A Mother's Beloved Cooking, A Daughter's Bittersweet Inheritance

by BEENISH AHMED

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My mom cooks in a makeshift kitchen in the garage because she doesn't want the smell of simmering onions — the start of most of her dishes — to settle into the walls of our house. Even when there's a foot of snow on the ground, I find her there pulling jars of spices out of mismatched cabinets and stirring stews in a pan she brought from Pakistan when she couldn't find anything big enough to entertain with in the States.

When she's cooking roti, a flatbread, Ahmed moves into her kitchen.

That's where she is Sunday morning, preparing curried chickpeas and potatoes plus a sweet halva for brunch. Her father bought these items from the bazaar almost daily during her childhood in Pakistan, but here, my mom, Tahira Ahmed, tells me while stirring cream of wheat into sugar she's caramelized, "If you want to keep the tradition, you have to work for it."

Cooking evokes a bittersweet sort of nostalgia to her. My grandmother died when my mom was just 16. My mom first started to cook several years later as a newlywed in America, reconstructing dishes from memory. On trips back to Pakistan, her brothers look like they've seen a ghost when she cooks for them: they say the food she prepares tastes exactly like her mother's did.

Food connects my mom to her family, her homeland and her past. That might be why she stuck to what she knew in those early years, packing me lunches of Pakistani food when I was a plaid jumper-wearing Catholic school-going first-grader. It makes her sad when I tell her for the first time all these years later that my hallway partner refused to hold my hand whenever I'd had lentils to eat. "I'm not going to touch you after you ate all that slime!" she'd say, accepting a scolding from our teacher before taking my hand.

"People were very narrow-minded," my mom says, pushing the potatoes she's chopped into a pot of boiling chickpeas.

My parents moved from Northwest Pakistan to Northwest Ohio after they were married in 1981. Back then, finding the mainstays of Pakistani cuisine was a challenge. They had to drive to ethnic grocery stores in Detroit or Chicago to find what they most craved. Over time, they developed ways to keep fresh the trunkfuls of ingredients they brought home, grinding up ginger to jar and storing rice in plastic barrels.

Beenish Ahmed writes that her mother's roti is at the core of most of the family's meals.

When I was younger, I enjoyed my mother's cooking at home but feared what others might think of it. A friend asked me what I'd had for dinner at every one of our evening gymnastics classes. To compete with her descriptions of mac and cheese or meatloaf, I'd translate the Pakistani dishes I'd had to more American ones, turning bits of beef curried with carrots into steak and steamed veggies. So I was relieved when my mom became a more creative cook, adding everything from chicken pot pie to goulash to her standard rotation of Pakistani dishes, if only because I didn't have to stand around telling lies in my leotard.

"I always wanted to learn [about] different cultures," she tells me when I ask about how she ever even heard of goulash. She's a hairstylist and connected with some of her clients over food, asking them for their favorite recipes and sharing some of hers too — though she knows her spiciest dishes aren't for everyone. To be safe, she delivers less intensely flavored ones to our neighbors whenever one of them falls ill or loses a loved one: homemade flatbread, or roti, tops the list.

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That's what she's making now; forming balls of dough, rolling them out, crisping them one by one over the stove. Roti is what she wants me to learn to make more than anything. It's at the core of most of our meals. Watching her, I can almost see back centuries to generations of women standing over stoves, passing bread to their families to eat before it cools. And this is part of the problem. I've always somehow imagined that the second I start to clap roti dough between my hands, it'll mark the start of a lifetime of feminine domesticity. Though she's always worked, catering to our family is something my mother holds sacred. To me, it feels unforgivingly difficult — not to mention unfair.

For years I told my mom that the mere thought of making half-baked versions of her meals made me homesick. I couldn't quite explain to her that I felt burdened by all the expectations she put on me as her only daughter. I never felt equipped to carry on the traditions she'd worked so hard to recreate. Growing up, I struggled to make room for my culture outside of my family home. Now that I've lived on my own for a few years, I've started to feel something is missing from my life without delicious day-to-day reminders of where I'm from. Like my mom did when she set up a kitchen in the garage, I finally feel determined to create space in my life to indulge the best of my heritage — and allow the rest to float away. I might even learn to make roti.

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