

The Lunchbox

In the year 2000, as a three-year-old, I left my home and came to this fascinating place everyone called America. Prior to our departure, our relatives, friends, and even strangers ran barefoot down the burning sandy roads till they reached our browning house tucked into the shadows of the tall palm trees and banana plants. They stood in our doorway, breathless, and couldn't get enough air out of the heavy, humid atmosphere.

"We heard that you're going to America! Congratulations! Make sure you make the most of it, and never forget your home!"

Yes, America, the place where dreams come true, the epitome of every immigrant's goals. Leaving their third world country for one that is already developed and prosperous makes America seem like a dream only few can have-yet for my parents, America was a burden.

As I grew older my mom would recount the multiple details of what it was like when we first moved: the pristine, odorless, fresh morning air, the grass green and freshly cut, and the silence of the city at dawn, just like everyone always said. The traffic rules were always strictly enforced. People were expected to maintain this thing called "personal space," which my mom would only learn about later. Littering could cost you money. These discoveries my mom presented seemed so obvious to me now.

My dad would be at work from dawn to dusk. The friendly neighbors we were promised were actually alcoholics that would let their bottles of half-drunk beer crash on the pavement in front of our apartment at ungodly hours. The Indians in our neighborhood who were supposed to be accepting and understanding of other immigrants like us were actually an exclusive group that

refused to accept our family for reasons we would never learn. When my mom told me these things at the age of 13, they filled me with a brew of emotions about how alone she must have felt when she first moved here.

The first memory I have of my time in Denver is of my mom trying to teach me English in our living room. The yellow fluorescent light bathed the walls and floor in a decaying beige color, making even the white walls seem centuries old. I remember English being a language that I couldn't wrap my head around fully. All these words were made up of twenty-six letters whereas in Tamil, my native language, there were more than 100 letters total.

"I," she said, "that is what you call yourself." I looked at her confused, actually wondering if she expected me to use the word "I" because it meant something vulgar in Tamil. I posed this question to her, she laughed, tilting her head back and mumbled something about how everything is the opposite in English.

Three years later, I was in first grade. I had already switched three schools due to my dad's job constantly changing, and was not surprised that I would be attending yet another school in Longmont for second grade. I had failed to make new friends except for the ones I was forced to make on the jarring bus ride home. During a rocky start in first grade I discovered that I was academically talented, but my culture belonged back in India; it was not accepted in an American lunchroom. I initially had this revelation when I ate my rice with my hands instead of a spoon. At first, it was just looks and whispers, then kids would outright come up to me and ask if I needed a spoon.

Being the innocent first-grader I was, I would reply "No, thank you, I like eating with my hands. Don't you? Isn't that how your parents taught you to eat?" My own classmates would

stare at me, not understanding how to respond. Others would simply say that it was because I was a “foreign student,” which I now realize was a very considerate way of thinking of a first-grader. It took me about three days before I asked my mom for a spoon.

The next incident occurred later that year, when I was eating a traditional South Indian dish known as *dosa*. By this time, I had grown accustomed to “Americanizing” what I was eating. For instance, when my classmates asked me what *dosas* were, I would reply by telling them that they were an Indian pancake.

To that, their response would be, “Can I try some?” I watched them eat patiently, anxiety building for a reason unbeknownst to a first grader. They would take the porous *dosa* and tear a piece off. The steam that had accumulated in my lunchbox made a slick surface on the *dosa* making it easy to tear and eat. Now, I would like to go back and personally thank the kids who did not spit out the *dosa* after the first chew. Some would just scrunch their face up, and a few would actually like it, but most would just ask, “Why are they salty if they are pancakes?” or “Why does all your food smell weird?”

That evening I went home and asked my mom three things, “What do pancakes taste like? Why are *dosas* salty? And can you make me food that doesn’t smell bad anymore?”

I can swear now that I saw the worry lines place their claw-like grip on her face at that moment. She seemed to brace herself against the table counter for a moment and take a deep breath in before exhaling slowly. “You should stick up for what you eat Maana, that is the only way your peers will respect you,” she inhaled again and it seemed as though there was not enough air she could breathe in to calm her grieving heart.

I did not understand how my peers could respect me for bringing in food that smelled so pungent. It seemed unfair to me that all the American kids got peanut butter and jelly sandwiches

that never smelled, and carrot sticks, while I got a variety of rice that would envelop both the table I was sitting at and the one next to it in an aroma of spices.

A couple years ago, after I had a cornucopia of experiences to understand the difference between American and Indian culture, my dad related to me how his colleagues at work would tell him that his curd rice looked like “little clouds.” They would then ask him how he found interest in eating something that seemed tasteless. It brings a smile to my face now to think of how similar kindergartners and adults can be.

I remember walking in to my new school the morning of second grade, with enough knowledge to expect that I would again be isolated because of the food I brought. Multiple times I had begged my mom to sign up for “hot-lunch”; she refused, saying that they did not have enough vegetarian options, but I had a certain belief that she did so because she couldn’t stand the thought of me eating food someone besides her had made.

I sat down at the corner of a table, hoping that nobody would sit by me. As I heard the patter of shoes walking down the hall I felt the familiar cold grasp of fear in the bottom of my stomach, engulfing me and making my heart beat out of time. I prayed, wishing that nobody would slide into the seat next to me since I was an unrecognizable face, but the eternal intrigue of the story behind a new face would fuel my classmates’ curiosity into coming and saying hi. Some just waved or smiled, but so far none had come to sit by me, and my worry was ebbing away. Then I watched a lanky boy scooch into the seat beside me. The lights seemed to grow a little bit brighter and the posters encouraging healthy eating with picture of smiling apples and salad went a bit out of focus. I found it hard to swallow as I turned around.

“Hi, I’m Robbie,” the mysterious voice echoed, “I’m in your class!” I turned trying to focus on the voice. It kept talking but for some reason I couldn’t understand anything, except for the phrase I so dreaded. “What’s that in your lunchbox?” I tried to reply. I could do it; I had come up with so many ways of answering that question. That one question which seemed to multiply and fill up all the empty space in the huge cafeteria lunch room, until I felt as though I could not escape of its suffocating vise.

“It’s lemon rice,” a whisper that didn’t sound like me slipped out. Soon, what seemed like half the cafeteria to a second-grader but couldn’t have been more than five people had crowded around my table.

“Lemon rice? What’s that? Why are you eating that? What’s it taste like?” the voices sang out, building into a beautiful yet terrifying crescendo of accusations, until one voice broke the spell.

“Can’t you see that you’re all crowding around her? Give the poor girl some space! Let her eat her lunch in peace!” A tiny blonde head pushed its way through the crowd. Nudging past everyone, a girl stumbled in front of me. “Can I sit with you?”

It seems as though I must have nodded for she scooted down the table to my side. “I’m Lina by the way. And your lunch looks amazing! I’ve never seen rice look so yellow! What’s your name?”

The pangs of fear that had been there only a minute before had vanished. A smile of utter relief had somehow pushed its way onto my face without asking for my permission, “Maanasa, I’m Maanasa and thank you, my mom made it.”