  
this once young child from Silver Springs,  
“is elsewhere, and maybe it’s not  
so bad, ‘Paki,’” but still, it  
hurts and he knows that it’s  
meant to hurt, that the  
naming is a sign of his difference, and their belonging here, and  
his not, and their claim to this mythological  
nightmare, this North American place,  
a nightmare of newness and technological wonders, and,  
say it: not escape, but  
trap.

“Worse than the indentured servants you saw in Gujarat state?” I ask myself.  
When I found out how the third world is indebted  
forever to – who?  
Not us – small characters in a story we’re only beginning to tell.  
Indebted to the first world – not even a country, Canada.  
Indebted to a bank, the World Bank, for the North American agricultural equipment, American  
industry grateful to dump its no-longer-working parts somewhere else,  
its dumping  
a cycle, its stories  
secret, which are now circling above,  
                    along with the falcons,  
the eagle, and me,  
                    the aubergine,  
coming home.

“Worse, I think, than those children, already indentured servants,” I answer, again to myself,  
“because of what we say:  
about freedom,  
those myth-tories,  
those lies. What we’re supposed to keep living,  
                                    the gap growing larger every day between the rich and the  
not-so-rich-and-the-poor. Every day, more headlines: less medicare, more

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taxes: one law for the rich, another for the not-so-rich-and-the-poor.  
You know? Know somebody, the right somebody or you might as well forget it, everything:  
no government loans, no jobs, no—nothing.

And so that secret  
story keeps coming home,  
generation after generation, and somehow gets  
lost, like that feather duster you love so much.

The disdain is coming home, and has always been home:  
because to not have enough here, in North America,  
is to disappear.  
    Into a crack,  
    a canyon,  
    a fourth world. Right  
    out of the story where you keep living  
    into the newspaper which reports your  
    death, a  
    statistic. In this story,  
    one part of the world, indentured to another,  
        indebted to others:  
        the cycle of zeroes our seasons.

And so, estranged from ourselves,  
    strangers to our seasons,  
    this zero our secret and hidden winter. This  
    nighttime, our time of recovery,  
this story a possibility of survival until tomorrow.

And, after all, I wrap up, finishing that talk which began with that once-young-boy from Silver Springs, who has again been called “Paki”, Pakistan is a place, where he’s come from once. But so long ago.

Or maybe Babali, will hear this story of secrets unravelling, and listening tell it to the Calgary policeman who asked her (it was only last week),

    “what color are you?”

She wondered what to tell him—it was only a phone call. She was reporting an accident: the front fender of her car, damaged, the insurance requiring a police report. And now, wondering  
    how to tell him

the color of her name,  
the color of her skin, she hangs up the phone in  
silence. Stares into the space of the window where  
the magpies are diving down through the tree, trying to  
catch the robins' young. She disappears through the window,  
runs out to protect the robins' nest.

Or the story Devika was told when she was meeting employers for her night cleaning job, when he  
asked if he might use a stereotype, would she mind? And she didn't

until he said, "well, I don't hire East Indians. Can't. Find they're too lazy."

And Devika is still

there, in his office,

a smile pasted on her face.

Then she, not the smile,

disappears, moves into silence.

Later, she thinks of the Human Rights Committee. Or the Committee Against Racism. But she  
wonders, if she talks? If she tells?

Is it all over, her story?

Herself – finished. Kaput.

Herself a story,

ending.

And his casting of images, an imprint which  
shadows the people, modifies them.

How to explain? We're all different but, we're still. Still ...

Or the interview Aruna had with that big institution, now with affirmative action: for women, for  
people of color. And all the employer can say is – "well, I know who I want to hire"

(and it's not you –

but he doesn't say it that way, not outloud),

"know in 10 seconds. I can tell a lot in 10 seconds."

And I think, answer to him now – "so you want the ones who are like you?"

A duplication of apparent sameness?

In his ten seconds, a visual pathology erupts.

Racism. Blinding so much, I wonder, how much can he  
see? Especially for his new work project, one on immigration,  
the problems of people caught between two cultures.

His fear in the day and nighttime of the imagination,  
a growing sickness.

And the cleaners.

Who told me to get rid of the

stories which tell you to

die, because there's nothing left.

That woman, desperate, who died with her children,

jumped-jumping, the river

claiming them now,

their story left—so that now other women, when

desperate, begin to enact first in their minds her story—

jumping, the river.

“Erase it,” they say,

“this you must remember, then

forget, then remember, then re-tell,

this story of buried sorrow,

no story,

no place left but that

river. Now of

tears.”

And this river of tears I'll

cry if I don't finish,

if I can't change the story, at

least for my daughter, and her friend,

the night cleaner, both

part-time workers in a story that

doesn't give them much hope. And if I can

change the story so that they might live,

not die: might

see themselves with a future,

not a blank.

Not zero.

Not absent, but present.

Not post-modern,

not post-colonial:

their lives too fragmented,



that diaphanous fold of the story waiting to engulf them,  
carry them off into the eternal night,  
that labyrinth of death.

I'm not ready yet.

I'm not finished yet.

I'll keep writing.

I'll keep changing it

– that's what I'll tell them.