

Spices

1st Generation

Don't worry, even as you find yourself thrust into married life- estranged from the caress of your mother and the toothy grins of your best girlfriends- you will find us whether you like it or not. In the folds of the faded sari that you had to exchange your brown uniform for, between the plaits of your hair, suspended in the coconut oil you moisten your scalp with, and nestled in your molars, rudely interrupting the fleshy taste of the mango whose pit you sucked clean like a dry rack of lamb or the pale green rind of a watermelon. Hours after the silver plates and cups are washed and dried, our combined taste will linger and rudely interrupt your reading of those small Krishna comic books, the 8:00 news, or the romance serial that you claim to find horrifying but actually really enjoy.

We'll motivate you as your arms flex and veins pulse when you are leavening banana bread or spinning paper dosas like a deejay. We'll proudly watch as you wrap your grand silk sari around you, position a bindi on your forehead, and rattle your wrists to adjust your bangles to attend a fancy dinner for the police department and twine elbows with your deputy chief husband. You may think nothing of us and underestimate our influence- garnishing and sprinkling us in imbalanced proportions. But we know. We always know. Even when your mother reprimands you for incorrectly following her recipe, your friends begin rumors about you out of jealousy, and your husband leaves before breakfast and comes late past your supper, we are always there.

2nd Generation

When the kids are playing between the mangrove trees, the crickets chirp in the dark, and the mosquitoes land on the shiny Tarmac of your skin, you absentmindedly scoop us up and run us through your fingers. We cherish adding some flavor to the monotony of this small village. We understand when you pack us up and shut our tin because money's tight and four kids are four too many mouths to feed. Basmati rice and rubbery vegetables, day in and day out. No rich, buttery ghee, sweet ladoos, or fried pakoras.

We sit watch as you and another couple sit cross-legged on banana leaves in a stuccoed house with a wooden swing, discussing an arrangement between your youngest and a young doctor from the States. We feel as much pride as you, able to raise an older daughter who competes for the best of her class like an Anne of Green Gables and eventually exchanges fragrant garlands with and fastens a gold thalli around a young boy's neck. You stand behind her in front of a mirror, fastening the folds of the snug fabric with safety pins- her back torso visible- and then smudging red or white turmeric powder on her hair parting or as a dot on her forehead. You know she's the good one, and you tuck small pouches of us into her brown duffel as she departs to the States after applying for her visa abroad. We keep her baby company- whirlpooling in sugarcane juice and studding her kulfi- as you agree to watch her. We despair, right along with you, the prospect of us never ever being tossed into a pan, pot, or griddle.

3rd Generation

But as predicted, she tries valiantly. We grudgingly comply with being purchased in small, zip-locked bags, thrown into a cart beneath the jet-black hair dye and Fair & Lovely cream instead of being bargained over with a street seller and earning our rightful respect. We tolerate being laden onto a spoon

and steered toward a baby's grubby mouth who's too busy shaping little earthworms out of the dough, your daughter cajoling her, "If you really love me, you'll eat this." *Anything to continue the tradition, we tell ourselves.*

We appreciate the consideration of being in a chutney or sambar, but are disgruntled being hand-mixed with some starchy white rice or wheaty microwaved chapatis. We get packed into lunch tins, only to get stuffed into the cafeteria's garbage and given up for a friend's other half of PB&J or Lunchables. We shudder at her older one's feminist rhetoric, recited whenever asked to prepare dinner. Our aroma disperses and intermingles out of the split-level's chimney, earning the wrinkled noses of other neighbors in the suburbs. Your daughter persists, spending half a Saturday making that exotic, textured biriyani, paper dosas, or idlis that non-Indians and Indians alike crave, but her daughter will brazenly opt for turkey sandwiches and Kraft.

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We can trace a genealogy of being depended on, to bravely being preserved, to being trashed outright. No longer do we clamor for attention like we used to, we instead rejoice when even one of us is pinched up and dusted onto a dish.

