

A Pot Of Daal

by

Maria Khan

The salt. The salt was the problem.

The spoon stirred around the pot three times and the consistency got thicker under the disapproving gaze. It was almost as if she was willing to turn it to what she wanted just by looking at it hard enough.

She grabbed the container and whisked it three times, then moved the spoon around the edges of the pot to collect the sticky residue that stuck itself to the metal. When she tasted it this time, her face twisted into a grimace. “It tastes like someone put it through a sand sorter.”

Sighing, she grabbed her spoon and shook it on the outer edge three times, hard enough to shake any leftover soup. Then she covered it with a lid and willed it to bubble away.

Moving away from the stove, she grabbed a pen from the counter and traced it through a notebook lying a few feet away, canceling the seventh item. *Salt*, it said.

“It’s not the salt.”

She peered at the next item, “Maybe it’s the tomatoes.”

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“Mama, it’s *daal* again?” Isha asked as soon as she stepped inside the kitchen threshold. She didn’t say anything, still bent over her list.

Isha went over to the pot and noticed the blinding yellow color of the soup. “Are we having it with rice?”

“Yes.”

Her daughter stood around for a bit, looking around the kitchen. “Mama, do you want any help?”

“No.”

Isha didn’t say anything. She took her response in stride and slowly slipped away.

*

Her mother had a black leather diary of all the recipes that she learned from cooking shows. It had the same format, big, bold heading, followed by a list of ingredients and their measurements and then the procedure. She loved reading it when she was a kid, especially the dishes she would’ve loved to eat, but were never made.

She understood that it was a lazy day for her mother when she made *daal*. The measly lunch she had in her school breaktime was hardly enough to keep her hunger at bay till nearly 3 when the van dropped her off at the doorstep. All the way she would conjure up images of what her mother could have possibly cooked, only to find out the stench of lentils and the yellow, disgusting soup slithering around the pot.

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When she was 12, continental food was the new thing around Karachi’s food scene. Before it was known as a food metropolis, the only delivery options she heard of were pizza, burgers and fries. There was only the matter of choosing whether to order it from an upscale food chain or a local shop around the corner. Ordering *desi* food was never an option because you would have that at home anyway. Why waste money on food that you could get on your mother’s stove?

These were special few days in the year, when she could coax her father out of some money to get something fast and oily that she was craving. It was to be savored, eaten slowly and finished completely. If you didn't finish, you would remember it the next day and regret that it ended up becoming food for someone else who wasn't as full as you.

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The next day, she cut the tomatoes small enough to resemble a mush and kept them aside to dump in when the water started boiling with the *daal*. She stood around for several minutes until she could see it simmer and then bubble with steam rising above it. She took her cutting tray and dumped the tomatoes, put the rest of the spices and then put the lid on top.

It took a long time for *daal* to become soup, especially if you weren't using a pressure cooker. However, the learning curiosity of whether she had achieved what she wanted was too much to retreat from the kitchen and waddle around the house. She knew her mind would always be in pursuit of what was waiting at the pot. So she stayed and peered as the lid fogged up, and then condensation drops began becoming visible by the side.

As soon as the timer hit its mark, she was on her feet, turning the heat off and sending the cooking to a halt. She removed the lid and tasted it directly from the spoon. Contemplated for a bit.

“It's not the tomatoes either.”

She went back to the counter, grabbed the pen and crossed another item off the list.

*

Whenever they would eat *nihari* from a restaurant, it would always burn her tongue. She didn't know what to do to stop it, especially because through her own tears, she could see her dad eating it without so much as a single drop of sweat.

It wasn't until she was sitting around at some wedding, fighting through tears, this time on a plate of *biryani*, when she heard her mother say to someone else, "When my oldest was born, I consciously chose to lower the spice content in all of the food I make at home. I was so paranoid about her stomach issues. We eat very little *masala* and salt at home."

That would explain why my dad always asked for more salt whenever he ate, when I couldn't exactly tell the difference. It was probably because he was used to more of it from his own childhood.

As her exposure to more salty and *masala*-concentrated food increased, so did her awareness of the difference between her mom's food and the rest. She didn't know why the food at home always tasted like a watered down version of everything else she ate anywhere else. However, she never said anything to her mother's face. She didn't cook herself, and she knew her mother would ask her exactly that if she expressed discontentment. She also didn't know if she was allowed to. There were a lot of other problems with her mother that she already had, she didn't want to pile on one more.

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The ninth item on her list was a pressure-cooked *daal*.

She dumped everything into the pot with a ton of water, sealed it shut, put on the weight and the beeper and let it run. She didn't normally use pressure cooker for the food that she made, but she could remember in smidges that her mother did, a lot. Maybe that was what it was. Maybe it would give her what she needed.

It was ready a lot quicker. She didn't even have time to go into her head as she always did. She removed the lid off the cooker with a satisfying click and saw the soup bubbling away.

She took the ladle out and tasted the yellow liquid, her face automatically turning into a displeasing shake.

*

It was her brother who started doing it.

“Mama, the *chai* was *bekaar*.”

At first she thought her mother was going to start screaming, but she didn't. She remembered a few years ago, when meekly, she had tried asking for second helpings. “Mama, can you bring me more from the kitchen?”

“Am I your servant? Go and get it yourself. You are old enough.”

She was so bewildered, because this is the first time it had happened, her mother refusing her a request. She was so embarrassed, because her mother was indeed right, in retrospect, she wasn't a servant and she could definitely go get it herself. She never asked her mother to do anything for her from that point on.

She thought it was an age thing, maybe she would say the same thing to her siblings when they were older. And she did see it happening in the future, her sister

went through the same, but when it came to her brother, everything stopped. It was as if her mother had turned into quite a different parent altogether.

They would be sitting at the dining table when her brother would say, “What is this, Mama? What have you made? Is this even edible?”

She would go into shock. Her brother definitely did not know how to cook. But he could still say all of that without her mother piping up and screaming a storm. She took all the criticism with a tight nod.

It gave everyone else the confidence to do so too.

At first, it was her dad who followed suit. “Look at your *parathas*. So weirdly shaped, all uneven. Can I not even get *gol parathas* in this house?”

“Where is the salt in this? Did you forget cooking altogether?”

And then when she didn’t say anything, her brother started finding fault in everything.

“Mama, this is disgusting. I cannot eat it. I am ordering something from outside.”

She remembers that eating the food with a gulp was easier than telling her mother to change the way she cooked. She was meticulous and hard to change, a tough nut to crack, and always wanted to be right. However, she always remembered that her mother had changed her cooking style to match what her kids needed in health. She didn’t know just why she didn’t change back. Maybe her mother had forgotten that they were all old now. They couldn’t eat baby food anymore.

However, she still didn't say anything out loud, gulping the food as she went through life.

*

Her eleventh try took her to mixing two different types of *daals*: the orange and the yellow in equal ratios. She went back to the normal pot, the pressure cooker gave her a headache from how loud it was.

It took considerably longer because she had gotten used to the quickness of the pressure cooked time. But when she tasted it, her tongue didn't agree, it was still wasn't what she was looking for.

*

By the time she moved out of the house for her education, the situation was such that no one ate her mother's food anymore. She would see large quantities of *daal, qeema, baingan, aaloo ki sabzi* just being dolloped onto each other in the wastebasket. It would always be on the top of paper boxes that held food orders from numerous restaurants. Every time the *kacchre-wala* came to collect the trash, her mother would always hand him a plastic bag full of rotis that no one bothered eating during the day.

She would eat her food herself, hunched in the kitchen, picking at the usually full pot.

When she started cooking for herself at her dorm, she realized she could do anything she liked with the spices. There was no more restriction, no more holding back from any *masalas* or salt. She realized there was a different way of making the same home food spicier, oilier and a delight to eat. It made her want to tell her

mother that there was a way she could revive her cooking, and stop throwing it all away at the end of the day.

She never really said anything though. Maybe it wasn't appropriate to teach someone with a lifetime experience of being a mother how to cook.

When she went back home after seven months, she remembers telling herself to brace for the baby food she would have to resort to after months of her own 'adult' cooking. However, when she had a bite of the *bhindi* her mother had cooked a day before her arrival, she was surprised to find it didn't feel tasteless. The salt was perfect. The *masala* was too. It tasted exactly like her mother's cooking also. But there was no sign of the blandness she had attributed to it.

“Did you change anything about the way you cook?” She asked bewildered.

Her mother was hunched over the pot once again. “No. It's the same recipe I've used for years.”

*

The fourteenth try was adjusting the amount of onions used in the *baghaar*. She had to wait impatiently as onions always took a longer time to cook than was necessary.

It wasn't worth the wait. The *daal* tasted exactly the same, like something was missing.

*

Once in college, she messaged her mother for a recipe of *baingan ka raita*. Her mother sent it over, and even though she was still skeptical of the amount of spices,

she ended up following it to a T. It came out looking exactly as she had remembered her mother's to be.

It didn't taste the same. She didn't know what to do with it, so she threw it away.

*

When her mother started losing her memory, it was her who took up cooking for the house.

Her cooking style was very different, she didn't measure everything perfectly, let things simmer more, was very experimental, and always used more oil and *masala* than needed. She was a fan of cream and milk and cheese, and had a few signature dishes that she wanted to cook again and again. It felt like her opportunity for the other members of the house to start eating more at home instead.

For her mother though, anything was acceptable.

She remembers she didn't complain once. Even though she knew exactly what was different, how different it was and where she had gone off the track, she never said anything to anyone.

It was a rude awakening though, when her own food started getting leftovers in bigger amounts each passing day. At first, it was only a plate, then a bowl, then a glass Pyrex dish. She was different from her mother though, because she never asked for any criticism on the way she cooked, so everyone knew to stay silent. But she knew she was hyper-aware of the micro-expressions, when family started getting up from the table after taking two or three bites, when more and more *rotis* started staying in the *roti daan* and when finally, she had to throw away a whole pot's full of that day's

sabzi. She stared at the waste for a long time, feeling like her heart was lying somewhere in between the spinach and the potato.

*

Three days after her mother passed away, she managed to go through the contents of her fridge and emerged with a box of yellow *daal*. She put the frying pan on the stove and warmed up half the *daal* for herself. It was when the first morsel went into her mouth that the first tear fell, right into the plate, making it saltier.

*

A week after, she knew the box in the fridge was in danger of going bad. She had kept it to savour the *daal* her mother made, because she would never taste anything like it again. She wanted to make it last forever.

It was then when she opened her kitchen cabinet and found a sack full of lentil beans. Maybe it didn't have to finish. Maybe she could just taste-test and try to make it over again, exactly how her mother made it. It wouldn't have to finish.

*

On her twentieth try, she was sure she had done everything she could possibly do. The lentil sack was empty with the exception of a few handfuls, and there was possibly no iteration she could remember that would change anything else. The *daal* would always taste like something different, and new. She didn't want new, she wanted the old, earthy taste of the yellow goop in that box in the fridge that she couldn't touch.

Isha came out of the shower soon after and joined her mother in the kitchen. She was a smart kid, knew how to take her own plate, and pour her own food. She

was proud of her, because she remembers she wanted everything handed over to her at her age. She wouldn't ever have to confront Isha with "am I your servant?"

When Isha sat down at the table and picked up her spoon, she was hunched over the list, thinking of what to add to it.

It was when she considered adding a third *daal* to the mix when Isha mumbled, "Mama, what is this? It tastes so *bekaar*."

She turned around slowly and looked at Isha, who was putting her spoon down after her first bite. She dropped the pen, moved forward and took the spoon she had used seconds ago. Dipped it in and brought it to her mouth.

It finally tasted just right.

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