

Crumbs on the Counter:
A Study of the Ability of the Food Memoir
To Reveal a Writer's Identity through Culinary Experience

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Abstract

Despite various backgrounds, cultures, and perspectives, the table offers a place for people to meet on common ground. With my chosen creative work, the food memoir, I invite the reader to the common ground of food so that I can share my journey of self-discovery through specific memories with my mother. This process demonstrates how the food memoir effectively reaches a modern audience by incorporating key components of the cookbook, the memoir, and narrative writing. This analysis of the academic fields and writing techniques incorporated in the food memoir reveals a key literary tradition of the subgenre—the discovery of identity through food. Representing current trends and multiple genres, the food memoir uniquely reveals a writer's identity from a culinary perspective.

Dedication

First and foremost, I must dedicate this project to my mother, Monalisa Ledoux. Every time I enter a kitchen, her presence and memory follow me. Without her, my childhood would not have been nearly as interesting, and I would have no story to share.

I also dedicate this journey to Harsha Meda and Vikalp Bhaskar Puram. They have no idea how much their two-year stint in Kansas City changed my family's life. I didn't realize how much myself until I journeyed into the past. Only two amazing people can make such a lasting impression.

Finally, I must recognize the greatest Author and Artist of all time. I don't know where He is leading me now, but looking back, I can see how perfectly He has written my story thus far. The past reveals His character and gives me the faith to press on.

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Finally, I recognize Laura Alnutt and Sarah Eshelman for inspiring me my junior year in college to dream big. As they shared in our writing classroom about their experiences in M.F.A. Creative Writing programs, they ignited a desire in me to join their ranks. Almost a decade later, that dream is finally realized.

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Chapter 1. Artist Statement

When I see a package of refrigerated, cheese-filled tortellini noodles in the grocery store, I inevitably remember my mother dumping two packages of the pasta into a pot of boiling water to make her chicken tortellini soup. The ingredient and the memory are inextricably linked. But what makes this memory so potent is that it reminds me of my mother's high standards for food and her love affair with soups because of their thrifty nature. Today, I find these same qualities in my own personality. To further discover this subconscious influence of childhood dishes, I chose to write a food memoir about my mother. As I seek to share this story, the food memoir is the perfect platform because my mother's character is inseparable from the food she cooked and the childhood recipes that I still cook today. Each chapter of my memoir realizes another way that my childhood, interconnected with food, affects my personal identity by reflecting on key moments with my mother's cooking. In addition, this food memoir also reveals the techniques that the subgenre uses to connect food to a person's personal or cultural identity. For my reader to better understand the significance of this literary practice within the food memoir, I offer an explanation of my creative work's literary context and background, my vision for the food memoir in relation to the reader, and the implications of the food memoir for the Christian scholar today.

Literary Context of Food Memoirs

Literary Traditions Found within Memoirs

My choice of the food memoir began with its ability to combine other genres into one effective medium. The food memoir, at its foundation, is a memoir and shares similar goals. Using both truth and fact, the memoirist offers a person's true story to the reader. Historically, the writing of memoirs has existed since Roman times. While the writing of memoirs may have

been restricted in the past to authors who lived exceptional lives, such as generals, businessmen, and politicians—people who were known for their achievements and did not appear to live the average life—the twentieth century brought a change to this genre. For the first time, an average person could write a memoir that could capture the attention of readers. According to Denis Ledoux in his *Turning Memories into Memoirs*, the increased interest in psychology and the ability to research family ancestry has prompted individuals to reflect on life and share their stories (12). In addition, modern technology has made publication only easier for the average person and contributed to the influx of memoirs, according to Paula Balzer's book, *Writing and Selling Your Memoir: How to Craft Your Life Story so that Somebody Else Will Actually Want To Read It*. In today's world, everyone has a story to tell, and anyone can write his story for others to read. This literary context of the memoir genre as a whole sets the stage for the introduction of the food memoir which helps the average reader consider the outside influences in his life as revealed through food.

When my mother passed away, I wanted to remember her stories and who she was—the good and the bad—by writing a memoir that connected her character to the recipes that I still cook today. While her story and mine may seem average, the beauty of the memoir genre is that it brings significance to everyday moments as the writer recalls memories. With my food memoir, I walk through everyday experiences with my mom and allow them to bring significance to my conclusions about myself today.

Literary Traditions Found within Cookbooks

Over the years, writers have used various associations, contexts, and perspectives to share their personal story in the memoir. When I decided to focus on the memoir genre to tell my mother's story, I realized that the food memoir added a unique addition to the typical memoir, an

addition that pays homage to the classic cookbook. In fact, the food memoir suggests that one of the best ways to share a person's story is through food. A culinary experience can become the doorway to self-realization or a career path; sometimes, food helps the individual connect with his family or a culture. This connection is especially seen today when people have more access to various cuisines than ever before. Yet, every person identifies with a home-cooked meal, Mom's cooking, or the food of his childhood. Because cuisine options are so numerous, the food choices that people do make often reveal their lifestyle, where they are from, and what culture they identify with.

Another reason that the cookbook element of food elevates the memoir is that culinary experiences provide a common ground for humanity. Because my creative work focuses on the connection between identity and food, the full literary context of not just the memoir, but also the cookbook, needs to be considered. According to Deya Bhattacharya's article, "How the Traditional Cookbook Evolved into the Food Memoir," this recently recognized subgenre of the memoir category is also a necessary descendant of traditional cookbooks. As authors and "foodies" increasingly realize the connection between food and memory, they seek to personalize their recipes with narratives. To explain this evolution, Barbara Frey Waxman remarks in her article, "Food Memoirs: What They Are, Why They Are Popular, and Why They Belong in the Classroom," that this this subgenre is "about the treasury of metaphorical associations that link food with love and emotional nourishment that are often present in the personal histories and confessions of food memoirists" (363). The food memoir fills in the gap between humanity's fascination with cookbooks and the contextual stories that make a dish more desirable and memorable. These memories and corresponding recipes form the foundation of the food memoir and compel writers to share their stories with fellow readers who also love food.

Reflecting the cookbook influence, my work traces my mother's parental influence on my own perception of food. While I grew up, my mother fostered in me a love for food through the numerous restaurants our family visited and the army-size meals that she would make at home. She possessed a love for cooking, and I often found myself as a child reading through her various cookbooks and helping her in the kitchen. My childhood exposure to cooking and a love for food caused me to realize how this sensory experience influences a person. When I describe my mother to a stranger or relate an experience from childhood, food inevitably becomes part of the description. This early introduction to food in my creative work aligns with the cookbook aspect of the food memoir.

Literary Traditions Found within Narrative Writing

While the personal element of the story sets the food memoir apart from the cookbook and gives it the power to connect with readers, the narrative elements also contribute as needed literary traditions for this subgenre. Although a writer of food novels such as *Magic Bitter*, *Magic Sweet*, Charlie Holmberg illustrates the importance of narrative elements such as sensory description in the food memoir by drawing connections between a delicious dish and a captivating story. In the article "Why We Hunger for Novels about Food," Crystal King interviewed Holmberg who notes the power of food over the senses:

in writing, I think food is an excellent method of transportation. If I were to detail a table setting with food you've never heard of, but I describe a flaky crust, the way a gelatin gives underneath a knife, and the smell of burnt sugar, you are there. You smell and taste and see that meal. It gives a story, ancient magical tales included, a sense of realness.

Sensory detail makes any author's world real to the reader, and the food memoir embraces the rich description of food in order to draw the reader into the story. Although featuring fact versus

fiction, food memoirs embrace narrative elements, including plot, description, and characterization, in order to bring food to life. In the real world, people gather around a table to share a meal; this same relationship can occur in writing when the writer describes and introduces food to his reader. Through this shared experience, the writer and reader get to know each other. The food memoir, then, takes the true-story advantage from the memoir, incorporates narrative writing techniques, and includes cookbook recipes to reveal a person's identity.

The elements of narrative techniques enter my creative work as I select the key memories of my mother that connect to a recipe that I still use today. Certain recipes stand out because of the background that features key character moments and conflict. Family naturally provides these moments, both good and bad, that shape children and the path that they choose. For me, my parents encouraged my dreams of writing, theater, and education but also instilled high expectations. Sometimes, these high expectations manifested as simple prejudice or preference; and I found myself battling between my dreams and parental expectations. Of course, despite this conflict, a person cannot simply forget his family. Whenever I cook or eat a dish from my childhood, I am honoring that family connection as part of my identity. In addition, when my parents separated, my mother threw herself into cooking as a refuge and used homecooked meals to provide stability for her children. These two personal examples highlight the fact that a food memoir can connect a culinary dish to a childhood experience featuring family conflict. This conflict provides the momentum necessary to captivate the reader in my food memoir. A food memoir serves as the best platform to share my mother's story because it embraces the power of a memoir and narrative writing to tell her story while adding the shared fascination with food found in traditional cookbooks.

Project Vision for the Creative Work

The food memoir's ability to tell personal stories through memorable culinary experiences forms the foundation of my vision for this creative work in relation to readers. Overall, my intention with this food memoir is to reveal the characteristics that make up my mother's identity, qualities that continue to influence me today. To share these characteristics with the reader in narrative form, I have chosen specific childhood recipes as the focus for each story. Each story not only memorializes an aspect of my mother's identity, such as her generosity and selflessness, but it also showcases her continual influence on my own identity through the food I cook. With this mother-daughter relationship and culinary influence in my food memoir, I show how a memoir can use food experiences to reveal a person's identity.

While the vision overall relates to this theme of food and identity, my vision for the readers includes a reflection on personal identity. As the reader discovers the influence of food on a person's individuality as seen in my creative work, he should be encouraged to reflect on the influences in his own life. Family affects the individual, and the process repeats itself from generation to generation. This connection sometimes manifests itself in recipes that are passed down. While the family dynamics constantly change, going through stages of turmoil and peace, the recipes stand as a unifying and unchanging element. As readers consider the ageless influence of food in family and identity, they should be prompted to reflect on the family dynamic in their own lives. In my own memoir, the interconnected stories and recipes should prompt the reader to consider how each generation influences the next. For example, my mother's influence, even though she has passed away, continues to affect simple things such as my food choices. Implementing the vision for my readers, my food memoir records my personal reflection on this generational influence through food.

Since the food memoir specifically discusses the role of food in forming identity, readers should reflect on food's specific influence in their lives. Food offers a picture of a person's background and identity, and a writer can capitalize on this relationship to reveal character. Since food offers a sensory means for characterization, the food memoir showcases a work that relies on this technique. As I share the recipes connected to my mother's stories, I also use imagery and description to help the reader picture, smell, and taste the various dishes. In turn, the reader should consider the food choices in his own life and how they expose his childhood and personality. Beyond the childhood aspect, however, food options are also unlimited; in the process of reading new recipes and culinary experiences, the reader may be prompted to try something new. With this new experience, the reader's identity continues to grow and develop.

For my own food memoir, I embrace this vision of self-discovery by featuring specific culinary memories. One of the included stories in my food memoir recounts a memory when my mother yearned to make some college students from India feel more at home in the United States. She decided to invite them over to our kitchen so that they could show her how to prepare one of their ethnic dishes. From this food memory, I not only saw my mother's generosity on full display but also added an appreciation of Indian culture and cuisine to my own identity. This personal reflection on the influence of food on identity is a corresponding reaction I expect from the reader, and the vision overall is to show how the food memoir unfolds a person's identity within a culinary context.

Academic Significance of the Food Memoir

While readers of my food memoir should see a combination of memoir, cookbook, and narrative elements at work in revealing my mother's influence on my identity, the Christian

scholar should consider the food memoir's significance in relation to current trends and biblical principles.

Academic Significance to the Study of Multiculturalism

Today, scholars acknowledge the growing interest in globalism and multiculturalism and study its evolving influence on readers and writers. In his article, "Telling Tasty Stories: How Three Food Writers Found Their Niche," Alex Espinoza remarks, "Food writing is an exploding field and continues to change with the rise of digital and culinary appetites, sparked by social media behemoths like Instagram and Pinterest." Citing a specific example, he features author Elazar Sontag who recently published his book, *Flavors of Oakland*, to feature the stories and recipes of a complex and multicultural American community. Sontag explains his perspective on food writing:

I often tell people that I identity myself more as a writer who uses food as a way to tell the stories of people than I do as a food writer. Really, for me, food is a lens instead of being the final product of what I have my eye on . . . You can be telling these really complicated, intense stories of race and gender and sexuality and economic disparity but in one way or another they all touch back on food. That's something we can all understand.

Sontag is just one writer in today's horizon of food writers who taps into the power of self-discovery and multiculturalism by engaging in the common ground of food. By its very definition, the food memoir represents a powerful example that views the culture behind a person's identity from a culinary perspective. The academic significance of this field of multiculturalism is both found and applied within my creative project. In my food memoir, several chapters feature the influence of Indian cuisine on my childhood when my mom

introduced it into her kitchen. While Christian scholars note this current trend of multiculturalism, they should also explore its implications on the food memoir specifically.

Academic Significance to the Christian Scholar

In addition to its reflection of current trends such as multiculturalism, the food memoir offers Christian scholars an effective representation of how the thread of God's sovereignty and creativity can be found in narrative writing, both nonfiction and fiction. First of all, the theme of identity addresses the fact that divine influence dictates a person's family. An element so influential on who a person is can rarely be chosen. However, a person will feel this influence throughout his life. As memoir writers grapple with the influential forces of family, Christian scholars can see this influence as a sign of God's sovereignty. In addition, Christian scholars can see the integral plot element of conflict as a reflection of God's sovereignty in using trials for good. Memoirs often focus on someone's story of hardship in which he discovers a truth about himself and life. These stories testify to the fact that God does use trials for good, as stated in Romans 8:28. Applying the discussion of divine influence in my own work, I acknowledge the coincidences in my mother's story that show a greater hand at work. The perspective of looking back also offers me the opportunity to see how God used childhood experiences with food to mold my identity as an adult. The journey through dark or difficult times ends with the light of self-discovery, testifying to a divine, guiding hand.

Besides His sovereignty, the food memoir also presents a practical illustration of how mankind can follow in God's example of creation. From the beginning, He demonstrated a spirit of creativity and an appreciation for beauty when He created the world for humanity to enjoy. A true culinary experience takes elements that God made for man to appreciate and brings them together in a beautiful, orderly dish that showcases creative thinking. My creative work

acknowledges this divine creativity when it walks the reader through the details of various soups, sandwiches, and meals, testifying to the creative energy and appreciation of beauty granted mankind. While the food memoir holds interests for the Christian scholar in psychological and cultural fields, it also incorporates a study in and appreciation for art with its creativity. For the Christian reading or writing a memoir, the presence of these topics and principles in the food memoir and literature in general acknowledges a sense of community and supports God's presence and character.

Conclusion

As I analyze the literary context of the food memoir and the background of my creative work, this subgenre offers the best medium for realizing my vision for the reader and presents relevant topics of discussion for Christian scholars today. The various factors addressed in this study of the food memoir reveal the significance of connecting a person's identity to its outward manifestations in food. Food novelist David Baker in his book, *Vintage: A Novel*, explains the significance of this subgenre:

A dish is a story. . . . It's the story of the culture that created it, the person who made it, the story of the ingredients and where they're from, the tale of the meal's creation—successful or otherwise—and then of sharing it. The whole process is a form of narrative. The same goes for wine. . . . It's the story . . . of years of geology that created the region where the vines grow. It's the story of the culture of the region and then a time capsule of what happened weather-wise the year in which the grapes ripened, and finally what the winemaker did during that year. There are so many layers of narrative in food and wine that it's a rich field for exploration in writing (iii).

While I personally explore this field of writing, I discover a part of myself revealed in specific recipes cooked by my mother. While my food memoir endeavors to introduce readers to my mother's story through the recipes that she cooked, this work offers a broader application for readers and writers alike. The food memoir, in general, showcases key advantages from other genres, including the cookbook, the memoir, and narrative writing. My own creative work incorporates these advantages by including recipes, relying on a personal story as the foundation, and incorporating narrative writing techniques. For self-discovery and for character development, the writer must ask the deepest questions about family and identity. Food, perhaps, is one of the most tangible ways to honor the past and capture that person's story.

Chapter 2: Critical Paper

For many memoirists, the present task of writing entails a journey into the past so that the writer receives a better view of the future. Sometimes, though, these past influences manifest themselves in the present as a plate of fresh *al dente* pasta slathered in a homemade marinara or as a bowl of fragrant broth filled with succulent chicken and tender vegetables. The food memoirist views the everyday activity of eating as clues to the person. A recent food memoirist, Ramin Ganeshram, chef and author of historical novel *The General's Cook*, recognizes this connection between who she is and food. As she thinks about the food that reflects her identity, she comments the following:

I was . . . brought up in a time where people still really tried to assimilate so they downplayed their native culture with their kids. The one thing that remained a solid connection was the food we ate. I realized from a young age that I could get my parents to talk about their homes when we were eating the foods they had prepared from their respective cultures (320).

Ganeshram returns to the food of her childhood in determining her identity. Other food memoirists examine the food they eat to determine their path moving forward. Today, the academic community has noticed this unique practice within the food memoir genre, using culinary experiences to determine a person's identity. In her essay "Food Memoirs: What They Are, Why They Are Popular, and Why They Belong in the Literature Classroom," Barbara Frey Waxman notes that by connecting food with the person, the subgenre has the potential to address topics such as psychology, cultural identity, and personal development. She explains the encompassing nature of the food memoir: "Some food memoirists . . . treat readers to a bit of philosophy they have learned about where happiness lies and how to achieve it. And many of

these authors in telling their life stories give readers a little psychology on how to interact with others—even across cultures—and how to get to know themselves” (365). The ability of the food memoir to evolve into more than simple entertainment warrants attention from the academic community. The techniques that the food memoir uses to connect food to a person’s identity reveal that this subgenre’s effectiveness lies in its continued ability to borrow literary traditions from other genres and use them to connect with the average reader in today’s cultural environment.

Literary Traditions Found within the Food Memoir

The food memoir receives its ability to thrive as one of the growing subgenres in the academic community and with the average reader because it borrows the literary traditions, or strengths, of other genres, including the cookbook, the memoir, and narrative writing.

Cookbook Elements within the Food Memoir

First, the food memoir borrows heavily from the cookbook by featuring descriptions of food and, many times, actual recipes. These two features capitalize on the fact that since the twentieth century, the culinary arts have only grown in popularity. Of course, this popularity began with the basic cookbook. Despite the advent of modern technology, the traditional cookbook remains one of the most visual manifestations of the public’s fascination with food writing. Brian Amick notes in his article “Coronavirus pandemic leads to rise in cookbook sales” that with current events keeping people out of restaurants, the sale of cookbooks rose fifteen percent. He interviews Kristen McLean, an NPD analysis, who comments that “the strong 2020 growth in cookbooks makes sense given the fact that consumers are cooking many more meals at home. . . . We expect cookbook sales to remain strong for the foreseeable future as people seek variety in their day-to-day meals.” This interest in food, though, does not limit itself to the

cookbook but extends to the food memoir since the subgenre also offers to broaden the reader's horizons with different cuisines and new recipes.

Because of the nature of the food memoir, writers obviously must capture the reader's attention with their descriptions of the cooking, growing, and eating of food. Sasha Martin uses vivid descriptions in her food memoir, *Life from Scratch: A Memoir of Food, Family, and Forgiveness*, to tempt her readers' appetites for her mother's crepes. She describes them as the "simplest preparations . . . smeared with apricot jam, sprinkled with crushed walnuts, and stacked under a dusting of powdered sugar. . . . My favorite is a Hungarian-American hybrid: sliced fruit (whatever is on hand), a spoon of yogurt, and a drizzling of maple syrup" (22). After this delectable picture incorporating the senses of sight, smell, touch, hearing, and taste, Martin shares the recipe with the reader.

Whatever stage of the culinary experience a writer chooses, he must describe this process with similar detail as a cookbook, employing all five senses. However, the extent of this detail remains a topic of discussion. Publishers often welcome a subgenre that effectively combines two other genres, the cookbook and memoir. Some writers, however, have different thoughts about including the actual recipes. In her article for *The Guardian*, "Top 10 Culinary Memoirs," Isabel Vincent explains her reasoning for not including recipes:

When I was writing about the dinners I had with my elderly friend Edward, I made a decision early on not to include any recipes. Edward, an accomplished cook, rarely wrote down any instructions. . . . While the food we ate was certainly important, the book was not meant to be a cookbook, but instead a memoir about the nature of friendship. . . .

While I'm still a big fan of a good recipe book, . . . it's the stories in beautifully rendered memoirs that stay with me longer than any recipe.

Some writers, like Isabel Vincent, choose to leave out any recipes in traditional-cookbook form. Others, however, include a detailed recipe with its measurements and instructions as a gift to the reader. The theory behind this debate remains a personal choice dictated by the purpose of the individual's food memoir. One common element of all food memoirs, however, remains the attention to detail in regard to the food. With colorful imagery employing all five senses, the writer takes the reader on a journey, endeavoring to bring the culinary world to life. Regardless of the personal story involved, every food memoir effectively pulls a page from the classic cookbook and brings the reader to the common ground of a table.

Memoir Elements within the Food Memoir

While some may simply describe a food memoir as a cookbook with stories, this subgenre offers more than recipes and mouth-watering descriptions of dishes. The food memoir attracts readers because of its non-fiction, heart-felt stories set in the culinary world. As a subgenre, the food memoir takes full advantage of the best trait from the classic memoir, bringing a true-life story to the average reader. This unique trait of combining a cookbook's fascination with food with a captivating story began in 1825 when Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin introduced the world to the power of the food memoir. Now recognized as the first food memoir, his *Physiology of Taste: Or Meditations on Transcendent Gastronomy* includes Brillat-Savarin's well-known statement: "Tell me what you eat, and I will tell you what you are" (15). With this line, he sums up the ability of this type of memoir to approach an individual's story in a unique way. In her article, "Food Memoirs: What They Are, Why They Are Popular, and Why They Belong in the Literature Classroom," Barbara Frey Waxman clarifies this unique approach as a way of defining this subgenre of the memoir: "Culinary memoirs generally trace the memoirists' passage from youth to a maturity in which they have discovered a passion for food (eating it,

cooking it, writing about it, traveling to experience it, etc.) and established a niche in the world” (365). Unlike previous memoirs, Brillat-Savarin’s memoir connected the identity of an individual to the food that he ate by using everyday food as a means of capturing someone’s personality. His belief in revealing someone’s identity through food has since become the underlying message behind most food memoirs in the following decades.

Since 1825, the food memoir has only grown and developed into the landscape of cuisine and stories known today. While some focus on the cuisine of a place like France and others spin stories around the humble dishes of their childhood, every memoir connects the growing, cooking, or eating of food to its contextual memory. Some food memoirs stand out above the rest for accomplishing this connection between food and storytelling in a memorable way. Arlene Avakian in her article “Cooking Up Lives: Feminist Food Memoirs” notes the power of Julia Child in transforming the average reader’s perspective of French cooking with her classic food memoir, *My Life in France*. Child not only places her reader in France amongst its delectable cuisine, but she makes herself a personable guide through the post-World War II setting. In her article “Consuming Food Memoirs: Identity, Experience, Legitimization as Rhetorical Sustenance,” Kayla Bruce offers another example of a food memoirist that captures readers with her food and stories from the 1940s (2). M.F.K. Fisher, a legend in the world of food memoirs, became the first food writer to gain widespread popularity. With her food memoir, *The Gastronomical Me*, she offers readers gifted descriptions of food, coupled with riveting storytelling, that still sets standards today. In 2000, Anthony Bourdain introduced the chef’s food memoir with his *Kitchen Confidential*, bringing the world of restaurants to the reader’s attention in a fast-paced, adventurous food memoir. Of course, Julie Powell not only revitalized the name of Julia Child with her own food memoir, *Julie and Julia*, and brought French cooking into the

limelight again, but she also popularized the concept of an average person embarking on her own culinary adventure. Each of these memoirs, and many others like them, sets the standard for food memoirs and wets the readers' appetites for more stories surrounding the culinary arts. Although focused on food, the food memoir still follows in the footsteps of storytelling originally found in the memoir genre.

Narrative Elements within the Food Memoir

While this subgenre appeals to the common fascination with the culinary arts as found in the cookbook and offers readers a true-life story as a memoir, the food memoir gains key advantages when it incorporates narrative techniques from nonfiction and fiction. An initial analysis of food writing today reveals that narrative techniques have increasingly found their way into the food memoir. Specifically, narrative elements such as plot, description, and characterization are intrinsic parts of a captivating food memoir.

First, one major element that sets a memorable food memoir apart is plot. While cookbooks can include short anecdotes that provide context for the recipe, classically, the food memoir relies on the backbone of a narrative to connect the culinary aspects together. In her article "The cookbook-memoir hybrid: 'You're really putting yourself on the plate,'" Natasha May discusses this key difference between cookbooks and food memoirs in an interview with culinary historian Barbara Santich. Explaining that the food memoir offers more advantages than the cookbook, Santich notes that readers want more than tried-and-true recipes in today's internet culture. Instead, the plot aspect draws readers to the food memoir and keeps them caught up in the story. This narrative technique emerges when a writer evokes an emotional response in the reader to the plot, setting, and conflict. Sol Stein encourages nonfiction writers in his writing guide, *Stein on Writing*, to inject new life into their work by looking outside their genre. He

observes that “the lifelong habit of writing traditional nonfiction, passing on information, is curable through attention to the fiction writer’s primary job which is creating an emotional experience for the reader” (8). He notes that other genres, such as journalism, have adopted this practice for the better, and writers can apply Stein’s strategy to the food memoir as well.

Although food memoirists showcase their craft in descriptions of food, the writer needs these elements of plot to ensure that the description does not overpower the story. Cautioning nonfiction writers regarding too much description, Stein notes that “description is not static. It is part of the storytelling, and that is a key to description as it is used by our better writers: It has more than one function. . . . My advice to writers yearning for publication is to minimize description, and be sure you don’t stop the story while describing” (43-45). To keep the reader engaged, the writer must rely on more than vivid, colorful images of food in his memoir. While the description of food offers a sensual experience, the story with its conflict propels the reader through the memoir. Stein emphasizes the need for conflict in writing, even in the memoir:

All storytelling from the beginning of recorded time is based on somebody wanting something, facing obstacles, not getting it, trying to get it, trying to overcome obstacles, and finally getting or not getting what he wanted. What has interested listeners, readers, and viewers for centuries is available in the conscious use of desire in nonfiction (232).

For the story of a food memoir to grip the reader’s attention, the writer cannot rely on the common ground of food alone; that story needs the crucial ingredient of plot with its corresponding conflict in order to engage the reader.

In addition to these key plot elements, a food memoir stands out when it adapts narrative techniques of characterization. Even though he is discussing characterization in fiction, Stein

offers a characterization technique that fits within the food memoir, a technique that connects a character's identity with the food he eats:

food, drink, and the places they are consumed are markers. If the reader knows a character drinks popular brands of American beer, rye whiskey, and chilled red wine, what does the reader guess about the character's background? If the character drinks Scotch, Perrier, and martinis straight up, does the reader have a different view? . . . These markers are useful. Fizzy wine or coolers would not be the choice of people with educated palates. Nor would you be likely to find people with educated palates in line in a fast-food take-out joint (79).

By using this principle, food memoirs such as Ruth Reichl's *Tender at the Bone: Growing Up at the Table* stand out among other memoirs because they bring not only culinary dishes to life for the reader but also the people in the story through in-depth characterization. In her *New York Times* review, "'Tender at the Bone': Overcoming Obstacles by Learning to Cook Well," Ruth Adams Bronz praises not only Reichl's rich culinary descriptions but also the many colorful characters throughout its pages. Within the first chapter, Reichl shares a story of her mother who was "getting impatient for the day to begin" and used her "sweet and accommodating" father as a test for determining if food was spoiled (3-4). Throughout her memoir, the characters and food are inseparable because she believes that "food could be a way of making sense of the world. If you watched people as they ate, you could find out who they were" (6). A good memoir such as Reichl's uses the characters' interactions with food and the choices made to reveal the character's growth across the story.

While memoir writers use character development techniques apparent in narrative writing to reveal their characters, many times they also use the visual manifestation of food to reveal

their characters. In his fiction guide, *Creating Character Arcs*, for writing captivating characters, K.M. Weiland encourages writers to capture “the characteristic moment” of their characters to hook the reader. To accomplish this goal, the characters need a key scene that showcases their personality and desires. Writers of the food memoir apply this same principle to their writing by allowing the transformation of culinary tastes to reveal an aspect of character. As an example, Nigel Slater recounts a childhood memory in the first chapter of his memoir, *Toast*. His mother attempted to make toast for breakfast but burned it; Slater remarks, “It is impossible not to love someone who makes toast for you. People’s failings, even major ones such as when they make you wear short trousers to school, fall into insignificance as your teeth break through the rough, toasted crust and sink into the doughy cushion of white bread underneath” (5). By using a moment such as making toast, Slater draws a larger conclusion to identify his mother and their relationship. By applying these narrative techniques of characterization to the food memoir, writers help ensure that the subgenre continues to engage readers with its recipes, stories, and narrative elements.

One narrative pitfall related to plot and characterization that the food memoir genre is currently encountering is the complaint that these stories often sound the same to the reader. In a *Washington Post* article, “A spate of new food memoirs promised something different. But the lack of diversity is the same old story,” Charlotte Druckman explains the need for uniqueness in food memoirs:

the culinary memoir comes with limiting parameters. We have the chef’s memoir, the restaurant critic’s memoir and, the bulk of the category, the food writer’s memoir. The first two have been dominated by White men; the third is shared between men and

women, most of them White, and most of those by women have recipes scattered throughout and might just as easily be categorized as “narrative cookbooks.”

Food memoirs with similar backgrounds that feature stories about childhood and family can blur together in the reader’s mind. Writers with a similar ethnicity or writers that focus on the same cuisine can also fall into this trap when they do not include enough unique details to make their specific story stand out to the reader. Many memoirs have been written about French cuisine or painful childhoods. Many memoirs feature childhood recipes such as fried chicken or apple pie. However, these similar experiences and recipes are made unique by the surrounding details, such as the characters. In her food memoir *Life from Scratch*, Sasha Martin reflects on her story of a difficult childhood and mixed relationship with her mother—a common story seen in many food memoirs. Martin makes her take on this common story unique by allowing the recipes to reveal unique characteristics of her mother. For example, the crepes recipe previously mentioned reveals the extreme stinginess of her mother’s personality. Martin remembers that “Mom practiced what she preached. . . . If we had browning bananas, she’d whip up a batch of her Hungarian crepes. . . . The result, endlessly drippy and sweet, was one of our favorite childhood treats—one that made us believe that our lives were as ordinary as any other” (21). Connecting the food imagery with character-revealing details ensures that the description has a purpose and that the characters are properly brought to life. While food remains a common ground that stands the test of time, the food memoir needs to continue to evolve by incorporating these narrative techniques and bringing new characters and unique details to the reader.

As this subgenre of the memoir has grown in popularity, the education world has started to take notice and acknowledge these narrative techniques found in the food memoir by introducing them to the classroom. In her essay, “Food Memoirs: What They Are, Why They

Are Popular, and Why They Belong in the Literature Classroom,” Barbara Frey Waxman points out the exceptional narrative writing in food memoirs, making them approachable for even students:

providing an unthreatening context with which we are familiar (since we all have to eat), these food memoirs will reach out even to reluctant readers and turn reading into an enjoyable activity, teaching students about the power of a vivid description, the issues of selecting and arranging events in one’s life story to fulfill a specific purpose and invent a particular version of the self, the methods of creating a lively character portrait or an engaging voice, especially a witty one, and many other literary topics (381).

Offering more than anecdotes surrounding recipes, the food memoir offers exploration of character, plot elements, description, and other writing techniques as perfect examples of effective narrative craft. Of course, the writer must pay attention to the description of any food in his food memoir; more importantly, though, the writer must bring the story element of his food memoir alive through rich, complex characters that the reader will remember. These techniques trace directly to narrative storytelling, and the more that a food memoir embraces them, the more the genre will continue to connect to readers today.

Implications of Academic Studies of the Food Memoir

Readers have connected with food memoirs since 1825 and Brillat-Savarin’s *Physiology of Taste*. An analysis of food memoirs reveals that one reason for this popularity is that this subgenre borrows from several other genres to its advantage. By pulling the food element from cookbooks, the story aspect from memoirs, and narrative writing techniques, the food memoir offers an engaging product to the average reader. However, the simple assembly of these components is not enough to warrant the food memoir’s continual success and its place in the

academic community. The food memoir continues to connect to the average reader because it resonates with today's culture by offering aspects of psychology, multiculturalism, and personal development. Traces of these fields can be found in the food memoir's unique way of revealing identity through food.

Academic Studies of Psychology within the Food Memoir

To achieve this connection between food and identity, the food memoir draws on proven psychological connections between memory and food. In their critical study, "Young Adults' Use of Emotional Food Memories To Build Resilience," Elisabeth von Essen and Fredrika Martensson investigate the link between food and memory in young adults. They explain the steps of this process:

young adults commonly use food choice and mealtimes in everyday life to narrate their own life story and form an identity, for example as a vegetarian or a vegan. . . . Specific traditions and habits of preparing food and arranging mealtimes are associated with emotional experiences taking place in daily life and formed in the context of tradition, family and a discourse in society with specific ideals, taboos and value systems. . . . Preparing, cooking and serving food is described as an 'unexpressed intimacy' in which good and memorable meals become associated with family and friends and positive emotional states (210).

The sensory experience of food creates a powerful link to a specific memory, good or bad. As academic studies continue to analyze the implications of this psychological connection, the food memoir illustrates the findings of these studies when a distinguishing characteristic of identity is drawn from a food experience. Madhur Jaffrey and Diana Abu-Jaber explain how this process takes place in their article, "Home, Memory, and Identity in the Culinary Memoirs." They note

that “the culinary memoir is . . . a part of identity-construction. It is linked to both private and public settings, to ideas of home and childhood, and also to the ways in which they affect the formation of the subject. . . . When the subject remembers and narrates is then occasionally limited and/or triggered by such conditions” (96). With a food memoir, the writer shares the memories behind certain dishes that were instrumental in forming who he is. This power behind food and memory partly explains the food memoir’s resonance with readers.

Academic Studies in Multiculturalism within the Food Memoir

A relatively new factor contributing to the subgenre’s ability to connect with readers today is the rise in multiculturalism. In her article, “Food and Culture: Interconnections,” Margaret Visser explores the acceptance and influence of various foods in countries over the decades. She explains how each of these independent studies show that food and its corresponding culture cannot be separated:

postmodernism . . . achieves dramatic expression in the food we eat. The unrestricted desire that is central to postmodernism makes food symbolism irresistible. We eat postmodernly when we insist on having whatever is not normal or ordinary; . . . grazing on a hundred ethnic cuisines. . . . This is food as literature. At the same time, literature itself . . . increasingly describe[s], even discourse[s] at length upon, food. Whole novels are written with food as their main content, their driving force, their passion” (124).

The food memoir indicates how food is intertwined with personal identity. The act of eating or cooking becomes a way to showcase and even expand personal identity. Martha C. Sims and Martine Stephens in their book *Living Folklore* explain the process that allows writers and readers to share and achieve a sense of identity through culinary experience. Beginning with the concept that mankind views food as an integral part of culture and tradition, Sims and Stephens

note how easily this tradition can be created and shared between parent and child or writer and reader:

We foreground as elements of tradition those features that groups rely on to maintain their current sense of group identity. . . . The concept of *continuity* suggests the importance of time and repetition in tradition, but it is also used to acknowledge that traditions do not always come to us from generations past. . . . Participation in and sharing of a particular group's traditions allows members to a group to feel they are a part of it. . . . In some cases, . . . we actively choose to take part in a group's traditions in order to create or confirm our own sense of identity within the group" (65-66).

With the modern trend of multiculturalism and cultural transmission through food, a specific type of food memoir has emerged. In these memoirs, a parent influences a child's identity through food by relating the family's culture to its cuisine. One example is Chef Marcus Samuelsson's food memoir *Yes, Chef: A Memoir*. He shares his journey of bridging the gap between his Ethiopian homeland and adopted country of Sweden. Adopted when he was three, Samuelsson reflects on his birth mother's identity and its influence on him:

I have never seen a picture of my mother, but I know how she cooked. For me, my mother is *berbere*, an Ethiopian spice mixture. You use it on everything, from lamb to chicken to roasted peanuts. It's our salt and pepper. I know she cooked with it because it's in the DNA of every Ethiopian mother. Right now, if I could, I would lead you to the red tin in my kitchen. . . . I would reach into this tin and grab a handful of the red-orange powder, and hold it up to your nose so you could smell the garlic, the ginger, the sundried chili (4).

While these food memoirists connect to their own culture through the process of cooking, they share this experience and introduce this new culture to their readers through the process of writing. With multiculturalism as an accepted field in the academic community, the food memoir with its themes of food and identity is an extension of multicultural principles.

Academic Studies in Personal Development within the Food Memoir

Besides an application of psychology and multiculturalism, the food memoir also embraces the current trend of personal development, also known as self-exploration or self-discovery. While this field can be traced to the teachings of Greek philosopher Aristotle, *Philcicio's* article "History of Personal Development" explains that the modern implications of self-discovery began in the early twentieth century with the publication of books like *The Secret* by Rhonda Byrnes. Since then, increased marketing of personal development has brought the journey of self-discovery to the attention of the average reader. The influence of self-discovery has made its way into the food memoir genre as well since many of the stories behind these culinary experiences involve a journey of self-discovery. In his memoir, *Savage Feast: Three Generations, Two Continents, and a Dinner Table*, Boris Fishman revisits his Russian culture and family heritage after his parents fled the Soviet Union when he was a child. "The author turns inward, mining his own life and appetites to tell a tale of family, shame, self-discovery and stunningly delicious food," Leah Koenig comments her *Wall Street Journal* review, "'Savage Feast' Review: Self-Discovery at the Family Table." Author and baker Jackie Kai Ellis chronicles her journey of self-discovery in her memoir *The Measure of My Powers: A Memoir of Food, Misery, and Paris*. In a CBC interview, "How Jackie Kai Ellis's Passion for Food Inspired a Journey of Self-Discovery," Ellis explains the influence of food on her life during one of her darkest times. "The moment I woke up in the morning, I would think of one thing that would

give me a reason to live for that day. Eating a chocolate chip cookie was the one thing that kept me going for many months. It was the idea of something so comforting and solitary. . . . That got me obsessed with baking and eventually took me to pastry school in Paris.” She concludes that “in Paris, . . . I let go of the fear that food would harm me, and I let it nourish me emotionally and physically for the very first time.” Both of these food memoirs indicate that food directly affects a person’s perception of who he is and offers a way to manifest that identity to those around him. Since the trend of personal development shows no signs of slowing down, the food memoir will continue to identify with the average reader in this aspect.

In a more specific application of personal development, the food memoir appeals to various readers by manifesting the link between food and identity in different ways. In some food memoirs, the writer’s journey is solely one of self-discovery. She recognizes key elements of her character and personality through food. Food memoirs like Emily Nunn’s *The Comfort Food Diaries: My Quest for the Perfect Dish to Mend a Broken Heart* and Tembi Locke’s *From Scratch: A Memoir of Love, Sicily, and Finding Home* feature a road to healing and self-awareness in addition to the culinary experience. Readers who have recently experienced a loss often connect to these food memoirs.

Other food memoirs, however, tell a different story in which the writer discovers a career path through food. Current New York chef Gabrielle Hamilton traces her journey through twenty years of kitchens before she discovers her identity as a chef. In her food memoir *Blood, Bones & Butter: The Inadvertent Education of a Reluctant Chef*, she begins the journey in her parents’ kitchen. She remembers those first steps in her journey:

it must have been my mother, the cook, who was in the kitchen with the six burners and the two-bin sink making lima bean salad and the asparagus vinaigrette and the all-butter

shortcakes . . . doing ‘the bones’ as my father called it. But it was from him . . . we learned how to create beauty where none exists, how to be generous beyond our means, how to change a small corner of the world just by making a little dinner for a few friends. From him we learned how to make and give luminous parties” (10).

With these childhood memories as the cornerstone, Hamilton continues her culinary experience, eventually finding herself opening a restaurant in New York City. These career journeys often inspire readers seeking satisfaction in their work or as entrepreneurs. Whether the food memoir focuses on a journey of self-discovery or career building, both stories achieve the journey through food.

A third type of food memoir related to personal development focuses on the parental influence. Through food, the parent serves as the main conduit for the conflict or inspiration that fosters a writer’s personal identity. For some food memoirs, the parent influences the writer’s identity through the experience of cooking or eating. In her food memoir *Always Home: A Daughter’s Recipes and Stories*, Fanny Singer remembers the valuable lessons concerning food, work, and first impressions that her mother, Alice Waters, taught her. On one occasion, she remembers her mother arriving

at the governor of California’s mansion in Sacramento for the inaugural event she’s catering and immediately insist on starting a fire in the disused, presumed-decorative fireplace—for grilling the bread for bruschetta, of course! Despite the initial eye rolling, sweating, and concerned protestations from the staff, my mother prevails—and the first guests arrive to the smell of woodsmoke and grilling bread, an elemental perfume. The grilled bread, the handmade mozzarella, still warm from the brine, the splash of green

olive oil, together with the aroma of the room, make the place feel like no other well-heeled political event out there (3).

This short anecdote not only reveals beautiful description and apt characterization but also connects a food experience to a positive parental teaching moment.

While the experience of cooking or eating is often an enjoyable one, readers sometimes better relate to other food memoirs that explore the negative experiences associated with a parent and food. Nigel Slater came face to face with the most painful experiences of his childhood when he chose to write his food memoir, *Toast*. He recalls the process of writing his memoir:

At first it was all straightforward enough. Oat cookies reminded me of coming home from school; green beans brought back the smell of the farm where I was sent to pick them. . . . But the more I ate the more I realized that not every mouthful produced a memory so sweet. A dish of canned raspberries revisited a violent thrashing from my father that brought me to a point of near collapse (I had spilt them and their scarlet juice on the new gray carpet, and he was distraught from being newly widowed) (11).

Food memoirs such as Slater's emphasize the power of food to recall memories, whether they be good or bad. When the writer connects to his own memories, he triggers a similar process in the reader. Both of these versions of the food memoir illustrate the power of a parent to affect a child's identity through food. A review of these various examples from food memoirs shows the underlying theme of food influencing identity. This influence often reveals itself in a story of self-discovery or career-making. Other memoirs focus further on the specific influence of a parent on the child's early experiences with food. As old memories resurface with childhood recipes, these recipes and their corresponding stories not only remind the writer of an aspect of the parent's personality but also reveal the influence on personal identity.

Conclusion

Readers today continue to connect with this subgenre because it offers various perspectives in psychology, multiculturalism, and personal development; in addition to manifesting these various fields, the food memoir employs the best advantages of other genres, including the cookbook, the memoir, and narrative writing. A successful food memoir must incorporate these various fields and techniques so that it can continue to appeal to the modern reader. Writers in this genre should be encouraged to take advantage of these techniques to not only improve their food memoir but to also make it stand out to the reader. Many times, food offers a place of common ground for people to gather and make memories. The food memoir taps into this magic behind culinary experiences by sharing it in story form with readers. Despite the complexity found within this growing subgenre, the food memoir, at its foundation, embraces two major themes that allow it to surpass cultural and personal boundaries. In the end, the food memoir is all about the food and the people.

Chapter 3: Creative Manuscript

The Taste of Sunshine

The smell of cumin always makes me pause. The earthy flavor, both raw and refined, transports me to a place soaked with sun and the natural hardness of the soil. The feeling reminds me of that moment I step into the summer afternoon after being trapped inside air conditioning for hours and pause, feeling the rays sink into my skin and warm me from the inside out. Just a few minutes more and I'll start to sweat, but right now, the earth and its warmth embrace me, and in that moment's pause, I acknowledge its power.

For me, cumin adds this warmth to any dish and transforms it into a savory complex that leaves a reverent silence around the dinner table. Before I knew it stood as a foundational block in Mexican and Middle Eastern cuisine or in chili potlucks, this smell first introduced itself to me in a hole-in-the-wall Indian grocery store in a Kansas strip mall.

My mother led the way. She, too, had never seen a grocery store that transported someone to another culture, another country. My younger brother and I clung to her shadow—we were too old to physically cling to her. Painfully aware of our pale skin, we opened the door to a world immediately richer, warmer, and teeming with energy. A pulsating rhythm, almost animalistic in its tempo, greeted our ears and sent our pulses throbbing with its beat. Every aisle stood packed with more boxes, produce, and bags than any American grocery store I had ever seen. But what I remember most was the most intoxicating smell that met us. It drew us in, despite our hesitancy. The smell of cumin—and coriander, turmeric, mustard, chili, paprika, saffron, fenugreek, and a host of other spices that we didn't know existed in the world of flavor. My mother and I shared a common love for unusual smells—the JC Penny Outlet store, new

shoes, or freshly-laid tar roads. The smell of cumin working its magic in a pot of chicken biryani simmering on the back of the stove is still one of my favorites.

Today, I rediscover that magic when I open a glass spice bottle of cumin. Even though the brand is American, the smell that curls from the bottle takes me halfway across the world and half a lifetime ago. With this humble brown spice, I hope to transform leftover chicken thighs into a mouth-watering childhood favorite, tandoori chicken.

At the mention of tandoori chicken, a childhood image surfaces in my memory, one burned into my mind of my dad grilling tandoori chicken in the rain on his gas grill. With the sharp features of a Ken Barbie doll softened by a boy-next-door persona, my dad battles the elements of rain and fire. The smoke of the grill mixes with the humid downpour as greasy flames lap the air. The wildness of the moment as nature in all its forms collides works its way into the charred exterior of the juicy meat.

Somehow, I'm hoping my air fryer and googled recipe will achieve a shadow of the same affect. While I prepare my hodge-podge of a marinade that somehow includes stoneground Dijon mustard, I remember watching my mom carefully pour organic yogurt into a bowl. Lemon juice, oil, and pungent spices would mix together, turning the yogurt into a glowing orange. My current marinade remains a bland tan color, no matter how much paprika I add.

As my chicken thighs sink below the surface of the marinade, my phone pulls me from this odd moment balanced between a closed past and the seemingly calm present. I pause to check the text, and everything around me stops. All of a sudden, I am yanked back into the past, back to a time when life moved in a rhythm around me and my mom's kitchen evoked the flavors of a world far away from the cornfields and suburbs of Kansas. Somehow, that childhood

rises out of the shadows of memory and offers to wrap me in the present with its warmth and color.

Could my husband and I stop long enough to breathe and enjoy this opportunity? In forty-five minutes, I would find out.

The familiar drone of the garage door rising signals that the time has come. Ethan has just pulled into the driveway after a long day of supervising construction projects in the hot Florida summer. Both I and my Husky puppy freeze, look at each other, and then scamper to the side door that leads to the garage. When he finally opens the door into the house, he finds us dancing in place, waiting expectantly. She throws up a wolf howl while I dive in for a hug.

“Ethan! You’ll never guess who texted me today!”

Pleasantly surprised at finding me on tip toe just on the other side of the door, he gathers me into his arms and plants a kiss on my lips. “Hello, honey. How was your day?”

I brush pleasantries and romance aside, attempting to talk against his lips. “Guess who texted me!”

Relinquishing his attempt at a greeting, Ethan shoves the tiredness of the day aside like a good husband to appear interested in my news. “Who was it?”

“You’ll never guess! Bhaskar texted me, he and his family are in town for vacation.”

A small degree of surprise flickers on Ethan’s face. Bhaskar was the last person he expected me to mention. “Oh, really. What did he want?”

I’m so excited, but I’m trying so hard to not simply get on my knees and beg Ethan for this opportunity. At the same time, I’m half-afraid that Ethan will agree, and then I’ll find myself in a worse position, having to remember happy memories that sit next door to painful ones. If I

stop long enough to explore memory lane, will I be able to shut the door again in the present without every item around me recalling a story or an image?

Taking a breath, I make the plunge. “He and his family are in town. They want to know if we can get together for dinner. Can we? It’s been so long, I can’t believe they’re here!”

Perhaps I knew the answer already, because, to my lack of surprise, Ethan’s face floods with sunshine. “Of course, Honey. What time? I just want to work out first.”

My mind blows past his one condition—I can’t believe that after all these years, I finally get the chance to reconnect with a childhood friend. But this dinner date is only disguised as a chance to catch up with an old friend. In the shadows around the table, I know I’ll sense the outline of someone else joining us—my mother. Beside her will be the ghosts of my parents’ marriage, of my childhood, of the family we once were but will never be again. And they all will bear the scent of spice and cumin.

As Ethan strides through the kitchen and unloads his pockets of loose change and keys, I trail closely behind, yet am still stuck in the past. “Last time I saw Bhaskar, I was fifteen years old.”

“Really?” Ethan turns to me while he unbuttons his collar.

Standing there in our kitchen, I realize just how many years have transpired. Almost two decades. My mind scans them and recalls the last time I saw Bhaskar.

The floor of the Kansas City airport gleamed with mosaics and random planets. I always thought the architects designed the airport floor as a favor to parents to keep their bored children occupied in between flights. As proof, my younger brother, Garrett, followed the mosaic dotted line on the floor like a game of follow-the-leader. A baseball cap too big for him sagged over his forehead. While I may have secretly longed to join his shenanigans, the teenage part of me

placed greater priority on comparing my hair and clothes with what I saw other girls wearing around me.

Bhaskar, a backpack on his shoulders and worn tennis shoes on his feet, scuffed his shoes against the floor while he tried to hide the tears. He kept sniffing and wiping his nose with the back of his hand. The fluorescent lights of the airport glared off his glasses, and I wondered if he knew they were helping to distract us from the tears making his eyes glassy.

He shuffled his way into line to pass through airport security. Even though he stood just feet away from the gate, my mom insisted on staying with him until the last moment. Despite the sadness of saying goodbye, she continued to smile and laugh as if she knew that Bhaskar was struggling to say goodbye and she wanted to spare him the anguish. New England winters, New Jersey traffic, and even possible restaurants to try all came up without our mentioning the true reason behind all these conversation topics.

Giving him one final hug, Mom tucked a grocery bag into his hand. “Mint chutney sandwiches for the flight,” she said.

Bhaskar laughed. He shouldn’t have expected my mom to do anything less. Then, turning toward us with a final wave, he disappeared around the corner. Two years of exploring another world closed. Only then did I realize that I had no idea how to venture back to our “normal” world. In hindsight, I don’t think my parents knew the way back either.

Back in the present, I try once again to impress upon Ethan how important this part of my childhood is. For some reason, I need him to understand the uniqueness of my family, as if understanding this chapter of my history will explain the other chapters I can’t explain about me, about my parents, and about my mom.

“Other kids our age were hanging out with friends, playing sports. But Garrett and I, we were more comfortable around college students from India.”

“Wow.” Ethan laughs at the family picture I show him—of me, a teenage girl with braces and frizzy hair pulled back into a ponytail. Garrett, scrawny and goofy with his too-large baseball cap and watch, sits on the shoulders of a college student with olive skin and curly black hair. My mom and dad lean into the picture. Never touching, they smile and squint into the sun. Included in this family portrait are two college students. One, Bhaskar, has his arms around my shoulders and my mom’s. The other, Harsha, is Bhaskar’s roommate and serving as Garrett’s perch in this captured moment.

“Bhaskar and Harsha were like older brothers to Garrett and me,” I say, flipping through more memories.

I chuckle at another picture of my mother holding a cricket bat in our driveway while Bhaskar pitches her a ball. Ethan doesn’t know the chuckle comes from the multitude of other images flooding my mind, ones that were not captured on camera and I can’t adequately capture with words. The funny faces, the teasing, the family revelry.

“My mom invited them over to the house all the time—birthdays, holidays, you name it.” Looking up into Ethan’s eyes, I plead, “Can we please meet them? I really want you to meet Bhaskar.”

Ethan laughs. “I already said yes! Where should we go with them?”

“I would say an Indian restaurant . . .”

My mind recalls the spicy, fried Indian food of my childhood. A warm scent accompanies it, intoxicating and burning, smelling of earth and fire. One particular Indian restaurant in Kansas City, Ruchi’s, offered the best Indian cuisine I had ever tasted. To this day, I fondly remember

the fiery, red Chicken 65 with roasted cashews, flaky loaves of naan, and savory chicken biryani. Unfortunately, Ruchi's has set the bar very high for other Indian restaurants.

“There aren't any good Indian restaurants in Pensacola I would take him to.”

I don't tell Ethan that I haven't tested this conclusion for myself. One day, Mom came home after lunch with a friend at a local Indian restaurant in Pensacola and announced, “There's just no Indian restaurants here that can compare with Ruchi's.”

I can't help but wonder if the reason no Indian restaurant comes close is that we're no longer the same family. For me, Ruchi's represents a time when our family smiled. We weren't afraid to sit around a table with friends because we had no reason to wear a mask and play the part of a perfect family. The last time I went to Ruchi's, I had just buried my mother's ashes in a tiny country cemetery one mile from my childhood home. For some reason, the food didn't taste as delicious as I remembered it, and I haven't stepped inside an Indian restaurant since.

I can hear my mom's voice in my head. *Who needs an Indian restaurant when you can make your own?*

Out loud, I ask Ethan, “What about Cactus Flower?”

While I hear Ethan's response, “Sure! That sounds good,” I can also hear my mom exclaiming, *Seriously, a Mexican restaurant? You know how to make Indian food. What about Bombay potatoes—unless you're still afraid of frying. How about biryani and raita? Have you ever met an Indian who could resist a good chicken biryani like mine?*

“I think they'll like it—Cactus Flower doesn't serve greasy Mexican food. It's fresher, more like California Mexican. And you can pick your spice level.” I try to convince the voice in my head that we're picking the right place to meet Bhaskar after all these years.

Even after I text Bhaskar back and he agrees to meet us at the Mexican restaurant, I can still imagine the conversation with my mom. *That poor family, you're making them drive an hour to meet you! At that rate, why didn't you invite him to your house and serve him a proper homemade meal? I taught you better.*

Indeed, she had. My mother was the only one in our family, and the only American I know, who came remotely close to mastering Indian cooking. Her hand-written notes and recipes still sit in a cupboard in my kitchen right where she left them, mostly untouched.

That evening, my excitement grows as Ethan and I wait in the lobby of Cactus Flower despite the gray clouds glowering overhead. My eyes are glued to the window looking out into the wet parking lot as I yearn for that first glance of Bhaskar. Would I recognize him? Would he recognize me? Fifteen years can really change a person, and we both have experienced almost all the major life changes possible for someone our age—college, marriage, major jobs, and family.

“I think that’s them,” Ethan says, pointing my attention to a woman and a girl standing in the parking lot. Their long, glossy black hair and tanned skin make me think that they could be Bhaskar’s wife and daughter, but I’m not sure.

“Once I see Bhaskar, I’ll know.”

Seeing a woman from India with her daughter reminds me of another image from another time. My mind travels back, past the first time I saw Bhaskar, to the first time I ever saw someone from India. Looking back, I can connect the dots, trace the paths life took us, and realize that from that moment on, everything changed.

While I was growing up as a child in a conservative family living in the Bible belt, every Sunday found our family attending church in a cheap, metal-siding structure that sat on a street corner surrounded by corn fields that stretched for miles. With Easter Sunday bringing the

attendance to a record of one hundred people, every family in this country church needed to pull its weight. My mom volunteered our family, then, to serve as greeters.

“It’ll be fun, a way for us to contribute. Remember how scared and lost we were that first time we visited? They laid out the welcome mat for us and made us feel right at home. Let’s do the same thing for someone else.”

That first Sunday as we entered the lobby with its faded carpet and walls covered in peeling, corrugated wallpaper, Mom announced to me, “You and Garrett will help us. Whatever we do, we do it as a family.”

“What about Sunday School?” I asked.

“You won’t be missing anything. This is actual service.”

I wonder now if she realized the example she was setting for her kids, a distrust of church authority and the inclination to only take herself seriously. Regardless of my opinion now, that day I silently watched as she busily arranged the “welcome” mugs full of pens, chocolates, and brochures for guests. Her busyness signaled the end of the conversation.

Disgruntled at missing my once-a-week opportunity to socialize in Sunday School with other girls my age, I wandered around the lobby. Boredom drove me to the point of investigating the church bulletin board with its yard sales and nursery announcements. Then, someone caught my eye.

A woman walked toward me, but I had never seen anyone like her in all my Kansas country life. Long, shiny black hair curled to her waist in a thick braid. Her wide smile revealed white teeth that contrasted beautifully with her tan skin. But what attracted my attention the most were her baggy, linen pants and jewel-toned purple tunic that reached to her knees. A shawl boasting gold and red embroidery wrapped over her shoulders. If I hadn’t known better, I would

have thought that she wandered off the set of an Easter play. She must have caught my staring, for she approached me with her bright smile.

“Where is the—?” she asked.

Due to my shock, I still have no idea what she actually said. Her voice carried a thick accent that my ears weren’t used to. Speechless, I pointed to the sanctuary since most visitors wanted to go that direction.

She nodded her thanks and left in the direction that I indicated.

As soon as her back was turned, I scampered back to the safety of my parents. For this very reason, I wished that my mom wouldn’t force our family to do things that brought me face-to-face with strangers and placed me in the predicament of talking to them.

“Mom! I just saw someone. She looked like someone from the Bible, she was wearing these strange clothes.”

“Really.”

My mom’s eyes were focused outside the church’s main doors at a family crowding up the sidewalk. She and my dad hurried over to the main doors. Using what little body weight existed in her petite frame, my mom swung open the main door and offered her biggest smile.

“Welcome!”

As she and my dad rambled about the church, I approached, on cue, with a “welcome” mug. While they introduced me as their daughter and pointed to my brother hiding behind the display of other “welcome” mugs, I decided that now wasn’t the time to further discuss the unusual lady that I saw. After all, I would probably never see her again.

As the minutes ticked by, the morning continued as normal. Guests filtered through the main doors, and we handed out “welcome” mugs filled with church pens and chocolates. The

sanctuary tried to fill up its one hundred chairs, and Mrs. Mullins, the church's aging pianist and music teacher, plunged into her rendition of "How Great Thou Art."

"Mike, let's head in."

Mom gathered up her purse, sweater, and "church" bag—everyone's Bibles piled into one tote—while Dad carefully locked the front doors. With Mom taking the lead, she hurried down the sanctuary's main aisle to the front row with my brother, Dad, and me sheepishly following.

As the last note of the hymn hovered in the air, Pastor Gary approached the faded wooden pulpit and adjusted his lapel mic.

"Good morning, friends, church family, guests. Before we get started, I'd like to introduce you to a new member of our church and school family. Brother Rick, would you please come?"

Brother Rick—I knew him better as Mr. Culver—wore the same uniform to church every Sunday, his western slacks, boots, and leather suit jacket. Whenever he deigned to stop and talk to my dad, I realized how short he actually was. But he made up for his stature by exuding confidence and holding key positions as a deacon in the church and board member for the attached Christian school.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he proclaimed, gripping both sides of the pulpit as if he owned it, "I'd like to introduce you to Mr. Sabu Joseph, our new high school science teacher. He and his wife Shobha and their daughter, Helen, recently arrived from India. Please join me in welcoming them."

While the rest of the congregation clapped, I twisted around in my seat to see a man and a woman standing in the back. The man with his salt-and-pepper coif of hair and thick caterpillar

moustache reminded me of a Bible illustration card of King Saul, stoic and mysterious. But the woman next to him wore a shawl and purple tunic that I recognized. The mystery woman from the lobby. Turns out, she wasn't just a visitor. She was our church's newest member.

"That's the woman I saw!" I whispered fiercely in Mom's ear.

My mom simply nodded. From her lack of enthusiasm, I assumed that the mystery was solved and closed, put in the past to be rarely remembered as a fluke event.

After the service, though, Mom steered my dad toward the back of the church. Garrett and I followed like ducklings in a row.

"We got to say hi." She gestured toward the Josephs who stood in the corner and appeared lost despite their smiles. Even after the service was over, she couldn't turn off her greeter instincts.

Even though these ventures were never his idea, my dad always found himself pushed to the front as the face of the campaign. I used to think that if Dad were the political counterpart to a king, Mom would be an acting prime minister.

Straightening his entire six-foot frame, my dad tentatively approached the new science teacher and held out his hand. "Good morning, nice to meet you. I'm Mike. This is my wife, Mona."

My mom grinned broadly and shook Mr. Joseph's hand. With the initial introduction over, she was free to take control of the conversation. Turning her full attention on the wife, Mrs. Joseph, she asked, "What are your names? How long have you been here?"

Mrs. Joseph's husband promptly answered the question. "My name is Sabu."

"Sabu?" my dad asked, testing out the name on his tongue.

"Yes, Sabu." Sabu then gestured toward his wife. "And this is Shobha."

The strange woman flashed her bright smile, which I noticed now was more nervous than when she and I were standing alone in the hallway earlier.

“Where are you staying?” my mom asked, resuming control of the conversation.

Shobha looked up at her husband and waited for him to respond.

Sabu’s voice rose in excitement, and his bony fingers gesticulated wildly. “We plan to get house. Right now, we stay with Shobha’s parents. They so kind to let us stay.”

Shobha turned to my mom. “My sister and her husband and her son are also staying with them. They came here just a little bit before.”

My mom’s eyes grew wide, but she didn’t say anything. Some kind of unspoken cry for help must have passed between the two women, one that only wives and mothers understand.

After we said our goodbyes, we trudged into the parking lot. The car doors had barely closed before Mom exclaimed, “That poor family, all crammed into one house.” Turning to my dad, she said, “We need to make them a meal. Let’s stop by Hyvee, get some fresh bread. I’m going to make our sub sandwiches.”

The mention of sub sandwiches made my mouth immediately salivate. For me, this sandwich represented the perfect end to a busy summer day spent outside sweating in the sun. After letting the hot water from a shower rinse off a day of weeding and climbing trees, I would relish the cool breeze of golden hour and sitting my tired legs down at the dinner table. The pinnacle of the day would sit before me, a wedge of Mom’s fresh sub sandwiches. No chips or sides would be necessary to complete the ensemble.

“Are we going to have some?” I asked.

Dad just sighed. We were all hungry after a longer-than-normal church service. But he knew better than to argue with Mom as he pointed the car away from home and further into town.

Annoyed, my mom responded, “Yes, we’ll have the same thing for lunch.” With that answer, she knew she had temporarily satiated the hungry children in the back seat.

Even though the last-minute grocery trip meant a longer wait for lunch, I knew that Mom’s famous sub sandwiches were worth it. Dozens of times, I had stood by her side in our square country kitchen as she layered meats and cheeses on fresh loaves of Italian bread. For some reason, each slice of meat and cheese needed to be paper thin and cut the same day to ensure ultimate freshness. The employees behind the deli counter learned to dread her approach because she guaranteed almost thirty minutes of micromanagement until the thickness met her approval.

However, these ultra-thin slices tore into shreds so easily that she didn’t trust me or anyone else to carefully peel apart the slices of roast beef and ham to make the sandwiches. Instead, she awarded me the safe charge of writing down the specific order of meats and cheese and resealing the Ziploc deli bags.

“What do we start with?” She asked every time, even though we had made these sandwiches dozens of times.

“American white,” I proudly answered, glad to be entrusted with something as crucial as the order of ingredients.

We had learned the hard way that American white cheese could never be placed next to ham or roast beef. After a few hours, the cheese softened and disintegrated into a gelatinous goo with no texture. Since then, Mom always checked the order twice.

Once the diamond slices of salty American cheese lay in neat rows on each loaf, she turned to me for the next layer.

“Salami.”

While she peeled apart the greasy slices, she sensed my eyes silently begging for a slice.

“Fine. Just one.”

We each indulged in one slice. Silence reigned in the kitchen as we took a moment to enjoy the burst of fennel and Italian seasoning.

“Okay, next one.” Mom wiped her hands on a paper towel.

“Provolone.”

“Are you sure?”

I should have known Mom would question. After all, we had arrived at another layer of cheese. With my confidence slightly shaken and pictures of dissolving cheese filling my mind, I double checked the file card that held the order of ingredients written in my blocky, print writing.

“Yep. Provolone. Then turkey.”

Mom didn’t respond, trusting my handwriting.

After the mild Provolone and black peppercorn turkey, my mom pulled out the bag of sweet Virginia ham. My mouth watered—ham was my weakness. I couldn’t help but imagine the sweet and salty flavor, one of the few times that I liked my separate worlds of sweet and salty to intermingle.

Mom carefully laid down each slice of ham, so thin that it would appear translucent if she held it up to the window. As if sensing my silent pleading, she said, “No, Danielle, you can’t have one. We don’t want to run out.”

“I didn’t say anything.” Inwardly, I fumed at the rejection.

With every slice of ham safely landed on the sandwiches, Mom arrived at the last layer, the most expensive layer. Slices of rare roast beef. After this crown jewel, Mom topped off the sandwiches with crunchy lettuce, tomato, and onion.

As she wrapped these six overflowing sandwiches tightly in plastic wrap like a mummy, my mind and mouth were ready to sit down and indulge. These sandwiches, although amazing any time of the day, were best when fresh. Only then did I receive the peak of satisfaction from the crusty bread with its doughy center, the meats and cheeses each featuring its individual flavor, and the crispness of the vegetables. The only thing left to add was a healthy drizzle of acidic and oily Italian dressing.

“Let’s go delivery these.”

I should have known that Mom would not rest and be able to eat until she had delivered the meal to the Josephs. Disgruntled, I sat in the back seat while my hunger pains battled with my uneasiness to meet the Josephs again. Sabu, with his energetic hand gestures and volley of sentences, gave me the most apprehension because I could barely understand two words that he said. Shobha, much quieter and clearer when she spoke, evoked a motherly charm, but my eyes couldn’t get past the foreignness of her bright tunic and pantaloons. At this point, all I wanted was to deliver the sandwiches as quickly as possible and run back to our house where the perfect summer lunch waited for me.

I hid behind my dad while my mom rang the doorbell of the weathered house where the Josephs were supposed to be staying with their parents and sister’s family. The door swung open to reveal another woman who looked a lot like Shobha.

Even though we knew that the Josephs lived with several other relatives, we all stood for a moment, surprised and unsure how to proceed.

Clearing his throat, Dad ventured, “Are Sabu and Shobha Joseph here?”

The woman’s eyes brightened with recognition. “Yes, yes. Wait here.”

Leaving us on the doorstep, she disappeared for a minute before reemerging with the faces that we instantly recognized, an angular face creased with wrinkles and adorned with a bushy moustache and a round face flashing a bright smile. Sabu’s and Shobha’s eyes widened as Dad handed Sabu a grocery bag revealing four sandwiches crammed inside.

“We wanted to make sure there was enough for you and all your family,” my mom explained.

“Thank you, thank you!” Shobha couldn’t stop exclaiming and covering her mouth with her hand.

Sabu, for once, appeared very quiet, as if the surprise meal had overwhelmed him to the point of silence.

“We must thank you,” Shobha said.

This insistence seemed to snap Sabu out of his awed trance. “Yes! We make you food. Shobha is a very good cook.”

The energy I remembered from the church resurfaced, and I grew more uneasy and eager to leave. For the first time, I found myself around someone who defied prediction. Any second, Sabu’s excitement could take this serious middle-aged man and transform him into a childlike energy. In some ways, he reminded me of Mom, leaping into situations without much consideration but trusting heart and instincts. Many times, though, they would expect the rest of us to plunge in with them without question.

“We’ll bring food to you, come to your house,” Shobha said, smiling.

Wondering if I had just heard two complete strangers invite themselves to our house, I glanced back at Mom and Dad.

If my mom noticed and felt uncomfortable at all, she didn't show it. Glancing at my dad, she smiled and said, "Sure. You can come over, and we'll make dinner."

"Yes, I'll cook." Shobha emphasized the personal pronoun.

As we drove back home, I hoped that the offered dinner was just a formality. After all, bringing the Josephs into our home meant that we had crossed a bridge into new territory and were taking the interactions between our families beyond simple small talk at church.

Only a few weeks later, though, I stood at our front door while a green van crept into our driveway. Shobha climbed out of the driver seat while her husband, Sabu, stiffly stepped out of the passenger side as if his back had fused together into one painful rod. Then, the side door of the van slowly slid open, and a thin, eleven-year-old girl clambered out. While our family stood at the front door staring outside, the Joseph family meandered up our driveway, their heads swiveling to take in our acre of green grass, maple trees sloping to the ground, and two-story brick house. From their reaction, our modest house in the country must have appeared like a mansion.

"Hello, welcome! Come in!" My mom threw open the storm door and ushered the small family from India into our entry way.

"Oh wow." Sabu gasped as he looked around our simple white-wall entry.

Up until that point, I had never given our entry much thought. The high ceilings featured a dusty chandelier from the 1970s, and the walls had no decorations whatsoever because Mom hated nailing holes in walls. If anything, our house stood quite plain, but to the Josephs, they couldn't stop admiring the carpet, the windows, and the yard.

Unsure how to respond to this gleeful admiration, Mom led the way into the kitchen.

“Oh wow.” Shobha’s admiration contained less gusto than her husband, but her admiration sounded more normal as she surveyed our sunny kitchen with its white walls, pink flower wallpaper, and white linoleum.

“I know, it seems big. But if you actually take a look at it, the kitchen doesn’t have a lot of counter space.”

Mom proceeded to prove her point by bringing attention to the small slab of countertop sitting between the sink and the stove. While Shobha nodded her agreement, her lack of expression told me that she still envied our expansive, clean kitchen.

When Mom finally finished touring the kitchen, she focused her attention on the mysterious grocery bags that the Josephs had carried through our front door.

“What do you have for us?” Mom asked, excitement and curiosity coloring her question.

While Shobha and Sabu placed the grocery bags on the kitchen table, our family gathered around to see what unusual culinary creation they would introduce to us.

Smiling, Shobha pulled out a bundle of leaves. Each leaf contained a serrated edge, reminding me of a rose leaf, but I had never seen anything remotely like this in a salad or any dish that I could remember.

Seeing our perplexed looks, she held the bundle out to my mom. “Smell.”

Mom leaned in cautiously, taking a deep inhale. The rest of us watched, wide eyed, for Mom’s reaction.

Mom turned a puzzled look toward Shobha. “What is that?”

“Mint.”

“I wondered.” Mom turned to me. “Smell it, you’ll see.”

Shobha offered the bundle in my direction. Hesitantly, I leaned in to take a whiff. The bright green leaves greeted me with an odor that reminded me of toothpaste and peppermint, just greener and fresher. I couldn't imagine eating the leaves any more than I could fathom snacking on a tube of toothpaste.

"That's nice." I suddenly felt conscientious of all the pairs of eyes watching me, especially those of the Joseph's eleven-year-old daughter.

"And look, instant mouth fresher." Sabu's excitement peaked again, and he ripped several leaves off Shobha's bundle and stuck them in his mouth. He grinned at us as he noisily chewed with his mouth open. To emphasize his demonstration, he huffed into the air. "See? Breath all good!"

Relieved that we couldn't smell it, we all nodded and pretended to be impressed with his natural breath freshener.

Embarrassed, Shobha explained, "We grow it ourselves. You should take some, it grows very easily." Shobha continued pulling ingredients out of the damp grocery bag.

Sabu picked up on this idea of a garden and strode to our bay kitchen window. "Yes, you could grow big garden. Back there." He pointed to the back corner of our property. "Can we look?"

"Yes. Mike, go ahead and show Sabu the back yard." Mom latched onto the idea too quickly, making me think that she spied an opportunity to take Sabu's exuberance outside where it would find more room to breathe.

Unsure whether to stay in the kitchen and help or to follow Sabu to the backyard, Dad and Garrett chose to follow the man from India who was already making his way to our sliding-glass door. Mom and I crowded close to see Shobha's next secret ingredient.

“Chili pepper. Do you like spice?” She held up three glossy serrano peppers.

Not wishing to be rude, Mom responded enthusiastically, “Yes! We enjoy spicy food.”

I, however, was not quite so convinced. After all, we still bought mild salsa and only cooked with mild Italian sausage. One time, Mom made the mistake of buying hot sausage, and she never repeated that mistake twice. Still, I knew that whatever Shobha proposed, we needed to at least pretend to like it for sake of company and hospitality. If she asked us if we liked toothpaste and ate fire, then we heartily enjoyed both.

Shobha placed a jar of mayonnaise on the table. I was puzzled since she couldn’t have brought a more American ingredient over. At this point, any picture of an Indian dish disappeared from my mind. Beside the mayo, she plopped a plastic bag of white chunks of something.

“This is the coconut . . . what do you call it?” She rubbed her fingers together as if encouraging the word to materialize out of thin air.

“Is that the inside of the coconut? The meat?” Since my mom had never bought a fresh coconut before, I knew she was guessing.

“Yes, the meat.” Shobha opened the plastic bag and pulled out a chunk of the white stuff.

Now, I could see that it looked like a piece of wood but was the color of pearl. Looking at it, I could almost taste the inside of an Almond Joy with its sugared shreds of coconut. To think that the shredded coconut I had seen on cakes, cookies, and candy started out in this raw form.

“You cut open the coconut and cut out the meat.” Shobha offered a chunk to my mom and gestured that she should take a bite.

I watched, holding my breath, as Mom nibbled on the edge of the chunk. Her eyes widened. “Danielle, try this.” Seeing my suspicion, she snapped off a piece and held it out to me. “It’s good, you’ll like it.”

Almost every time that Mom insisted I would like something, she turned out to be right. As I got older, I tried to exert my own independence and intuition when she tried to coax me to try homemade sushi. Even then, despite my reluctance, I discovered that she was right in guessing my taste buds.

Now, as I lifted the piece of raw coconut to my mouth, I found myself encountering a bewildering and delightful mix of textures and flavors. With the texture of sunflower seeds, the fresh, clean flavor of the coconut filled my mouth. I found myself eying the whole bag of coconut flesh sitting on our kitchen table.

Reading my mind, Mom laughed. “We could eat that whole bag of coconut right now, Shobha.”

Chuckling her agreement, Shobha pulled out another bundle of green leaves, but these leaves were slenderer and more delicate than the mint. A pungent fragrance of lime and the color green filled the kitchen. “Coriander. I think you call it cilantro.”

Mom smelled the leaves. “Oh, that’s nice.”

I agreed. While parsley looked similar to the untrained eye, I could always tell the two apart by the smell. While parsley contained a bitter flavor more bland and mild, cilantro woke up the senses with its vibrancy and celebration. While any dish could potentially pass without it, I learned that cilantro could be the one ingredient that made a dish unforgettable.

I studied the array of ingredients spread out on the table, many of them suspiciously green. As if this recipe couldn't get any stranger, Shobha asked Mom if we possessed a food processor.

Each ingredient fell into the food processor with a plop, and then Mom switched on the machine. The hard meat of the coconut rattled around, making it difficult to hear, while chili seeds sprayed against the top of the food processor. Soon, the mayonnaise overtook all the ingredients and created a smooth paste out of the mint and cilantro leaves.

“Okay, stop.”

Mom switched off the food processor at Shobha's command.

“Spoon?” Shobha gestured with a spooning motion.

Pulling out a kitchen drawer, Mom offered Shobha a teaspoon. All of us stared at Shobha as she dipped the tip of the spoon into the creamy green mixture that she had just created. Her tongue smacked as she noisily tasted and stared at the ceiling, as if by looking up, she could better assess the mixture.

“Salt.”

By now, I had no idea what this mixture was supposed to taste like as Shobha poured in a teaspoon of salt. While I assumed that all dishes with coconut would turn out sweet, the chili peppers, cilantro, and mayonnaise had thoroughly confused my culinary navigation.

After another test—and a double dip into the food processor—Shobha gestured for my mom to try the paste.

I carefully analyzed my mother's expression as she licked the creamy substance off her spoon. She nodded approvingly and then moaned with pleasure. “Oh, this is good. How do you eat it?”

Shobha's daughter darted over to the grocery bag. "You eat it with this! Like a sandwich."

She pulled out a loaf of white bread—not the fresh artisan wheat bread that Mom usually bought—but a loaf of basic, white American grocery bread. At this point, my expectations for this dish couldn't sink any lower since Mom had exclusively brought Garrett and I up on wheat bread.

Taking charge, Shoba placed several slices directly on the counter. I winced as she didn't bother to use plates while she slathered the bread slices with the green mixture then piled on slices of cucumber, tomato, and onion. While I tried to figure out if she was making us a salad or a sandwich, I found myself staring at a sample that my mom, thankfully, had placed on a plate before offering it to me.

Conscious of Shobha and her daughter watching me eagerly, I carefully took a bite. The explosion of flavor surprised me. Somehow, I found myself negotiating the worlds of spicy, sweet, savory, and fresh all at the same time. I glanced up at my mom, and I saw my own shock and pleasure reflected in her face.

"You bring a plate of these to any church function, and they'll be gone just like that." My mom snapped her fingers to illustrate.

"What is this?" I asked.

Shobha grinned. "Mint chutney."

Mint chutney, an unexpected combination similar to the group of us standing in the kitchen. Here I was, Kansas born and bred, talking to a woman and her daughter from halfway around the world where spice and sugar, heat and coolness, collided. American cuisine, with its clear delineations of savory and sweet, suddenly felt safe and boring. But now, I found myself

trying a recipe that brought the heat of serrano peppers, the coolness of mayonnaise and mint, the grassy flavor of cilantro, and the sweetness of coconut and sugar together. And, to my surprise, I liked both the mixture and the road where it may lead.

The Smell of the Color Green

“I bet that’s him,” Ethan says, leaning down to my level so that I can more clearly hear him over the noise of the restaurant.

My eyes scan the parking lot, then focus back on the Indian-looking woman and young girl that we had spied in the parking lot. “Yep, I see him, that’s him.”

My heart races, and the excitement makes my voice shake as a short, middle-aged man rounds the corner of a car to join the woman and the girl. I can’t help but chuckle and lean close to murmur to Ethan, “We always called him the short one.”

Ethan joins me in a chuckle as Bhaskar and his family emerge fully into view, and, for a minute, it’s as if my husband joins me in an inside joke.

As Bhaskar’s family approaches the restaurant, I find myself drawn to the door. I can’t help myself. I wouldn’t be able to stand still if I tried. My heart beats harder and harder as each footstep brings us closer and closer.

Sometimes, I wonder what my life must look like to an outside observer. After all, how many American teenagers would count an international college student among their best friends or name an Indian restaurant as their favorite choice to visit on a birthday? Somehow, the addition of these college students’ genuine smiles and the spice of their cuisine transformed our everyday lives from monochrome to vibrant. To the casual observer at our Mexican restaurant, Ethan and I must appear as an average couple on a date night. But what would that person think once Bhaskar and his family joined our party?

I remember how confused the tellers would appear behind the counters at the airport, car dealership, or grocery store as their eyes shifted from two boring white kids to the two college students from the Middle East somewhere. Even on the college students’ own turf at an Indian

grocery store, the eyes still ping ponged back and forth, asking questions the employees were too polite to verbalize.

Privately, I think Mom enjoyed the attention and even took pride in it. She wore her company with Bhaskar and Harsha as a badge of honor. In a post-September 11th world where Americans looked on foreigners with suspicion, Mom embraced these college students and flaunted her friendship as a challenge to the prejudiced observers around us.

Today, I find that same pride rising within me as Bhaskar's family approaches the restaurant. Secretly, I hope the other customers and waiters are watching because I want them to second guess their assumptions about me, and, more importantly, their assumptions about Bhaskar.

The door swings open, and my eyes meet a familiar pair of brown ones, framed with simple wire glasses. Mischief glimmers from them, a look I have seen numerous times during games of tag or hide-and-seek.

"Bhaskar!" The joy bubbles over, causing my voice to choke from the emotion of either laughing or crying, which one I'm not sure.

"Hey," he says.

A simple greeting, but with this one word, I'm transported back to Kansas, back to my childhood. Closing my eyes, I can picture the tiny white entry in our house, my mom swinging our front door open, and Bhaskar stepping in with a smile mostly hid beneath his careful moustache. His soft-spoken greeting echoes through the entry, a voice unchanged through time.

"Hey."

All these years later, he looks exactly the same, down to the moustache, the way he styles his hair, and the sandals on his feet. I throw my arms around his shoulders, and we are

immediately fifteen years younger. He's in his mid-twenties, a graduate student just arrived from India to study computer science, and I'm a teenager caught between the worlds of adulting and the imagination of a child.

While the waitress tries to find us a table for five, I'm no longer wondering what other people think as they observe this uncommon dinner party. Instead, I follow in my mom's footsteps of making sure everyone is comfortable and explaining the menu. While I try to engage in small talk with Bhaskar's wife and daughter, my eyes keep pulling me back to Bhaskar.

Part of me wants to leave the restaurant behind, with its distracting clatter and humidity pressing in, grab Bhaskar by the hand, and run away to somewhere quiet and still. There, we could lose ourselves in memory and relive those wild, carefree days when Mom would squeeze the six of us into our Honda Civic, and we would embark on all sorts of adventures around Kansas City.

I would remember those many meals late at night when chapatis with Bombay potatoes were the ultimate treat. To make those coveted chapatis, Mom and I would sweat in the kitchen for hours. I rolled out the dough, folding and layering it into almost-perfect circles. Working in perfect harmony, Mom fried them on the stovetop while an oily smoke filled the air and gave the house the faint perfume of a wood-fire oven. I rolled, she fried. With guilty smiles, we would taste test the results and revel in the warm flakiness.

In this stroll through the golden sanctuary of the past, I would tell Bhaskar what I assumed he wanted to know but would never ask. He would remember my mom laughing, alive and in perpetual motion, and moving the world around her with her smile. I wish I could only remember her that way, too, when life, love, and family were interwoven. But I would want to tell him of the storm clouds that rolled in after he left for New Jersey, of the dark days in hospice

where I watched Mom slowly and painfully give in to cancer. Perhaps, with this reunion, I could take Bhaskar's golden memories of my mom and Ethan's gray ones and, somehow, exchange them.

But deep down, I know Bhaskar won't ask, and I won't volunteer the information. This one hour, present, in the restaurant will run swiftly by, too fleeting for any excursions into the past. Instead, we will focus on the years in between the past and the present. The joy of the reunion with the unspoken acknowledgement of the changes will have to be enough.

I can't help but recall the first time I laid eyes on Bhaskar. That introduction was so different from this reunion. Although my world as a Kansas teenager had expanded to include the Josephs, a family from another country, I had no idea just how much my world could expand. For my mom, though, the world had not just expanded. She unofficially adopted the Josephs into our family, and Shobha and Sabu proved just how comfortable they were with us by popping over to the house about every week. As soon as Shobha stepped into our entry, her arms full of bread, cookies, and plastic containers of mysterious curries, my mom ushered her into the kitchen.

"I made another batch of mint chutney, tell me what you think."

Mom and Shobha stared at each other while they silently tasted Mom's latest batch, their tongues testing the spice level, consistency, and sweetness.

"Needs more salt," Shobha announced.

Mom and I looked at each other and laughed. No matter how many times we tried to get it right, Shobha always proclaimed more salt.

"Mike, would you help me with something?" Sabu interrupted our food exploration. After several months in the States teaching, his grasp of English had improved until he got

excited again, and then his articles, verb tenses, and adjectives ran away with the whirlwind of energy.

Dad turned to face Sabu and continued eating one of the chocolate-chip cookies that Shobha had brought for Mom to test taste. While Mom continued to explore the savory world of Indian cuisine, Shobha had ventured in the opposite direction into American desserts.

“I am working with organization to help international students at university.” Sabu’s excitement started to get the best of him.

“UMKC.” Shoba clarified, glancing at Mom.

UMKC, the abbreviation for the University of Kansas City, Missouri, was a word that I would soon rattle off without a second thought.

Sabu rushed over Shobha’s explanation. “Yeah, yeah. Students come from India, land at airport, and no one to meet them.” Sabu finished his story with an elaborate wave of his hands as if he were a magician who had just made something disappear. “We help by giving ride to school from airport.”

Dad nodded, his face a comical contrast between serious thinking and chewing a cookie.

Realizing that we didn’t understand what Sabu was implying, Shobha further explained, “We don’t know how to get to the airport, could you show him?”

Surprise flooded Dad’s face. “Oh!” He looked at Mom, not sure how to handle the situation. At some point in their marriage, an unspoken rule had been written decreeing that Mom must approve any and all propositions.

“Of course, you’re new here. We can show you.” Mom smiled.

“It’s about an hour drive,” Dad cautioned, and I couldn’t tell if he was cautioning Mom or the Josephs.

Shobha laughed. “Then you’ll definitely show, or we could end up somewhere else far away.”

Encouraged by Shobha’s joke, Sabu offered one of his own. “It has highway, I too scared. Cars go by, and I just—” Sabu finished with a small scream, a sample of what he felt every time he got on the highway and ventured above thirty miles per hour.

“How about Mike drives then, and Shobha, you can ride with me and the kids?”

Mom’s suggestion took us all by surprise. What started out as a simple favor had quickly escalated into a full-blown family outing.

To prepare for the big day, Shobha and Mom discussed what snacks they would bring with the same attention the average housewife gives Thanksgiving dinner. Dad checked and triple checked the gas in each vehicle and even drove a test run in the Josephs’ van. Garrett and I packed our pads of paper, colored pencils, and games.

When the morning of the big day dawned, Mom was already bustling around the kitchen. From my bedroom, I heard the whirr of the food processor indicating that she was converting handfuls of mint, cilantro, jalapeno, mayo, and coconut into mint chutney. When I arrived in the kitchen, slices of bread covered the kitchen table.

“Danielle, grab the cooler from the garage. We gotta keep these cold.” Mom didn’t even look up from the slice of bread that she was spreading with a thin layer of the green paste. Plates piled with toppings of tomato, cucumber, onion, and cheese waited next to her.

A few hours later, the mint chutney sandwiches were safely packed away, and I sat in a chair at the airport and eyed the grocery bag where the snacks hid. The airport stood like a gateway to another world—or worlds. The contractors seemed to know that parents needed a convenient way to occupy their children while they attempted to find the correct gate and

maneuver luggage. On the floor, Garrett and I discovered these dotted lines that swirled and circled and led like a treasure map to who-knows-where. For what seemed like hours, we followed these lines within the eyesight of our parents.

Finally, I plopped next to Mom. “How long do we have to wait?” Already, the newness of the airport was starting to wear off.

“Mike, can you check the arrival time again?” Somehow, Mom managed to carry on a conversation with Shobha, instruct my dad what to do, and pacify me all at the same time.

“Can I have a snack?” Garrett whined from his seat as he kicked his heels against the floor.

“We need to save some for the students,” Mom said.

But Shobha, as if she didn’t hear, reached into her stash of snacks and pulled out a plastic bag of cookies. “Here you go.”

Garrett happily munched on the cookie while Mom watched. She was very careful about the ingredients that passed the lips of her children, and I could tell she was attempting to decipher the cookie’s components from where she sat four feet away.

“What kind of cookie is that?” Mom asked, her curiosity and suspicion no longer able to stay silent.

“They’re here!” Sabu rushed up to us. His volume and clapping made me glance around, afraid that other people might stare at this undignified behavior.

Mom and Shobha waited for Dad to catch up and corroborate Sabu’s statement. “They just landed. Gate 27.”

“I told you!” Sabu crowed and clapped Dad on the back. His eyes were dancing with excitement, and he couldn’t stand still.

Mom and Shobha burst into activity.

“Danielle, grab that bag. Mike, carry the cooler. Shobha, how can we help?”

While Garrett, Dad, Mom, Shobha, and I all gathered the grocery bags, cooler, and totes that Mom and Shobha had collectively brought, Sabu watched us all eagerly, taking a few steps toward the gate then backtracking to us when he realized we were still packing up.

While I had eventually warmed up to the company of our international friends, what a strange sight we must have been to the average observer that day. A tall, thin man with thick black hair and a moustache paced back and forth, fighting the urge to scamper away like a child. His wife with her long hair and tunic followed him like a puppy does its master. Clustered behind, our typical, plain American family shouldered enough tote and grocery bags as if we were about to travel ourselves. We all lined up opposite a gate, and Sabu decided that now was the time to reveal his *pièce de résistance*, large white posterboard signs with *Vikalp Bhaskar Puram* scrawled on them in permanent marker.

Giggling, he shoved one in my dad’s hands. “Hold it up, Mike.” When Dad didn’t comply immediately, he pushed Dad’s hands up with the sign before he darted a few feet away to hold up his own sign.

I felt sorry for Dad in this situation. He already felt uncomfortable, and now he had to hold a sign that drew even more attention. But then, travelers streamed out of the gate. Since I had no idea who we were looking for, I glanced from Dad’s sign, to the gate, and back again. Two individuals finally stood out—not the average, white Americans striding off the plane or the obvious tourist sporting shorts and sandals. These two men stood out for their large backpacks, dark hair and skin, and general lost appearance as they shuffled through the gate.

Sabu waved for my dad to hold his sign up and illustrated what he meant by waving his own sign above his head. The erratic movement caught the eye of the two young men who maneuvered through the crowd like fish in a stream. Sabu's excitement reached new levels as he pumped their hands up and down and pointed to the crowd of us staring a few feet away. Instinctively, Garrett and I hung back behind our parents as we were introduced, one by one, to the two college students standing before us.

I had completely forgotten about the grocery bags of snacks that we were carrying until we all stood gathered around the baggage claim. No matter how quickly a person manages to get off a plane, all passengers must gather around the baggage claim and wait. During this pause, Mom approached one of the college students, the shorter one.

"Are you hungry? Did they feed you on the plane?"

I couldn't tell how much he understood her from the way he cocked his head and his expression didn't change. Despite his eyes nervously shifting, he maintained a pleasant smile.

"Yes." He nodded politely.

Unsure how to proceed next, Mom smiled awkwardly.

Flying in to rescue the situation, Shobha rattled off in another language what I assumed to be the same question as my mom's.

I saw the student's expression slightly change as he understood the question.

Whatever he said to clarify, Shobha turned to my mom. "Give him one of the sandwiches."

Eagerly, Mom pulled out her gallon-size plastic bag of mint chutney sandwiches cut into careful squares. As she handed one to the student, Shobha clarified something again, but not in English.

The student took a careful bite, and then he looked up at Mom in shock and asked Shobha something incredulously in a different language.

Shobha responded and laughed, finally filling the rest of us in. “I told him you made them. He can’t believe it.”

“Very good. It’s perfect.” The student gave us a thumb’s up and the brightest smile we had seen yet.

Finally, the baggage claim creaked into motion, and suitcases began dropping out of the chute with loud thuds.

“What is your name?”

I almost jumped in surprise. Standing by me, the student watched the suitcases while he continued to take little bites out of the sandwich, like a bird.

“Danielle.” I smiled politely, hoping that he didn’t ask me a question that I wouldn’t understand. Between the luggage thuds and throngs of people, I could barely hear him already.

“Daniel,” he repeated.

I smiled and nodded, fearing to be rude if I corrected him about little things such as pronunciation.

“My name is Bhaskar.”

“Bhaskar,” I repeated, and he nodded that I said it correctly.

We nodded at each other and smiled some more, filling in the awkward silence. Thankfully, Sabu waved Bhaskar over to the chute to pick out his luggage and spared me the anguish of conjuring the next bit of small talk.

The ride from the airport to the college dorm bore an atmosphere completely different from earlier in the day. Suddenly, Garrett and I had nothing to say as we ventured into downtown

Kansas City. Used to the sprawling shopping malls of the suburbs, we stared in awe at the skyscrapers outside the window. Brick buildings with cracked windows and iron bars stood in sharp contrast to the sunny openness of the country.

A part of me ached that we had to leave Bhaskar and his friend here as their first introduction to America. The maze of concrete and clammer of downtown traffic hardly felt welcoming. If only we could take them to the country where the sun shone through the trees and the loudest noise was the soothing hum of crickets.

Stepping out of the car, Bhaskar scanned the imposing dorm rising before him. At fourteen stories, the cold brick structure effectively shut out the sky. In its shadow, fear and that lost look I remembered from the airport slid over Bhaskar's face.

As if trying to compensate for the dull surroundings, Mom handed him the bag of mint chutney sandwiches. "Hopefully, this will tie you over until you can go grocery shopping."

The uncertainty in Bhaskar's eyes thawed slightly as he accepted the bag of sandwiches. Waving goodbye as we climbed into our car, he seemed to cling to this remnant of home.

After we parted ways and pointed our car south to the country, a wave of tiredness washed over us. Overwhelmed by the combined newness of the airport, downtown Kansas City, and meeting strangers, Garrett and I sat in silence in the backseat.

"Did you see their luggage? Just two bags, that's all they brought." Mom shook her head in disbelief. "Mike, that guy's getting over."

His face wearing its typical blank expression, Dad didn't respond to Mom's driving advice. "Yeah, that's pretty incredible."

"We should go visit them this weekend, make sure they're settling in okay. Bring them a meal."

Nobody responded—we all were too tired. But two days later found us standing in front of a peeling door in a dim hallway. As the man of the family, Dad felt the responsibility to knock, and we all waited breathlessly. After hearing voices behind the door for a few seconds, the door swung open. Another college student we didn't recognize blinked at us in shock. His hefty frame filled the doorway and made all of us take a step back.

“Bhaskar?” My dad asked, the name rolling awkwardly off his tongue.

The student recognized the name. “Bhaskar? Yes.”

Leaving us standing awkwardly in front of the open front door, he ducked around the corner. Within seconds, he appeared again with another student we did recognize.

“Bhaskar.” My dad smiled in relief.

“Hey.” Bhaskar lit up, recognizing us. “What is this? Come in.”

Tentatively, we filed into the room. Even though the hallway was dim, the living room of this dorm room was even darker with its covered windows and no lamps. A couch had been pushed against the wall. A table stood next to the kitchen, but the chairs were missing. Stacks of papers and books were scattered about because the room lacked the bookshelves and end stands to put them on. Even though I was still a child, this dorm room was the most unwelcome room that I had ever seen, and I couldn't wait to leave. I glanced at my parents' faces to see if I could read the shock in their eyes as well. But their expressions were closely guarded, and Mom attempted to distract herself and our attention from the dismal room.

“I didn't know if you had been able to get out and get groceries, but I brought a few things.”

Mom unveiled the meal that we had spent the entire day preparing. Nestled on a plate lay grilled tandoori chicken, a bright red from the chili powder and spices but moist and tender from its yogurt marinade.

“Oh wow,” Bhaskar marveled. “She makes mint chutney,” he boasted to the student who had let us into the apartment.

Surprise and admiration washed over his face as he pressed in to get a good look at the fragrant dishes we spread out on their dining table.

Heartened by their enthusiasm, Mom revealed a six-quart pot of sambhar, the broth forming a swirl of reds and oranges around the potatoes, green beans, and other vegetables. To accompany the curry, she held up a gallon-size bag of basmati rice, its long white grains releasing a delicate fragrance. Even though she couldn't have expected more than two college boys to eat this food, she only knew how to make army-scale portions.

At this presentation, both young men released a chorus of enthusiasm.

“You cooked all this?” the husky young man asked, not believing that an American family just walked into his apartment with homemade Indian food.

Mom nodded. “Sabu and Shobha showed us how to make a few dishes.”

“Then you should try this.” The student disappeared into one of the back bedrooms.

“He's going to show you one of the dishes he knows how to make,” Bhaskar explained as we waited.

“Is he your roommate?” Dad asked to fill the silence.

Bhaskar nodded. “There's six of us, two in each room.”

Perhaps Mom was justified in bringing so much food. Incredulous, we glanced around the bare living room. How did six young men make this small dorm apartment a home with its

sparse furnishings and depressing atmosphere? Mom's face, although carefully disguised with a smile, betrayed motherly concern as she looked around at the bare kitchen and dining table with no chairs.

Bhaskar's roommate emerged with a small pot in his hands. Smiling, he lifted the lid and showed us the contents.

"It smells good." Mom wafted some air in her direction and took a whiff. "I see tomatoes."

"It's egg curry." The student tilted the dish to show us several whole hardboiled eggs snuggled in the bottom of the pot. Surrounding them, a red broth filled with diced onion and tomatoes offered a sweet yet hearty aroma.

"If I buy the ingredients, would you come over to the house and show us how to make it?" Mom asked.

Bhaskar and his roommate looked at each other in shock. First, this crazy American family had appeared at their door, and now, this American woman had invited them over to her house to cook.

"Sure, I'll show you." The student smiled, and his smile was warm and friendly. For some reason, we all began to relax in each other's presence despite the strangeness of the group and the gloominess of the surroundings. Suddenly, the living room didn't seem so dark and depressing.

"Well, we won't keep you." Dad's words prompted us to meander toward the front door.

"We'll come by in a few days and pick up our dishes." Mom glanced back at the dining table as if taking a mental note of how many pots she was leaving and which ones.

Bhaskar opened the front door and shook Dad's hand. As we filed out, Mom stopped in front of the unknown roommate and shook his hand.

"What was your name?"

His charming smile and clear voice put us all at ease. "Harsha."

"Harsha." Mom smiled, her eyes merry. "Like the candy bar. That's how I'll remember. Hershey, Harsha."

While some may have found my mom's mind games offensive or eccentric, Harsha laughed in amusement. His hearty chuckle filled the hallway. "That's good. I like it."

Even after the door closed, I could still hear that laugh, making me wish I was still on the other side of that door.

Harsha. Harsha and Bhaskar. The two names were inextricably linked. We couldn't mention one without the other, like Danielle and Garrett, or Mom and Dad.

Even now, sitting across from Bhaskar all these years later, I feel like we're missing someone from the table. A laugh, a friendly smile filling the doorway. A member of the family.

The Sound of Mustard Seeds

“I wish Harsha was here,” I say wistfully as Bhaskar and I study each other from across the table.

The busyness and humidity of the crowded Mexican restaurant seems to drift away once the waitress shows us our booth for four and the five of us squeeze in. For a second, Bhaskar and I seem at a loss for words as we get lost in the nostalgia and the number of years since then.

Bhaskar turns his attention to my lumberjack of a husband squeezed into the space next to me. “Mona and Mike, they cooked all this food and brought it to us. They fed, like, all these students.”

He reverts to this memory as if he must explain his presence at this table with us. While he recalls the food that brought him a family, he doesn’t know I treasure the memory for the same reason.

I nod, thinking back to that special day. “It was Christmas.”

Mom always had a soft spot for others. She thought it nothing to bring bottles of Gatorade to the neighbors if they were out mowing their lawns or to make enough dinner for two families and deliver this meal to the friend across town. If she passed a homeless person while we were driving, she would stop, turn around, and find some food item that happened to be in the car—even if it was just a box of crackers—and offer it to them. When the holidays rolled around, her antenna for detecting anyone needing help or encouragement grew even stronger.

Although the Josephs and their ministry to international college students had become a regular feature in our lives, Mom didn’t like their organization’s idea of a Christmas party.

“It’s not enough. You bring one or two students, and it lasts for just one night. It’s not even on Christmas!”

While Dad sat in the living room and hid behind a magazine, Mom talked to him over the half-wall between the kitchen and living room while she prepared dinner. Tonight's dinner proved to be a simple affair. Two heavy Dutch ovens sat on the stove while she poured in cans of black beans, pinto beans, and kidney beans.

Watching her as a child, I sometimes considered the possibility that Mom made better food for others than she did for her own family. If we had roast Cornish hens with herbed potatoes instead of boiled hot dogs, chances were the neighbor across the street was having it for dinner as well.

Tonight, however, this humble and budget-friendly taco soup would offer comfort for my soul—as long as it was accompanied by handfuls of corn chips and cheddar cheese.

Peering through the lid, I tried to see the soup's contents through the steam. "This one doesn't have any meat."

Dad's head poked up above the magazine at the words *no meat*.

"I'm making a vegetarian one." Mom busily lifted the lid off the pot I had noticed.

A cloud of savory spice filled the kitchen, but it smelled lighter and more acidic. Without the presence of red meat to give the soup body, the tomato notes sung strong and bright.

Thinking that my eyes may have betrayed me, I mentally worked my way through her taco soup recipe and doublechecked what I saw in the pot. I spied at least three different kinds of beans, tomatoes and chilies, whole corn, and salsa, but no chunks of tender ground beef.

"I'm making some for the Indian students." Mom must have read my mind and the silent accusation there. "I was thinking this sounds like something they would like, and I even added extra chilies and hot salsa so that it's extra spicy."

A future version of myself would have laughed at the idea that the absence of beef and the presence of hot Mexican salsa would automatically make a dish palatable to an Indian. But at the time, Mom's logic seemed sound.

"And since they don't like beef, you left out the meat." I followed her line of thinking. "That's smart."

Dad leaned over our shoulders, his eyes on the second pot sitting on the stove. "Are they both vegetarian?"

Even though she refrained from an eye roll, Mom's voice became droll. "No. This one is for us."

She lifted the lid off the second pot, and I immediately recognized the smell, the rich, meaty smell of seared ground beef. My mouth watered.

Satisfied, Dad started to pull out our simple white dinner plates to set the table.

"I think we need to do something for them for Christmas." Mom announced.

"Who?" Dad asked, his mind on laying out the cutlery so that dinner could happen as soon as possible.

I checked the fridge to make sure that we had enough cheddar cheese to top these steaming bowls of taco soup. With any luck, a big bag of corn chips sat in the pantry as well.

"The Indian students. Harsha and Bhaskar." Mom sounded slightly frustrated that we temporarily forgot her original train of thought about the Christmas party for international students. "Think about it, those poor guys come half-way across the world, they don't know anybody. And everything shuts down for Christmas. They have no family, nowhere to go, no place to eat."

Mom hefted the pot of soup from the stove to the kitchen table. I triumphantly plunked the bags of corn chips and cheddar cheese on the table. In my mind I was already topping my bowl of beans, tomatoes, and beef with mounds of cheese and chips.

“Garrett! Dinner’s ready!” Dad called toward the stairs.

As always, everyone could be in the kitchen, but my younger brother would be who-knows-where—outside in the backyard, his bedroom, the spare bedroom, or half a dozen other places.

As Garrett’s footsteps thudded down the steps, Mom revealed her grand idea. “We should make a bunch of food and bring it to them on Christmas Day. It’s not just Harsha and Bhaskar who have nowhere to go. You know there’s dozens of others in those dorms.”

Dad didn’t answer. His mind and mine were too focused on the feast sitting in front of us. After all, Mom always came up with these crazy ideas, and we had learned to wait to see if the idea actually progressed into planning and action.

A few weeks later on Christmas day, I found myself sitting at our kitchen table again. Instead of a Christmas breakfast with Grandma’s beautiful, sweet rolls topped with icing and sprinkles or a traditional breakfast of waffles or pancakes, mounds of onions, potatoes, tomatoes, cilantro, and other vegetables were spread out in front of me. At six o’clock in the morning, Garrett and I didn’t hear the soft croon of Bing Crosby and the crackle of wood in the fireplace. Instead, we heard Mom banging pots and skillets on the stove in preparation for a massive Indian feast. Feeling the guilt and obligation of the eldest child to help, I sleepily staggered into the kitchen.

No Christmas tree with twinkling lights or shiny packages waited for me—not even a cheerful, “Merry Christmas.” For Mom, Christmas trees were a pagan influence, and the holiday

itself was Jesus' birthday, not a day to exchange gifts with each other. In her opinion, we were celebrating Christmas in the best way that honored the newborn King. To me, Christmas felt like any other wintry day.

"You want to chop the onion? I already peeled them and washed the potatoes." Mom continued measuring teaspoons of earthy cumin seeds, round black mustards seeds, and a rainbow of spices into little white bowls.

"What are we making?" I yawned as I picked up a knife. Even at eleven years old, I knew my way around a paring knife and cutting board.

"Let's see..." Mom surveyed the groceries around her. "Sambhar, Bombay potatoes, rice, papads, raita, and tandoori chicken."

Maybe if the sun hadn't been hiding still, my mouth would have watered. But it was Christmas Day, and all I could smell was the burning, pungent smell of onion that made my eyes water. Twelve pounds of onion later, my eyes had finally stopped watering due to the sheer number of onions.

A few hours later, Dad wandered into the kitchen.

"Oh my goodness." He stopped short, rubbing his eyes. "That onion is so strong." He stared at me, dry eyed and placid, dicing potatoes just a few inches away from the huge bowl of chopped onion. "How are your eyes not burning?"

Mom didn't bother to turn around from the stove while she carefully watched a few dried chilis, still a burnt red, simmer in a skillet of oil. If she looked away a second too long, she would miss the precise moment when the oil was the perfect temperature to dump in the mustard and cumin seeds so that they could roast without burning.

A little proud of myself for an immunity to onions, I shrugged in answer to Dad's incredulous question.

His eyes still red and watering, he sniffed back the tears and groped his way to the table. "What can I do to help?"

"You want to chop the tomatoes?" I piled nine pounds of tomatoes in front of him before carefully moving the bowl of onion to a safer distance.

"Danielle! I need the onion, now!"

Mom's urgent call pushed me into action. Grabbing the bowl of onion, I zipped to her side and watched awestruck as she carefully, but quickly, maneuvered the pan of sizzling oil. As adept as she was with cooking, she always seemed stressed when dealing with hot oil, and I felt the anxiety emanating from her soak into my own skin. Nervous, I watched as she poured in the cumin and mustard seeds then swirled the oil in the pan. The seeds immediately began to dance in the oil, jumping and popping like a million tiny firecrackers. Slamming the lid on, she pressed the pan into the stove and switched off the stovetop burner that was glowing a fiery red. Like slivers of obsidian, the dried red chilies had turned a glossy black from the oil, but Mom didn't seem concerned. Taking the bowl of onion, she stepped into position, and my nervousness peaked. Holding my breath, I watched as she swiftly raised the lid, releasing a cacophony of hissing and popping, and poured in several cups of onion. Thrusting the onion bowl back into my arms, she grabbed a wooden spoon and stirred the oily mixture. Finally, the raging sound of seeds frying in hot oil settled to a steady crackle. Mom had barely managed to avoid burning another batch of chilis and seeds.

The fragrance of chili, cumin, and mustard seeds hit me in the back of my throat, making me cough and sputter.

“I know, it makes you cough. Funny, right?” Mom gave me a smile as she coughed into her sleeve but still stirred the onions as they sizzled and grew translucent.

We turned to hear Dad choking at the table while he attempted to wipe his eyes. “I don’t know how you do it,” he muttered as he continued to chop his way through the bowl of tomatoes next to him. Despite his burning eyes and throat, he refused to leave his post at the kitchen table.

With the onions now in the pan, a sense of relaxed busyness returned to the sunny kitchen. Outside, no snow lay on the ground, only brown grass. Just another typical Christmas in Kansas.

By the afternoon, the kitchen showcased an explosion of flavor and color. All the burners of the stove held pots of fragrant basmati rice, rich sambhar, bright yellow potatoes, and tandoori chicken, each covered to keep warm. Everywhere else in the kitchen lay piles of dirty bowls, knives, cutting boards, and spoons, and my heart sunk because I knew that clean-up duty would inevitably fall to me. I couldn’t blame Mom. After all, she had just expended an incredible amount of energy in navigating the difficult worlds of frying, layering, salting, and tasting necessary in Indian cooking. Still, when I pointed out how she could consolidate dishes and clean as she cooked, my suggestion proved to be a point of contention. She saw no problem with going through multiple utensils, bowls, cups, and whatever else was necessary in the heat of the moment.

“Ready to load it up?” Mom asked.

While I was relieved to put off the immense job of cleaning the kitchen for just a few more hours, Dad and I tried to not let the disappointment show on our faces. After all, we knew that we made all these dishes to feed the Indian students, not ourselves.

“Call Bhaskar and Harsha to let them know we’re coming.”

Mom barked the orders as we scattered like ants to do her bidding. While Garrett grabbed cardboard boxes from the garage to transport the food, Dad cleared out the trunk, and I packed serving utensils in gallon bags with lots of paper towels.

“Hey Bhaskar, it’s Mike. How you doing?” Dad made sure he called Harsha and Bhaskar within earshot of Mom—a difficult task, since she kept moving around. “Merry Christmas to you, too. Listen, we actually have something for you, would it be okay if we stopped by in . . .” Dad glanced at Mom for guidance.

“Twenty minutes,” Mom answered confidently.

“Thirty minutes,” Dad said into the phone.

“Don’t tell them what it is,” Mom whispered urgently, afraid that Dad would spoil the surprise.

Dad waited for Bhaskar to answer. I suddenly feared that Bhaskar and Harsha would announce that they already had made plans or had left the state for the holiday.

Dad smiled, and my fear vaporized. “Great, we’ll see you then.”

“Don’t tell them,” Mom repeated.

Dad nodded, letting Mom know that he got the message. “Can’t tell you what it is, you’ll see. But we’ll call you when we arrive. All right, see you soon.”

Dad hung up, and the rest of us sprang into action.

Our excitement mounted as we pulled up in front of the dingy brick building that used to be a five-star hotel in the 1950s but was now a converted college dorm. While Dad called Bhaskar again, we clustered around the front entrance to catch that first glimpse of surprise on their faces.

Bhaskar and Harsha emerged in shorts, t-shirts, and flip flops. Even though winter in Kansas meant thirty-degree weather, these college students from India dressed as if we lived in the tropics.

“Hey.” Bhaskar’s shy smile peaked out from beneath his moustache.

Harsha wrapped Garrett in a bear hug before warmly shaking Dad’s and Mom’s hands.

“What’s this?”

Beaming, Mom led the way to the trunk. Opening it up, she revealed the steaming lids of half-a-dozen pots.

“Merry Christmas!”

A fragrant explosion of flavor spilled from the trunk into the crisp sunlight. Harsha and Bhaskar stood there shocked and just laughed. In that moment, Mom’s hours of sweating and working in the kitchen since dawn were rewarded.

She laughed, pleased by her surprise. “This is for you, and all your friends! And anybody else you can round up.”

Like a general, Mom guided all of us through the process of grabbing a pot and marching in a line into the dorm building. We passed closed-up salons, ballrooms, and restaurants until we arrived at what used to be a bar but had been converted into a make-shift lounge area next to the lobby. The bar counter provided the perfect place for Mom to line up her dishes, along with an army supply of plastic plates, cutlery, and cups.

“Call your friends, tell them dinner is downstairs.” Mom shooed Bhaskar and Harsha into the lobby to gather their friends while she made the final preparations.

For the first time, she didn’t have to coax Garrett and I into helping her and Dad “greet” people. We eagerly stationed ourselves behind the bar counter to pass out plates, pile on

steaming mounds of basmati rice, or top the entire plate with a crispy, fried papad. Of course, she reserved for herself the job of ladling piping hot spoonfuls of sambhar, raita, or Bombay potatoes.

“Mike, you can hand out the chicken. One piece per person. We want to make sure we have enough.” She gazed across her spread with an eagle eye. While extremely generous, Mom could also be extremely protective to the point of stinginess.

Harsha reentered the lounge area. “They’re coming.”

My heartbeat quickened. Perhaps, this feeling was similar to what children experienced on Christmas morning when they rushed down the stairs to open presents. The night before, they had crawled up the stairs and retrieved their last glances of the tree with its twinkling lights, shiny Christmas ornaments, and scattered packages. Then, somehow, during the night, those few packages had multiplied so that when the boys and girls scampered down the stairs, they discovered piles of brightly colored presents spilling out from under the tree and poking out of stockings. The best part of Christmas morning was the moment of expectation.

However, the feeling I was experiencing now was probably closer to what twelve tired, dusty men in Galilee felt right before Jesus fed five thousand people with five loaves and two fish. Here we were, our feast of Indian food spread before us, and we had no idea if we had enough food for all the people we hoped to feed.

When I thought I couldn’t wait any longer for the first line of Indian students to enter the lounge, Bhaskar finally appeared, leading a charge of half-a-dozen friends right behind. At that moment, I discovered that Harsha and Bhaskar were just as excited to reveal the surprise to their friends as we were. Proudly, Mom lifted the lids one by one, and a chorus of awe made us smile.

With each new dish, they asked, “You cooked this?” as if they couldn’t believe that an American family had managed to make all this Indian food from scratch. Of course, they didn’t know about Shobha and her mentorship in the kitchen for the past few months.

“Merry Christmas!” Mom called as they left the lounge area with plates piled high.

As the afternoon wore on, our stockpile of food remained half full. Like the disciples, we had been of too little faith. Mom realized that we could open the doors to welcome anyone and everyone who entered the dorm building, whether they be Indian or not.

“Danielle, Garrett, go out into the lobby and offer the food to anyone who comes in.”

The first few icy blue rays of twilight played through the main doors, lit up by the streetlamps and their orange glow. Harsha and Bhaskar joined us in the lobby as we played tag, wrestled, and played, waiting for someone who needed some Christmas cheer to straggle through the main doors.

When a couple Indian students entered—at least, they appeared to be Indian students to Garrett and me—we chorused, “Would you like some Indian food?” and pointed to the lounge.

Christmas Day wore on into the evening, and Garrett and I collapsed onto one of the lounge benches with Harsha and Bhaskar. Mom and Dad sat at a couple’s dining table only a few feet away. Remnants of the feast lay scattered on the bar counter.

As we cleaned up and piled the empty dishes into the trunk, I realized I would trade a bland turkey dinner for this juicy red tandoori chicken any holiday. Bombay potatoes, with their yellow stain and spicy seeds, stood at the same level as creamy mashed potatoes and gravy. Even though we returned to a dark house and a dirty kitchen with no presents, Garrett and I still felt the same excitement of a holiday and the same joy only brought by family. Perhaps, this feeling kept Mom thinking of new ways to share the holidays with new people.

At the Mexican restaurant with Bhaskar's family and now, a family of my own, I smile at the memories of past holidays. While I have since returned to a classic Christmas holiday with its family gatherings, Christmas trees, presents, and a traditional turkey dinner, I look at Ethan and wish that he could join me in one of those unusual Christmases long ago. Somehow, the absence of all the things that create Christmas allowed me to find a true holiday magic that I've never forgotten. It takes cuisine from another world and multiples it for a holiday feast. It takes a few hours and makes them unforgettable. It takes complete strangers and makes them family.

The Feel of a Sharp Knife

More than once, I've sat in a corner of a restaurant booth and watched my mom carry on a conversation with company. While Dad, Garrett, and I listened politely, our plates in front of us licked clean, Mom's plate sat almost untouched before her. The waitress, making her rounds, picked up our empty plates before glancing quizzically at Mom's.

“Should I offer dessert?” she asked.

Mom chuckled. “I'm a slow eater.”

“No,” my inner voice retorted. “You talk too much.”

Whether we were eating at a buffet, entertaining in our own home, or visiting someone else, Mom somehow managed to dominate the conversation to the point that I began to consider it a monologue. As I got older, I realized that Mom may have turned conversations into monologues because she was afraid of the awkward pause.

As I studied the small talk around the dinner table, inevitably, those moments of silence would appear as we sought to bridge from one subject to another. A sinking feeling would rise in my stomach while my mind raced through topic choices. Outwardly, my face wore a placid smile as I continued eating or averting my eyes to glance around the table. Inside, though, my brain was like a person frantically ripping through files in a drawer. Pulling one file out, I briefly considered the subject before tossing it aside in search of a better one. For some reason, weather always emerged as the default choice. But one or two awkward pauses later, I needed a second go-to option. Here, I followed in my mom's footsteps after a childhood of observing her conversations. Food proved to be a tried-and-true topic for conversation. Recipes, techniques, restaurants—the options multiplied.

Tonight, however, I can only spend so much time discussing the choice between flaky quesadillas and saucy enchiladas on the Mexican restaurant menu. Even after Bhaskar's family, Ethan, and I place our order and busy ourselves with the fresh salsa and chips, I sense an awkward pause looming our way. Searching for a new subject, I think I've struck the perfect solution. Parents love talking about their children, and Bhaskar's daughter sits just three feet away, safely sandwiched between her parents.

"What grade are you in?" I ask, trying to be friendly.

Her large brown eyes look up at me, and I can tell she can't hear me over the hubbub of the restaurant. Leaning forward, I try to refrain from shouting as I repeat, "What grade are you in?"

She beams, wisps of black hair framing her face. "I'm in fourth grade."

Surprise fills my face, as if being in fourth grade were the most amazing thing. In actuality, I can't believe that the last time I saw Bhaskar, he was a bachelor just finished with his master's. Now, he sits with his wife, a beautiful Indian woman who laughs and jokes with careless abandon, and his daughter, a shy girl with glasses now in the fourth grade.

Of course, I can only imagine what he must think as he looks at me now, a grown woman married and graduated from graduate school.

Confident in this new subject of conversation, I ask her, "What's your favorite subject?"

I know the question is cliché, but I hope my energy disguises the lack of originality.

"Math," she announces.

"Wow." Ethan and I look at each other, impressed, and then at her parents. I shouldn't have expected anything less since her father is a computer science graduate and her mother works in banking.

As if fate smiled upon us, our waitress arrives with a large tray, and I am temporarily relieved of the need to provide another topic for conversation. We echo with delight as she places piping hot plates of Spanish rice, tostadas, tacos, and quesadillas before us. In front of me, she sets a fragrant bowl of chicken tortilla soup, bright with fresh lime.

“Enjoy,” she smiles before she leaves the table.

A comfortable silence rests about the table as we plunge our forks into our plates for that first bite.

“Where’s your mom?”

The question from Bhaskar’s daughter smacks me out of nowhere. The breath is sucked out of me right in the middle of my sipping a spoonful of spicy broth. Suddenly, the salty cheese, crunchy tortilla chips, and succulent shreds of chicken have no flavor. A Goliath-size awkward pause materializes before me without warning, and I don’t know how to conquer it. Speechless, I don’t know to respond to this question when it’s asked by a fourth grader.

In any of my imaginings of the response to this question, the question is always posed by an adult. While a part of me wants to talk to Bhaskar about Mom, I don’t want the conversation to emerge this way. Now, I simply feel embarrassment for Bhaskar who must feel awful about his daughter’s *faux pas*. Yet, a part of me feels relieved that the elephant in the room, so to speak—Mom’s absence—is now out in the open.

But I can’t escape the nervousness and fear of where this conversation will take me. Glancing at Ethan, I feel his hand gently rest on my leg. He doesn’t know how to answer any more than I do, but his heart throbs with sympathy just the same.

I see our feelings mirrored in the expression on Bhaskar’s and his wife’s faces, embarrassment, sadness, and slight awkwardness. Bhaskar leans down to his daughter and

whispers, although I can just hear him over the restaurant's hum of activity, "Remember, Mona passed away."

He turns back to me and gives me a hesitant smile. I know that I need to say something immediately to pick the conversation out of the hole it fell in, something that will pretend the honest question never happened and will let Bhaskar know that everything is okay.

"Do you remember when we took you and Harsha swimming?" I ask, the first topic my numb brain can think of.

Bhaskar gives me a puzzled look. This backfire surprises me. I had assumed Bhaskar would immediately remember the day I mentioned. I know he will remember it immediately if I mention a certain detail, but I don't want to turn an already awkward conversation even more awkward.

"We were housesitting for some friends, and we invited you guys over one day to go swimming with us in their pool." I try to draw on the safe key details from that day. Why this day stands out among others, I struggle to explain to Bhaskar. That day, I watched Mom do something that I both dreaded and admired at the same time.

When we had pulled up to our friends' sprawling house, Harsha and Bhaskar emerged from the car with wide eyes. While our house seemed big, this upper-middle-class home with acreage appeared like a mansion to them. A white ball of fur, Kodiak the American Eskimo dog, bolted out of the garage to greet us.

"Come on!" Garrett yelled, running around the house to the pool with Kodiak scampering at his heels.

The humid heat of a July summer pressing in around us, we strode for the clear, turquoise waters of the freshly cleaned pool. Garrett and I waited just long enough to kick off our shoes

before cannonballing into the deep end of the pool. Mom dragged her tote bag of towels, snacks, and water to a table and plopped down in the shade of the deck. Although she rarely stepped a toe into the water, she managed somehow to still be fully involved.

“Get in!” Garrett laughed, splashing water onto the concrete and getting Harsha and Bhaskar’s heels wet.

While Bhaskar jumped back like a cat scared of the water, Harsha’s laugh rumbled out of his chest, and a mischievous twinkle shone in his eyes. Grinning at Garrett, he clambered his way down the ladder into the shallow end of the pool. Like a wrestler, he eyed Garrett, making my younger brother seek the refuge of the pool’s deep end. To our giddy terror, though, Harsha proved that he could swim and followed us so that nowhere in the pool proved safe from his tsunami splashes.

Even after Dad with his farmer’s tan climbed into the pool to join the intense game of tag, Bhaskar still hung around the edge of the pool, safe on land.

“Bhaskar, Bhaskar,” we chanted, splashing and kicking water in his direction.

From the way that he eyed the water, I thought that no amount of coaxing would get him into the pool.

“Mike, do we have some of those arm floaties?” Mom asked from the safety of the shade. She shielded her eyes from the glare off the water’s surface.

Garrett and I hid the smirks on our faces while Dad climbed out of the pool and rummaged around in a storage container for pool supplies. Harsha found a bright neon flotation tube and offered it to Bhaskar with a laugh.

I finally gave up. I couldn’t help but howl with laughter when Bhaskar emerged with goggles pressed into his eye sockets, a neon inner tube wrapped around his waist, and bright

banana-yellow floaties around his biceps. Tentatively, Bhaskar crept down the ladder into the safe, shallow area of the pool. Garrett bobbed up to Bhaskar like a scrawny, little fish and splashed Bhaskar in the face.

“Garrett, be nice.” Mom scolded from her lounge chair.

Trying to act tough, Bhaskar bravely dogpaddled after a cackling Garrett who sped away to the deep end.

With all four of us in the water, the sun worked its way all too quickly toward the horizon. As it touched the miles of fields stretched out behind the house, the sun turned golden and finally offered shade across the entire deck and pool.

“Anybody hungry?” Mom asked as, one by one, we climbed out of the water and collapsed on chairs to air dry. Bhaskar, wrapped in a towel, joined her on the swinging bench.

“What’s for dinner?” I asked, perking up at the mention of food.

Mom glanced over at Harsha and Bhaskar with a sly smile. “How about you show us how to make your egg curry?”

We all lit up at the mention of egg curry, the dish that we only got at Harsha and Bhaskar’s apartment. It featured a savory broth filled with bright yellow eggs, best served over hot basmati rice. Even though making something from scratch meant a longer time until dinner, the promise of egg curry made the wait worth it.

As the sun continued to set, Harsha and Bhaskar took us on a tour of familiar territory for them, the Indian grocery store.

“Drumsticks.” Harsha announced, pointing to a green plastic bag in one the freezers.

Peering into the freezer, Mom and I expected to see a bag of chicken drumsticks. To our surprise, he was pointing to a green vegetable, long like a green bean but rounder.

“Those are drumsticks?” Mom asked, realizing why Shobha laughed when Mom presented her with chicken drumsticks.

Garrett, Dad, and Bhaskar wandered over to the coolers full of fruit juices and sweets while Harsha led Mom and I down the spice aisle. Looking around me, I couldn’t believe all the shades of spices, from the sultry red of paprika to the bright yellow of turmeric. The wall of fragrance that hit me was unlike anything I could find in a regular American grocery store.

“This is garam masala,” Harsha explained as he showed us a rusty brown spice.

Mom and I took a whiff of the earthy richness punctuated by garlic and chili.

“Every family has their own recipe. It’s a closely guarded secret, nobody tells.” A look of homesickness washed across Harsha’s face as he continued down the spice aisle.

Back at the house, I eagerly showed off my skills with the knife. While Mom pulled out her pots and pans, I grabbed an onion and promptly began peeling and chopping. Each ready to help, Harsha and Bhaskar sat on either side of me. After a few minutes, Bhaskar retreated into the living room with Dad and Garrett where he wiped his eyes from cutting onion. Harsha and I looked at each other smugly, our eyes still completely dry and unaffected.

“Did you know a sharp knife is actually safer than a dull knife?” Harsha asked as he continued to carefully chop an onion.

Disdaining his slow pace, I fiercely chopped my onion as Mom showed me, pressing the knife through the vegetable and continuing in neat rows across until the entire onion lay in rough pieces.

“It’s because you need to use less pressure, so you’re less likely to slip or accidentally cut yourself,” Harsha continued.

“Do our knives need to be sharpened?” Mom asked, catching on to Harsha’s not-so-subtle hint.

Fascinated, I watched her test Harsha’s knife with the side of her thumb. Never before had I seen her sharpen our kitchen knives. Instead, we bulldozed our way through any vegetable or meat without a thought of how dull or sharp our knives were. But now, she pulled out our can opener. Amazed, I watched as she plugged the can opener into the wall, turned it on, and slid the blade of the knife through a slit in the back. While the rumbling of the can opener filled the kitchen, it was followed by the screech of the knife as it slid across the back. Turning the appliance off, she checked the edge again.

“That should be better,” she said and handed the knife back to Harsha.

Not offering to sharpen my knife, I returned to roughly chopping up my onion. Regardless of Harsha’s explanation, I knew how to use my dull paring knife, and the three pounds of onion that I had just diced proved it.

After all the veggies sat in neat piles in bowls, Harsha joined Mom at the stove. I noticed that Mom, unable to relinquish control of her kitchen, still clutched her wooden spoon.

That wooden spoon, faded from years of cooking and dishwashing, had always symbolized authority. The first time I saw it, Mom had drawn it out of a kitchen drawer in order to spank me. In my early years, I equated the sighting of the wooden spoon with the stinging punishment soon to follow.

As my interest in the kitchen grew, my heart still quaked at the sighting of the wooden spoon and its stout handle whenever I glimpsed it resting in the drawer. Only as Mom introduced Indian food into her kitchen did the wooden spoon grow less frightening as it was stained with

turmeric and chili powder. Now, as Mom held it to maintain her position as queen in the kitchen, I wondered if Harsha guessed the stories behind the spoon.

“We start with the seeds?” Mom asked Harsha as she liberally drizzled oil into a Dutch oven.

Harsha nodded as he watched Mom measure out her cumin seeds and mustard seeds. “Make sure you don’t burn them.”

By this time, I realized that Harsha viewed egg curry as his own special dish. He watched with eagle eyes while Mom poured the pungent seeds into the hot oil and grabbed her lid to cover the spatter.

“Danielle.” Mom’s voice prompted me to grab the chopped onion and stand by, ready.

“Okay.” Harsha said, signaling that Mom should add the onion.

“Right now?” Mom asked, waiting still to add the onion.

“Yeah, I mean, right now would be fine.”

Mom waited a few seconds more, listening to her instincts before she finally poured in the onion and stopped the frying process.

“Did I burn them?” she asked Harsha as he leaned over her shoulder to inspect the black seeds dotting the onions.

“No.” Harsha shook his head, but I couldn’t tell if he was lying or not.

My attention, however, was quickly diverted to the two dozen hardboiled eggs waiting for me on the table. Excited, I sat down with Bhaskar and Garrett to peel each and every one of them. After a few eggs, though, the peeling process grew old very quickly. The shells pricked my thumbs, and the membrane often clung to the outside white of the egg. Then, Harsha and

Bhaskar showed us the fun part of the whole process. After peeling the egg very carefully to keep it intact, they showed us how to carve little slits into the outer white of the egg with a knife.

“That way, the flavor of the broth gets into the egg,” Mom realized as Harsha held up his finished egg with its three carved lines.

“Can we carve other things into the egg? Like words?” Garrett asked.

“Sure.” Mom always encouraged Garrett’s creative thinking in the kitchen whenever it manifested.

“As long as the egg stays together,” Harsha cautioned.

Finally, roughly two dozen eggs—minus the two or three that fell apart and needed to be eaten right away—sat waiting in a bowl. On the stove, a large Dutch oven held a simmering blend of cumin, coriander, garlic, and mustard seeds with tomato and onion, forming a rich savory broth that resembled a rustic tomato soup. Picking up the bowl of eggs, Mom carefully dumped them into the pot. As each one plopped into the broth, the splash sent up a splatter of yellow liquid. This rich broth stained the eggs a bright yellow and released a sweet and savory fragrance.

Outside, the sun had long set, and the moon cast its blue glow over the deck and yard and gave the grass and trees a silver outline. Finally, we gathered around the table as Mom ladled spoonfuls of egg curry over beds of fresh rice. As we sat around the table, I noticed for the first time that Mom was sniffing a lot and frequently using her napkin to wipe her nose.

“Do you know how to play Uno?” Garrett asked Harsha after his plate sat empty except for a mound of tomato chunks. All his life, Garrett consistently refused to eat any fruits or vegetables.

“Sure.” Harsha smiled and followed Garrett into the living room with Dad right behind them.

While I wanted to join the game, I lingered in the kitchen. As I attempted to quietly load dishes into the dishwasher, I kept glancing at Mom and Bhaskar relaxing in their seats around the kitchen table.

“Bhaskar, I’m curious, what made you want to come to America?” Mom asked.

I knew my mom well enough to know that a question was never just a simple question. It often served as the door to a larger chain of discussion. As the recipient many times of these “traps,” I had discovered the hard way that by the time I realized what was happening, the door would be far behind me. The only way to exit the conversation would be to continue through it as quickly as possible. Bhaskar, however, didn’t know this technique of Mom’s, and so, he walked in without a second thought.

“I come to study. My parents worked hard to send me and my brother to school.”

Although soft-spoken, Bhaskar’s voice grew even softer, making me lower the water pressure of the kitchen faucet.

“My older brother, he should have been the one to come.”

For some reason, I had never considered the fact that Bhaskar had siblings of his own. In the space of just a few months, Garrett and I saw him as our big brother without remembering he already had a family of his own. For a moment, I felt the pang of a bizarre, almost childish jealousy.

Mom, however, didn’t allow Bhaskar’s mention of his family back home to sidetrack her. In fact, she embraced the topic. “And why didn’t he? Why you?”

In that instant, I realized what door of conversation Mom had drawn Bhaskar into. While I marveled at her ability to direct a conversation to her subtle will, I also wondered why I couldn't replicate this same skill myself. Every time I tried, my mind would blank, and I would forget the next step of the discussion.

Bhaskar struggled to explain the weight of gratitude he felt for his family. "My parents worked and worked, saving money so that he could come to school in America. But he didn't want to. He chose to stay in India, go to school, and get a job. He's married."

Mom nodded, following his simple story. I couldn't see how she was going to progress to the next level in discussion, transitioning to a long-term, eternal perspective.

"He didn't want to come, so my parents offered me to come. I almost didn't want to." Bhaskar chuckled sheepishly, hiding his embarrassment behind a glass of water.

Laughing companionably, Mom asked, "So why did you?"

Setting down the water, Bhaskar studied the table as if ashamed to show his eyes. "Money. I knew I could get better job if I come here and go to school. Any company in India would hire me. Or, maybe I could stay here and get job."

For a moment, I spotted a wistful expression pass over his face. He wanted to stay here in America, and that faint throb of jealousy inside me melted away into a bubbly feeling of joy. Regardless of his longings for home, the selfish side of me rejoiced that he wanted to stay in America with us. As a child, my mind equated staying in America with staying here in Kansas indefinitely, as if time would stop and indulge me to preserve this present moment as long as I wanted.

Despite his previous embarrassment, Bhaskar now looked my mom full in the eye. "I want to make money and send it back to my parents to take care of them and thank them."

Turning over Bhaskar's words in my mind, I returned to the dishes. Up until then, I assumed that the normal thing for adult children to do was place their parents in a nursing home when they couldn't take care of themselves anymore. In my few experiences, nursing homes were horrible places overflowing with the sterile odor of cafeteria food and medicine combined with old clothes and stale air. Any time Mom insisted on bringing Garrett and I along for a visit to an elderly member of the church congregation, we hoped that the visit would last as short as possible so that we could escape back into the sunshine, the fresh air filled with trees, and the sound of birds and traffic. I couldn't help but think that Bhaskar would be appalled if he visited one of the modern American nursing homes that I had visited.

"Do you ever wonder what your life would look like if you hadn't come?" Mom asked.

Her question confirmed my suspicions. While I admired Mom's effortless way of bumping the conversation along in her direction, I also knew exactly where she was leading Bhaskar—to a conversation on destiny and, ultimately, salvation.

At this moment, two waves of emotion rose and warred within me. Half of me felt a sense of pride that Mom could so boldly witness to Bhaskar despite his Hindu background. Somehow, she always found the courage and the words to say while I simply rehearsed practiced presentations with no personalization under the same circumstances. At the same time, though, waves of fear rose to meet that pride, fear that Mom's boldness would undo everything we had built the last few months. As she continued to discuss faith and eternity, this fear dominated the battle inside me. As polite and gentle as Bhaskar was, what if he got up and stormed out of the house because he felt offended at my mom's attempts to convert him? Worse still, would this evening conversation around the dinner table splinter the family we had created?

I glanced into the living room where Garrett sprawled on the sofa next to Harsha. The pair contrasted each other like a twig next to a tree trunk. But Harsha, the gentle giant, wrestled with Garrett using the same gentleness as a Great Dane with a kitten. His eyes barely open, Dad sat in the rocking chair and smiled at the two, enjoying his moment of peace after a heavy, satisfying dinner.

When I returned my gaze to the kitchen, quite the opposite tableau greeted me. Focused and intent, Mom leaned forward on the kitchen table. Although she smiled and talked softly, her cheeks were flushed. Bhaskar sat back against his chair as if he wanted as much space between him and Mom as possible. While a serious expression covered his face, I realized that the lack of expression served as his mask. For the first time since we picked him up at the airport, he was uncomfortable and wanted to leave, but politeness kept him planted in his seat.

Unable to stand the tension in the kitchen any longer, I fled to the living room. Some of the apprehension must have followed me because Garrett and Harsha settled down, and even the living room grew quiet.

A few minutes later, Bhaskar emerged from the kitchen. I breathed a sigh of relief and studied his body language for any signs. Bhaskar and Harsha made eye contact, and Bhaskar asked him a question. Unfortunately for us, he didn't ask in English—a bad sign.

Mom appeared over Bhaskar's shoulder. "You guys must be tired." Her smile appeared forced. "Are you ready to go back home? Make sure you take some leftovers with you."

Getting up from the couch, Harsha nodded. "We both have exams to study for."

Dad pulled himself out of the rocking chair. "You should have said something sooner."

Mom continued to fill the awkward pauses with her small talk. “I’m so glad you showed me how to make that egg curry. You know now that you’ll be getting plenty of trial runs from me. Danielle knows how I like to perfect things.”

I nodded and smiled, but I couldn’t think of any words to add that would keep the dialogue moving along. Bhaskar and Harsha chuckled half-heartedly but resumed watching in silence as Mom heaped mounds of leftovers into plastic containers and plastic bags.

While I usually enjoyed late-night car rides into downtown Kansas City to see the lights and to enjoy staying up for an extra hour, tonight I happily made an exception. With the uneasiness already potent in the house, I couldn’t imagine how cooped up all of us would feel in the car. Despite the talk in the kitchen, both Bhaskar and Harsha gave Mom hugs before they followed Dad out to the car for the ride home.

“Come and wave goodbye,” Mom said as the car’s headlights slowly backed out of the driveway.

For as long as I could remember, she always reminded us to wave at the front door until the company disappeared from view. She insisted on hospitality until the very last moment. Tonight, she didn’t need to convince me to uphold this tradition. As if my performance could smooth over any hurt feelings, I smiled as big as I could and waved enthusiastically as our car disappeared down the road.

With the car gone, I spun toward Mom. “How’d it go?”

Mom closed the front door wearily. “Good.” She coughed as she plodded toward the kitchen. “Oh, I don’t feel well. I think I’m getting sick.”

As the kitchen lights lit up her face, I could see that the flush from earlier had only grown worse. Even her voice had grown raspy. Still, she pulled a cleaning rag out of a drawer and began wiping down the counters.

Unable to go to bed until the kitchen sat spotless, she distracted herself by talking. “I didn’t feel like doing it, but I felt the Lord pressing on me to talk to him. And you heard the conversation, the Lord was definitely leading him to open up. Tonight was the night to tell him about Jesus.”

I nodded, still slightly in awe at the risk that Mom had taken. However, I was also slightly mad that she didn’t feel more concern about taking that risk. What if we never heard from Bhaskar and Harsha again?

“I could tell the walls went up again,” Mom murmured as she leaned against the counter. “We gotta bring them back down.”

By walls, she meant Bhaskar’s uneasiness around us. Once again, we were strangers to him. Mom thought for a moment, and I joined her, trying to think of a way to let Bhaskar know that we still cared about him. Regardless of his actions moving forward, we would still treat him like family.

Mom straightened up, giving me a small smile. “We’ll bring them a meal.”

Why didn’t I see that solution coming? Of course, Mom tackled any problem with food. Her apologies or thank yous always came disguised as desserts, sandwiches, or dinners. Through the kitchen, she could speak with clarity and eloquence.

This momentary awkwardness with Bhaskar proved no different. Our follow-up visit a few days later healed any distrust about our intentions. While the chicken biryani spoke volumes

in savory flavor and slow-cooked complexity, it whispered reassurances of love and acceptance, the true comfort food for the soul.

Today, I'm sitting across from Bhaskar, and we're enjoying a Mexican dinner because of those words of comfort. He may not remember the pool party, but I'm certain that he hasn't forgotten that night around the dinner table with Mom.

As family, we often say things we regret or don't say things we should. If Mom could physically join us around this table, I know she wouldn't apologize for the bold and convicting words she shared around a different dinner table all those years ago. Her convictions and beliefs ran too deeply for that. But Bhaskar would still love her and welcome her just the same, as a son greets his mother. Her homemade meals spoke louder than her words.

As her daughter, perhaps I should take a page from Bhaskar's book of forgiving and forgetting. Regardless of my opinions and the words my mom and I have spoken, how can I forget the words of love she folded into her meals? Maybe I should let her language of the kitchen speak for itself.

The Look of Clear Water

“Where’s your mom?”

Bhaskar’s daughter has no idea the significance of her question. While I have mentioned my mom and my dad throughout dinner, my heart always hitches at the reference as if it knows I secretly long to say more but fear to unleash the painful memories. I would have to sugarcoat the details for Bhaskar, and Mom deserves no less than the truth. Silence is preferable to lies.

Where’s your mom?

The ghosts press in around the table. How do I tell an eleven-year-old girl that I lost my mom to cancer without introducing the reality that death can intrude at any moment? Right now, the naivety in her eyes and her innocent smile remind me of the time I was her age. Like her, I sat at a table with my parents and “foreigners,” the mysteriousness of life awing me with its gifts of new friends, delicious food, and wonderful memories. One day as she gets older, she’ll realize the hard truth that life snatches away as easily as it gives.

Where’s your mom?

How do I answer without telling Bhaskar the whole truth? Surely, he must know something went wrong after he left for New Jersey. Before she succumbed to cancer, my mom’s heart was broken when Dad divorced her. While broken families are almost commonplace for Americans, I knew Bhaskar wouldn’t understand why the family he cared for fell apart. I’m still trying to understand myself.

“Mona passed away, remember?”

Bhaskar’s hushed response to his daughter fills the silence, and it’s all I want him to remember. It’s all I want to remember, too. At least in our memories, my family is whole and

happy. My parents are still married and function as husband and wife, and my mom is still breathing and laughing and cooking.

“Remember Mona made pumpkin pie?”

I don’t understand Bhaskar’s question at first. When I think of Mom and her kitchen exploits, I hear the sizzling of seeds in hot oil or feel the heat of green chilis burning the back of my throat. Bhaskar, however, thinks of pumpkin pie.

Then, I remember that first Thanksgiving when we dared to have Thanksgiving without the grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins. We invited Bhaskar and Harsha instead, and although Mom substituted an Indian meal for the turkey, she still incorporated one traditional Thanksgiving menu option—homemade pumpkin pie.

“Yes, we invited you guys over for Thanksgiving.” I smile at the returning memory. “You loved the pumpkin pie.”

When Bhaskar nods enthusiastically, I turn to his wife. “I can give you the recipe. It’s super easy.”

Mom’s pie crust was simply a mixture of flour, salt, and oil. If Mom could find a way to make something healthier without sacrificing flavor, she embraced it.

Seeing Ethan’s puzzled look, I explain, “For a few years, we didn’t have a traditional Thanksgiving. No turkey. Instead, we would make all this Indian food and invite a bunch of Indian students over.”

Looking back at Bhaskar, I realize he doesn’t know the significance of Thanksgiving. From Ethan’s surprise, I know he understands. Who invites strangers over for Thanksgiving dinner? Bhaskar doesn’t fully realize that my mom, my dad, my brother, and I considered him family.

I don't think I fully realized this phenomenon in our family until one Thanksgiving that we celebrated without any family. A dishwasher leak put an end to our traditional Indian Thanksgivings. It really signified the end of an era. Soon after, the conflict in my parents' marriage that had been safely simmering beneath the surface fully erupted. Like any catastrophic event, the sudden, visible signs were symptoms of a hidden, chronic problem.

For a year, our dishwasher had been hemorrhaging water into the basement. All those times I had loaded the dishwasher after making Indian food, we were literally and unknowingly flooding the basement and causing a blanket of black mold to fester in the damp wood of the kitchen floor and basement ceiling. When my dad finally discovered the leak cleverly concealed behind the organized chaos in the basement, we had only one solution. The kitchen needed to be gutted to the bare bones.

My mom comforted herself with the thought that since the house was built in the 1970s, it desperately needed a renovation anyway. Despite its need for an update, this house had offered my parents the perfect place to start a family when they migrated to Kansas as newlyweds. It lay on the edge of the country, the line between the suburbs and miles of corn fields and cow pasture. More importantly, the house offered my mom a retreat from the suburbs where the in-laws lived. Living so close to the country meant a long drive to our house, meaning that relatives rarely visited more than twice a year.

As I get older, I wonder more why my mom dreaded her in-laws so much. To my rosy eyes of childhood, my grandparents, uncles, and aunts were nothing but fun, kind, and giving. But, as I get older, I also discover that adults are adept at showing children their good side and disguising the ugly. I can only imagine the ugly side that my mom must have witnessed behind closed doors to result in her fleeing to the country.

Regardless, as contractors gutted our kitchen, Mom watched the walls, ceiling, and floor of her kitchen disappear around her until nothing remained but the support beams. Then, a squad of mold specialists arrived in white plastic onesies. Methodically, they wiped down and vacuumed every object in our house before packing everything away in boxes as if we were moving.

Despite the chaos of construction and contractors surrounding her, Mom attempted to maintain a sense of normalcy by continuing to homeschool my brother and me. But with Dad still driving thirty minutes to work every day, Mom had to face the contractors and insurance company alone. Within days, she waved the white flag of surrender and cancelled school indefinitely due to construction. My eleven-year-old brother and I scattered to the backyard and trees with our newfound freedom. The textbooks and school supplies sat tidily sealed in cardboard boxes.

With no belongings, no kitchen, two pre-teen children, and an eight-foot-drop hole in the floor, Mom finally received the order to leave the house immediately while the insurance company housed us in a temporary apartment. The only problem was that she received this announcement the day before Thanksgiving. Any hopes for one of our “traditional” Indian Thanksgivings were packed away indefinitely like all our belongings.

Until the insurance company could finalize the accommodations, we needed a temporary place to stay for a few hours. With no other options, my mom reluctantly picked up the phone and called her mother-in-law in the suburbs. To this day, I realize how desperate she was to call Grandma. Arriving in a jumble of sweatpants and pajamas, we tumbled into Grandma’s grand entry like a band of ragamuffins.

Grandma's house always struck me with some degree of awe because it offered everything that Mom's house did not. While Mom possessed a fear of color, preferring white walls, white carpet, white furniture, and white appliances, Grandma couldn't decide on a color. Her front entry gleamed with a sunny yellow that led into the burgundy living room. From there, we could view the olive-green kitchen and dining room.

To cope with the eight grandchildren, Grandma had coerced Grandpa into finishing the basement. The crowning achievement lay in the large television and all the movies on videotape that a child of the 90s could want. Granted, Mom didn't approve of movies or television because she wanted to keep her children's minds as pure as possible. Still, my brother and I couldn't wait to rush down the stairs into our domain, a zone free from adults. For some reason, Mom didn't approve of spaces without adult supervision either.

Of course, we had a basement as well—in Kansas, everyone had a basement. But ours was a damp, dark cave made of concrete and wood without a strand of carpet or speck of dry wall. Unlike Grandma's basement, I rarely ventured into our basement for fear of the wolf spiders breeding down there.

But what mystified me most about Grandma's was that she actually decorated. Pictures hung on the walls—not just family photographs, but pictures of swans and landscapes—as well as wall décor in intricate metal designs. Other decorations with no practical function sat on bookshelves, end stands, and the mantle.

Above all, though, her house always seemed ready for company.

Reading my thoughts as I perched next to Mom on Grandma's leather sofa, Mom whispered to me, "No one's house always looks this well. Real people have houses that look lived in."

As I got older, I would learn she was right, but my thirteen-year-old eyes recognized a high standard around me, the possibilities beyond white, empty walls and cluttered countertops.

Grandma peered over her wire glasses at my wriggling, bored brother. “Grandpa is down in the woodshop if you would like to go see him.”

Phrased like a question, her words were really a prod to get Garrett out of the room into the basement. Her halo of white-blonde hair, red lipstick, and elegant way of sitting in an armchair made Grandma the clear lady of the house.

Mom, in her baggy sweatpants, oversized white socks, and Dad’s flannel shirt, said nothing as Garrett disappeared down the stairs. Her pursed lips told me that every cell in her body was screaming in disapproval. Grandma knew her feelings about the basement and Grandpa’s workshop. But we were guests—mere peasants—in this house.

Mom’s apprehension for our extended family had been accepted as normal for so long that I didn’t realize I had some of the pieces that answered the question, “Why?” I can’t fully blame Mom for her paranoia because Garrett and I did seem to have the worst of luck at Grandma’s.

For example, when I was two years old, I was helping Grandma dust at her house.

“What person lets a two-year-old dust?” I can hear Mom exclaim as she recounted the story.

Somehow, I managed to trip and fall, hitting the bridge of my nose on the edge of the fireplace.

Garrett fared no better. At four years old, he was using Grandpa’s hammer to drive golf spikes into the grass.

Again, I can hear my mom's righteous indignation. "Who in their right mind gives a four-year-old an adult hammer to play with?"

Sure enough, Garrett managed to smash the back end of the hammer into his forehead. Today, we both walk around with our thin, white scars as reminders of Grandma's house.

Since then, our family experienced cases of vomiting, toy balls running between cars on the street, and even a miscarriage—all at Grandma's house. Although I wouldn't classify her as superstitious, Mom still viewed our home on the edge of the country as a sanctuary.

And yet, here we were in Grandma's living room and homeless the day before Thanksgiving.

Grandma turned her eyes on me now, the corners crinkling in a smile. "Your cousins Noel and Sarah are over. They're in the basement."

I felt Mom stiffen beside me. While Garrett's disappearance had earned her disapproval, sheer outrage now rolled off her in waves. I couldn't remember the last time I had seen my cousins. Perhaps, Christmas when I was five? After Mom officially disapproved of my uncle and aunt's parenting, we stopped visiting. In her opinion, they were too "wild" and "worldly" to pass as good influences on my brother and me because they let my cousins jump on the couch and play alone in their rooms. Now, I found myself caught between my mom's invisible hand holding me in my seat beside her and Grandma's invitation tugging me toward the basement stairs.

Fearing rudeness against Grandma over my mom's wrath, I escaped to the basement stairs. As I descended, I wondered what my infamous cousins, Noel and Sarah, looked like. I had hung around college students from India for so long that I stood in awe of kids my age. With a

mid-twenties student from India getting his master's in electrical engineering, I could freely converse. But when placed in the same room with my cousins, I couldn't think what to say.

Rounding the corner, I came face to face with my cousins. The chatter I had heard coming down the stairs suddenly ceased as we sized each other up. Cousin Noel—much taller now—looked older than her sixteen years. Practically a grown-up, she appeared darker. Then, I realized in the dim light that her hair was dyed black, her fingernails wore black nail polish, and a heavy line of eye liner and mascara surrounded her eyes. Mom would definitely not approve.

“Danielle, hey! Come over here, Noel's showing me a messy bun.” Sarah, my younger cousin, waved me over to the carpet where she sat surrounded by blankets, pillows, and hair clips. Relieved, I saw she was still blonde and youthful, although now twelve instead of the five-year-old that I remembered.

Joining the circle, I observed mesmerized as Noel wrapped Sarah's tousled, dirty-blonde hair into a bun directly on top of her head. This experience, although normal for the average teenage girl, felt so foreign.

“Oh my word, your hair's so long,” Noel said in a throaty voice, as if she had woken up with a bad sore throat.

Sarah clapped her hands and squealed at her reflection in the mirror. “My turn!”

Noel shook out her black mane, and Sarah began to divide it into sections to braid.

“You wanna do one?” Sarah offered me a section of hair diplomatically.

The awkward shyness of a homeschooler tied my tongue. That, and the lecture from my mom that would inevitably follow in the coming hours. Determined, however, to enjoy the moment while it lasted, I gratefully took one of Noel's black locks. Perhaps, I could learn a secret or two about hair that would help my homeschool appearance.

Ew. I forced my face to reveal no change in expression. Noel's hair felt rough and dry, like a . . . My mind scrambled for a comparison. Sarah, however, wasn't so polite.

"Your hair! It's like a stuffed animal!"

"Shut up!" Noel laughed.

But Sarah grabbed a teddy bear off the pillows beside her and squished it into Noel's face. "Feel it!"

The two girls laughed and tussled with the bear while I sat awkwardly looking on, hoping my smile made me a participant.

As if remembering my presence, Noel turned to me. "What's your hair feel like?"

As if granting permission, I pulled out the hair elastic that kept my frizzy bob out of sight. Feeling ugly between my round glasses, ski-slope nose, and poofy curls, I braced myself as Noel's fingers gently rubbed a strand of my hair.

"Oh my word, it's so soft. Sarah, feel it."

Despite the awkwardness of two pairs of hands petting my hair as if I were a dog, pride filled me with confidence. I had impressed my cousin Noel, and she had bestowed on me the compliment of *soft*. I filed the remark into my memory so that I could repeat it to Mom. She would be so proud to hear my hair was softer than Noel's, and maybe, she would forget that I had abandoned her in Grandma's living room.

"Danielle, would you like some lunch?" My grandma's voice floated down to me and offered the perfect interruption to my awkward moment with the cousins.

Running up the steps, I found Grandma setting her kitchen table with steaming bowls of soup on top of woven placemats. A knife, spoon, and fork sat in perfect alignment next to each bowl.

Noticing my analysis of the table, she smiled. “How does tortellini soup sound?”

My gaze shot to my mom who hovered at the kitchen island. “Like, chicken tortellini soup?”

Surely, Grandma couldn’t be talking about the same chicken tortellini soup that my mom made. Although Indian food remained a consistent feature of our kitchen, my mom didn’t forget the tried-and-true recipes we had enjoyed before the arrival of Harsha and Bhaskar, chicken tortellini soup being one of our favorites.

Grandma caught my glance and read my mind. “Yes, it’s the same soup that you’re familiar with.”

The familiarity comforted me. In light of the non-stop upheaval in our family with the construction over the last few weeks, a familiar soup in an unfamiliar setting both comforted and calmed me. Sliding into my seat at the table, though, I noticed that this chicken tortellini soup was not the one that I was used to. Something was different about it—the broth was green. I felt Grandma’s and Mom’s eyes boring into me as I tentatively took a sip. For Grandma’s benefit, I complemented the soup.

“It’s delicious.” And, truly, it was, despite the green broth.

“Would you like some parmesan cheese?” Grandma pushed the green shaker bottle closer to me.

My eyes lit up. “Yes!” I shook a pile of pre-grated parmesan cheese into my steaming bowl.

If we were home, Mom wouldn’t have let me serve my own parmesan cheese. After I emptied a container of parmesan in just two days, Mom never let me touch the shaker again. Now, under Mom’s watchful eye, I shook a generous mound of cheese into my bowl. Compared

to what I preferred, the mound was still scaled back. I knew that it was impolite to empty a hostess's container of parmesan cheese in one sitting. The only thing that would make this medley of flavor better would be ground black pepper. Eating so much Indian food had caused me to crave spice where none had existed previously. But I didn't see a pepper shaker nearby, and I was too polite and shy to ask.

“What did you think about the soup?” Mom asked me once we were alone.

“Well, I thought it was salty.”

I didn't want to bash Grandma's soup, but I knew at thirteen years old that Mom wasn't fishing for compliments. She wanted to hear how her soup surpassed Grandma's.

Mom's smile almost appeared smug. “Yes, Grandma doesn't start with water. She uses canned chicken broth. All that extra sodium.”

From Mom's voice, I assumed that cooking with store-bought chicken broth was vastly inferior to cooking with pure, distilled water. Since Mom made the effort to buy twelve gallons of distilled water every week, I figured the difference was crucial to health and cooking. After all, I had tasted the difference in Grandma's soup.

“The broth was green.” My face wrinkled as I remembered, and I was glad that I had a true complaint to offer.

“She doesn't use fresh spinach.” Mom gloated. “Probably frozen.”

Again, I made a mental note that frozen spinach was bad and that a person must always cook with fresh spinach.

“Did you notice she also used canned mushrooms?” Mom asked.

My mind whirled to the bowl of soup and called up all memories of taste, texture, and looks. “Yeah . . . they seemed smaller. And they tasted . . . different.” I imagined a weird, sour flavor.

“Fresh makes all the difference.” Mom beamed.

I filed these words of wisdom away, thankful for my mother’s version of soup with its army-size portions, fresh ingredients, and distilled-water broth. Most of all, I was thankful that by complimenting Mom’s soup and choosing it over any others, I could deflect her displeasure onto Grandma and her soup.

As lunch wrapped up, Grandma revealed her motive for getting my cousins and I out of the basement. “Would you like to help me with preparing Thanksgiving dinner?”

I had completely forgotten Thanksgiving was the next day. Growing up, I assumed our family had stopped attending Thanksgiving with the whole extended family because Mom didn’t enjoy half-a-dozen cousins running wild about Grandma’s house.

“You always come home like little hoodlums,” she would complain to my brother and I. “You forget everything you were taught.”

I realize now that I didn’t care about the reason because Mom had simply created her own family around the Thanksgiving table, and Harsha and Bhaskar offered Garrett and I all the holiday cheer we could want. A spicy, vibrant piece of tandoori chicken beat a bland slice of turkey every time.

But now, for the first time in a long time, Grandma was offering for me to partake in this family tradition with my relatives. The unprecedented nature of this proposal scared me. Knowing my mother’s strong convictions about Thanksgiving and my cousins, I felt as if I needed to decline on principle alone. After all, my cousins’ behavior would be on full display for

her to critique. Glancing at my mother, I knew she had overheard Grandma's offer, but she was giving me no direction as to what I was supposed to say.

"Sure." I smiled, faking more confidence than I felt.

Grandma let the troop of us three girls into her modern, mid-2000s kitchen, a blend of greens and beiges. Remembering the Indian feasts that required all-day preparations, I mentally slipped into sous chef mode while my cousins laughed over some movie line that I had never heard before. Grandma laid out a collection of kitchen gadgets that reflected someone who watched a lot of TV commercials. Used to conquering the kitchen with just a paring knife, I surveyed the spread of gadgets with confusion. My cousins were just as puzzled as to the purpose of these gadgets.

"Let's start with peeling the potatoes." Grandma lugged a bowl of potatoes onto the counter.

With fourteen people to feed, she had a bowl of what seemed to be never-ending potatoes. At least, I recognized this gadget we would need—a potato peeler. Grabbing one, I tackled the bowl of potatoes. Peeling five pounds of potatoes was a normal occurrence for me when Mom and I made Bombay potatoes and one hundred chapatis for previous holidays.

Noel picked up a peeler and a gnarly potato and analyzed both. When I looked up from my first potato, she was still standing by the sink and awkwardly smearing the peeler across the potato skin with little to no effect. Sarah was faring no better, causing a fit of giggles between the two of them.

Seeing their struggle, Grandma asked, "You want to chop the onion?"

Noel laughed as Grandma showed her how to insert a wedge of onion into a plastic-dome gadget and, by hitting a button on top with her palm, chop the onion with the corrugated blades underneath.

“This is so cathartic!” Noel crowed as she banged on the button.

Sarah claimed another gadget with a crank and handle. While I continued working my way through the pile of potatoes, Grandma showed Sarah how to impale an apple on the contraption’s screw. Then, turning the crank, Sarah laughed to watch the gadget peel and core the apple. While the two girls giggled and chatted between smacking and cranking, I continued peeling potatoes with the focus of a soldier.

“Danielle, you’re so good at that,” Noel crooned as she rested her elbows on the counter, the onion abandoned.

Grandma weaved around the kitchen as she sorted ingredients and juggled pots and pans on the stove. Since I was used to the intense busyness of Mom, Grandma’s pace felt relaxing. Meanwhile, I diced a bunch of celery with a knife.

“Noel, Sarah, can you set the table?”

“Yeah! Noel, I can you show the napkin fold Grandma taught me!” Sarah led the way into the dining room with an armful of cloth napkins.

I could hear their cackling coming from the dining room, and I felt abandoned in the kitchen with Grandma. Still, I suspected that Grandma suggested the place setting in order to get them out of the kitchen.

“Thank you, dear, for your help,” she said warmly as I finished the celery.

My heart swelled with pride as I left the kitchen. Even though I didn’t know the latest celebrity news or girl gossip, I knew my way around a kitchen. Thanks to my mom, I had not

only sat at the kitchen table hundreds of times to watch her prepare dinner, but I had also learned to chop every vegetable possible—and all without a gadget. Even though our knives were often dull and few in number, my mother and I still managed to chop and dice and mince as many as twelve pounds of onion, ten pounds of potatoes, and nine pounds of tomatoes at a time for our Indian Christmases and Thanksgivings. While not the most glamorous work, I felt a sense of superiority that day in Grandma's kitchen that put me on par with my far more glamorous and worldly-wise cousins. In that moment, I considered the fact that my mom might not be entirely crazy in her preference to teach me kitchen skills over hair styling, nail polishing, and makeup.

However, when I meandered into the dining room to check on my cousins, a long dining table full of chairs, place mats, and name cards greeted me. Reading the names from card to card, I felt a pang of sadness and envy, for the first time, that my name wasn't on a card. None of my family's names were on a card because we wouldn't be in these chairs tomorrow. Before today, I hadn't cared that we skipped Thanksgiving with the big family, but now that I had helped and touched and seen what could be, I wondered if I was missing something that Harsha and Bhaskar couldn't offer.

Relatives brings their share of problems because the nature of family, in general, includes problems. Slowly, I started to question my mother's solution to cut family out altogether as the best answer to the problem. Without family, how do our traditions and memories, like holiday celebrations and good things like recipes, get passed down? How do new memories and recipes, like chicken tortellini soup, get made?

That day when I stood in Grandma's dining room without a place at the table, I dealt with my confusion and questions by simply leaving the room and leaving my questions unanswered behind me.

Only a few years later, though, those questions would resurface and refuse to disappear without answers. By this time, Harsha and Bhaskar were fond childhood memories, and I found myself in my own apartment. For the first time in my life, I could choose my own type of mattress, what color shower curtain I wanted, what brand of toothpaste I wanted to use. I could decide whether to eat out or to cook in. However, this freedom—though a rush—proved paralyzing. For a couple of weeks, the walls of my apartment sat empty and bare of decorations as I struggled to find out who I was. I did know who I was not—the colors pink and green, my mom’s favorites when she did decide to venture outside the color white.

In the kitchen, I cycled between boxes of macaroni and cheese, frozen pizza, and dried spaghetti with jarred marinara sauce. My pantry offered a ghost town of supplies—three spices, a couple cans of soup, and chocolate pudding. Even though I had a roommate, the fridge sat mysteriously empty because we rarely stocked it with fresh produce or leftovers.

Mom would be shocked since she, a voracious cook, stockpiled the pantry, fridge, freezer, and second freezer. She squirreled away containers of soup, meat, and veggies in case of an emergency. As for me, I was content with my new life as seen in the state of my kitchen, quick and minimal.

That is, at first.

As the humidity of summer loosened its grip in October, I found myself craving a warm bowl of soup in the evenings. But as I curled up on the couch with my bowl of canned lemon orzo chicken soup, something was missing. While my tongue played detective, trying to figure out the missing ingredient, I stared out the French doors that led to my apartment balcony as dusk wrapped the surrounding apartments and streets in its blue blanket for the night.

Bouncing off the couch, I hurried to the kitchen. Last week, I had craved spaghetti, and a bottle of leftover parmesan cheese sat in the fridge. First, I ground a teaspoon of fresh ground black pepper into my bowl. A small handful of parmesan followed.

Tasting a spoonful, I smiled. *Much better.*

Curling back up on the couch, I relaxed and sank into the comfort of my revitalized bowl of canned soup.

Then, my tongue decided to play detective with me again. Despite the store-bought can of soup now doctored with pepper and parmesan, something was still missing. I missed real pasta—not these mushy pods of orzo, but a fresh tortellini noodle twisted around a filling of melted, salty cheese. I missed tender leaves of spinach, chunks of bell pepper melting into the broth, and rich pieces of mushroom and chicken perfectly complementing each other. In other words, I missed my mom's chicken tortellini soup, complete with black pepper and parmesan cheese.

Unlike other cravings, this one didn't pass. Before I knew it, I was trudging up the steps to my third-story apartment with a grocery bag of spinach, chicken breast, mushrooms, bell pepper, rice, and fresh tortellini noodles. The parmesan and black pepper already waited for me in my kitchen.

After spreading my ingredients out on the counter, I pulled out my largest Dutch oven to make the soup. A pivotal moment had arrived when every son and daughter attempts to cook a parent's recipe on their own. Even without the faded card of the recipe before me, I realized how much—or how little—I had paid attention growing up. Having watched and assisted my mom in making this soup over a dozen times, did I even need the recipe? Still, just to be sure, I found my childhood book of recipes in a box buried in my closet. Best case scenario, I would sample the

finished product, sit back with a smile, and nod. Childhood would return, the sights, smells, and sounds that make up the memories of a country kitchen in Kansas.

Perhaps after a few more bites, I would admit, “There’s just something about it when Mom makes it.”

Worst case scenario, a son or daughter could give up in defeat and call Mom in hopes that she would fill in the gaps between memory and the faded recipe instructions. Unfortunately, I didn’t have this luxury to phone for help. To move into this apartment, my first apartment, I had burned the bridges behind me, denying myself the privilege of ever calling for help. The cost of freedom had proved higher than I thought, but independence seemed worth it.

Waves of nostalgia washed over me as I flipped through the cookbook’s pages, passing recipes such as oven-roasted potatoes, Twila’s million-dollar sandwiches, and fruit cocktail cups. Eventually, I reached Mom’s chicken tortellini soup, a ladies’ soup that men could still manage to enjoy because of its tender chicken and flavorful pasta. I scanned the ingredients—nothing surprising.

My eye noticed a stained, wrinkled recipe card poking out from behind the page with the tortellini soup. Pulling out the distressed card, I attempted to decipher the instructions written in cursive. Recognizing words like “spinach” and “tortellini,” I realized what I was holding—another recipe for chicken tortellini soup, my grandmother’s version. The original version. Which version should I use? While I was prepared to make the classic tortellini soup of my childhood, I remembered that another version did exist—one that I had only tasted once during that fateful Thanksgiving almost two decades ago.

My experiences with my mom had shown me that independence comes with a cost. Like her, I had tried building walls and fighting for complete independence. But now, what if I

reached a compromise? Instead of choosing a side and picking my mom's recipe or Grandma's recipe, what if I did my own version that combined the two?

Taking that six-quart pot, I didn't fill it with distilled water. Instead, I twisted the cap off a container of low-sodium chicken broth. Filling the pot halfway, I turned on the heat and prepared my vegetables. Both recipes called for bell peppers, and a package of cheese-filled tortellini pasta waited on the counter. Once the broth was gently bubbling in the pot, I dumped in some chicken thighs cut in bite-size pieces. Here, I did pull a page from my mom's cooking. While Grandma's version called for chicken breasts, my mom believed that the dark meat of chicken thighs held more moisture and flavor. Turns out, she was right.

After the chicken, the pasta followed, along with a handful of dried tarragon. At this point, the kitchen smelled like comfort on a winter's day. The aroma of juicy chicken, earthy tarragon, and creamy cheese filled the apartment. In quick succession, I added the chopped bell pepper, fresh button mushrooms, and handfuls of fresh spinach. Watching the spinach wilt and sink below the soup's surface, I was glad I kept Mom's updates and used the fresh vegetables. The tenderness of the mushrooms and vibrancy of the spinach celebrated life and reminded me of home.

Finally, the last touch to the soup came in the form of white rice. My mom had switched to the crunchy, hardy texture of brown rice, but I returned to the fluffy, buttery white rice of Grandma's recipe. As I stirred the pot, chunks of chicken surrounded by glossy tortellini noodles and a rainbow of vegetables danced together before my eyes. The smell reminded me of home—a kitchen with a leaky dishwasher and my mother stirring two six-quart pots of soup. Twelve gallons of distilled water sat at her feet.

But once I poured myself a bowl and sipped the first spoonful, the flavor exploded from the chicken broth. While my mom offered stability and nutritious ingredients in their purest form, Grandma truly brought a flavor that made everything sing. I could never go back to either one or the other. Instead, I had the best of both worlds in one bowl. All I needed to add was a mound of parmesan cheese and fresh ground black pepper.

Where's your mom?

I wish I can turn to the ghost of my mom sitting in the shadows at the Mexican restaurant and tell her she's here in these memories that Bhaskar and I share, in the pumpkin pies and Bombay potatoes that we remember and crave, and in the recipes that may fade but sit carefully preserved in a box. I would tell her that every time I make a pot of chicken tortellini soup, I see her in the wooden spoon that I use to stir, and I sense her in the woodsy smell of tarragon that I crush in my palm.

Instead, Ethan and I lead the way out of the restaurant. The rain has stopped, and the earth stands still in reverent silence, thanking the sky for its gift of water. Yet, we join with nature in greater thankfulness for the sun painting the clouds with a brilliant pink and purple sunset.

Breathing in the fresh air, we turn to say our goodbyes. I can't help but smile as Ethan leans down to give Bhaskar a hug. My past and my present finally come together.

As Bhaskar and Ethan step back, Bhaskar glances at my smile and murmurs, "You look so much like Mona."

My heart pauses. What gave me away—my smile, my hug, my hair?

Where's your mom?

I realize that she's in me, the way I move, the way I talk, the way I cook. And she always will be.

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