

Wisdom and tea

A fleeting memoir of a woman of many flavours

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“Food is memory, desire and dream. Food conjures us smells and aromas of days gone by. Food, no matter how simple, connects us with our kith and kin who have long passed on.”

Zuleikha Mayat.

A selective Biography

A woman of so many cultures and so many talents – that was my grandmother. She was not an educated woman, not in the conventional sense anyhow. Had she had the opportunity of an academic education, she would have been a doctor or a teacher, I’m sure. Neither was she a beautiful woman. At five foot and seven inches, she was taller than the average Indian woman, but of a petite Indian frame. She had the longest fingers, toughened by years of hard work.

Her life had been of many different colours and flavours, although a woman of Indian descent, she lived the best part of her life in two other very different countries – Malawi and England. Her knowledge of languages was impressive. Not only did she speak her native tongue Gujarati, but she adopted the languages that came with each of her homes. Afrikaans, one of the languages of South Africa, Hindi, Meman and Urdu; three of the many languages of India, Chichewa, the native language of Malawi and of course English, the language of her final resting place.

The healer and the storyteller

My grandmother was a wonderful doctor, one of the best. Of course, she wasn’t a doctor in the conventional sense, but a woman who believed the cure to any illness was in love, affection and the right food.

Growing up, the house was always filled with the scent of delightfully aromatic spices. For colds she would braise ginger in ghee, adding dates, nuts and honey. Tummy aches called for proper milk (none of that semi-skimmed stuff) with a little turmeric, some saffron and brown sugar. It’s easy to admit that medicine wasn’t at all a painful experience, with my grandmother dispensing it.

In the winter, she would make a bittersweet fenugreek cake, filled with roasted walnuts, almonds and molasses. Nutritious food never tasted so good. “It will keep your body warm in during the cold,” she would say as she served it with strongly brewed chai tea.

Where many parents and grandparents forbid or disapprove of children drinking tea, my grandmother would insist that we drink every last sip. “Nonsense!” she would exclaim if ever somebody were to contradict her and brand it as an unhealthy habit.

My grandmother made the best chai spices and whilst visiting her one evening, I’d mentioned how we were almost out of chai spices at home and she insisted we make another batch on my next visit. “Just bring me all the ingredients,” she said “and I shall roast and grind them and mix them together for you.”

When I visited next, I found her resting; her eyes semi-closed and the struggle of every breath, painfully clear. Her head felt hot and clammy and as she coughed furiously when attempting to speak. I’d brought with me a bag filled with spices for the chai spice mix, but I tucked it under my chair, out of sight as I sat down next to her bed. Always attentive, my grandmother had been quick to evidence my

move and asked me what it was that I’d hidden. I apologized, explaining that I hadn’t realized how ill she was and that we could make the chai spice mix another time, when she was feeling better. “Nonsense you silly child,” she laughed weakly, “I shan’t be here forever you know? We must make it now.”

So we did and she promised it would last a very long time. “Now don’t you forget me after it is all gone,” she said pointedly before hugging me tightly. “Well how about you make us some chai and I’ll tell you another story.”



The Lost Sister

When my grandmother spoke about Delilah, her face would brighten and her eyes would shimmer. Her speech would be as light as cardamom and rose water flavoured sutar feni. Delilah hadn’t been her real sister, but her maid-servant since my grandmother was a little girl. She was a native South African who spoke little English or Afrikaans, but my grandmother taught her to speak both. She even taught her to speak Gujarati.

Nearing the end of her story, my grandmother would shake her head, as if in disbelief of what she was about to convey. Her voice so recently laced with the sweetness of sprinkled coconut on a gulab jamun was now tainted like a perfect kheer gone sour.

The time had come for her to marry, she continued. She was to be wed to my Indian grandfather; and as the apartheid government would not allow him to live or work in South Africa, my grandmother would have to leave the only home she had known for her unfamiliar roots in India. Delilah wept at the news and begged my grandmother to let her come too, but again the South African authority would not issue her with a passport because of her colour. They tried to stay in touch, but as the years went by they would eventually become estranged and never reunite.

Bitter Memories

My grandmother never really spoke about India unless she absolutely had to, and when she did, it was with the bitterness of turmeric and the heat of a bhut jolokia chilli. I must have been just six or seven years old when I first heard the heart-tearing tale.

My grandfather, having been invited over to Malawi to find work, had left my grandmother in his home village with his family. Despite having lived in the developing cities of South Africa for the majority of her eighteen years, she had only just began to familiarise herself with her new and poverty stricken surroundings and to adapt to her new home. She was a bride of just three months, had been abandoned by her husband and was thousands of miles away from her widower father. And she was soon to discover that she was pregnant.

Her husband visited her once after their baby boy was born and when eventually he returned to India to take my grandmother back to Malawi with him, their son was no more. He had been killed by the poisonous sting of a scorpion.

The years without her husband had been a struggle that had hardened her heart and toughened her hazelnut skin. Her eyes had become possessed with a sadness that would never be exorcised completely and a tear glazed each cornea, threatening to erupt into a thousand more.

Family

Malawi was now her home and though life was never easy, she was happy there. She had borne five children, three boys and two girls and they kept her contentedly busy.

One day she was the mother of five, the next the mother of ten. My grandmother's niece had just given birth in her home, but complications had ensued and they hurried to rush her to the hospital. They were as close as sisters and my grandmother was determined to not let her die. She squeezed her hand and whispered over and over "You will be fine." "How could she not?" My grandmother had already prepared the healing food for after the birth; a sweet porridge with molasses and almonds, soup prepared with fresh ghee and baby chicken pieces, stewed ginger with ghee, dates, pistachios and walnuts and a bottle of freshly boiled fennel juice.

As the 16 year-old girl who had just given birth to her sixth child closed her eyes, her strength rapidly vanishing from her body, she held her aunt's hand as firmly as she could. "I'm leaving now Khadija, please, I am entrusting my children to you. Love them as your own." Seconds later she lay dead in my grandmother's arms. Her newborn son followed her to the after-life soon after.

No More Suffering

My grandmother had long lived at my father's brother's home and rarely stayed with her other children, preferring the comforts of her familiar surroundings. Though we saw her every day, it had been a year since she had last visited us. Ever since my grandfather had suffered a stroke, she had been committed to looking after him and had little time to do anything else. Since his death her health had deteriorated dramatically; and within months she was in hospital occupying a bed in the same ward that her late husband had resided in for so long.

The consultant discharged her at her insistence, once again. She lived an incredibly active life, and even when she was so gravely sick, she could not remain idle. We were surprised that afternoon when my father came home with my grandmother in tow and we rejoiced when she announced it was time she stayed with us for a while.

She didn't stay long, only a week – just long enough to supervise the making of that year's papri. That Friday, before she left for home, she called for me. This was not unusual as I would sit with her for hours on a daily basis, keeping her coming and listening to her stories; those of South Africa and Malawi and stories of her dearests ones who had passed.

She knew just how to tell a story; and though I had heard many of hers over and over, each time she narrated them I was a captive audience. She could make you laugh and cry and leave you thinking for days. As I listened to her tales of faraway times, she stopped for a moment and slipped off the ring she wore on her middle finger and pressed it into my palm. It was small and delicate. Indian antique gold decorated with a glaze cherry-like ruby centerpiece. I rarely wore accessories and at the time did not favour gold jewelry, so what I saw was just a ring.

She told me to keep it. I declined at first, telling her I did not wear jewelry and that one of my cousins might appreciate it more. This upset her and I quickly apologised, feeling thoroughly ashamed. Giving her a gentle hug and a kiss on the cheek, I accepted it and promised to keep it always.

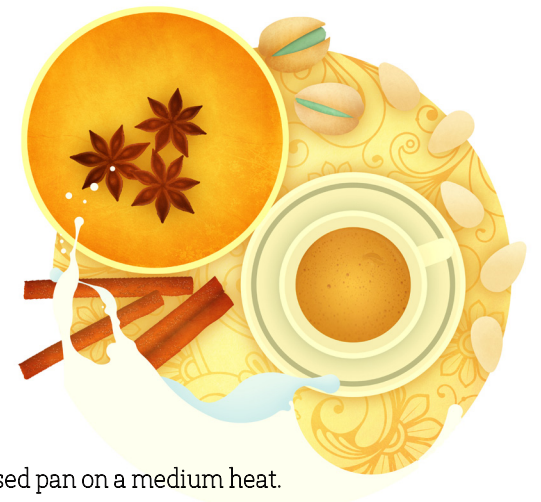
She died the following Monday. Having become very ill the night before, my father had rushed her to the hospital, where he and my mother kept vigil at her bedside. In the morning we hastened to the hospital, my aunts, uncles, siblings and cousins. As we entered the ward, it became clear she would not be here for much longer. The doctor confirmed our fears. She was unconscious as we surrounded her bed, and prayed; crying silently. She opened her eyes just once, recited the declaration of faith and heaved her final breath.

I didn't cry. I couldn't. I felt numb, empty and so cold. The phone was ringing desperately when I returned home, but I ignored it seeking quiet and comfort in the realm of my bedroom. I closed the door in an attempt to drown out the wailing ringing and stood at my dresser before pulling open the stubborn top drawer where amongst my neatly folded scarves lay my grandmother's ring. I picked it up and slid it onto my middle finger and closing my eyes, I let the tears flow.

There lives a story, a memory of my grandmother, in my every living day. For every meal, a plate of kichdi, a single chapatti, a spoon of sweet, spiced semolina or a pinch of chai spices in my cup of

Recipe for Methi Paak (a traditional Gujarati Fenugreek Fudge)

- 1/2 cup Wheat flour
- 1 cup Gram/Chickpea flour
- 1/2 cup Water chestnut flour
- 1/2 cup Batrisu (a traditional mix of 32 herbs) - available at most Indian grocery stores
- 1 cup Molasses/Jaggery
- 1-1/2 cups Clarified butter
- 1 tin Condensed milk
- 1/2 cup Powdered edible gum crystals
- 1 tbsp Ground Cardamom
- 1 tbsp Ground fenugreek
- 2 tbsp Ground ginger
- 1/4 cup Ground almonds
- 1/4 cup Ground pistachios
- 1/4 cup Chopped walnuts
- 1/4 Cup mixed seeds



Method:

Heat the clarified butter in a heavy based pan on a medium heat.

Add the flours. Stir and roast gently.

Add the ground fenugreek and continue to stir until the mix resembles a beige/pinkish colour, then add the condensed milk and molasses/jaggery and stir through.

Remove from the heat and add the rest of the ingredients, mixing quickly and thoroughly. Pour into a shallow greased tin/pan and spread evenly. Garnish with extra nuts and seeds before allowing to set.

Once set, cut into small bite-sized squares. Enjoy with a cup of masala chai!