

I sat defeated, constrained, resigned to endure this interminable journey...drastic change, uncertainty, pain...all waiting for me on the other side of this ocean. I watched coils of smoke drifting through the cabin...those were the days when they actually turned off the "No Smoking" signs...you could feel the palpable, collective release as thirty or forty people all lit up simultaneously...my dad was among the first...always.

It had all started with my eyes opening to him standing in the doorway, framed by the light coming from the hall. I knew it was time to go, but I didn't want to accept it...I didn't want to leave this way, everyone sleeping and our scurrying off like thieves in the night. I had been dreading this day...the day my life would change so drastically...the day I would leave the people I had known and loved as my parents.

I was terrified...of what was waiting for me...who was waiting for me...the familiar unfamiliar...I was feeling the dissonance only four hours into the flight and we hadn't even reached Heathrow...this wasn't even the leg of the journey that took us over that terrible, black expanse of ocean.

I was sitting by the window staring into nothing, my dad asleep in the middle seat, his elbow digging into my side. I was thoroughly alone. Who was this next to me? What was I doing here? The smoke was choking me. I couldn't sleep. I missed Sea Kist...that beautiful, tiny, unassuming flat in which I'd grown...in which my whole life had unfolded. I missed Dadda Abba's quiet contemplation over tea and biscuits...staring out at the Arabian Sea. I missed Daddi Amma's frenzied energy...the smell of fresh rotis off the steaming tava...the comfort of knowing that with the price of a disapproving glance from her, I was always allowed to sneak a snack before the meal. Now I was lost in the world. Unmoored in a sea of change, apart from these wonderful, wise, old, crabby, loving grandparents...moving at 600 mph toward uncertain relationships with people I had known only in brief glimpses.

Just then the shrouded figure sitting in the aisle seat next to my dad began to stir. A crumpled mass of silk-embroidered sari in a deep, rich green...a familiar color that Daddi Amma wore, my aunt wore, my Nani wore...the sari covered a silver haired woman waking from a sleep I wish I could enter. She stretched and groaned and looked over at me, sitting there, thoroughly uncomfortable in my existence. Her thin, frail hands dug around in one of several bags stuffed beneath her feet. Then that frail, comfortingly familiar hand reached across my sleeping father toward me...I reached out and took the fragment of murukku from her. It was water in the desert...a light on a hill. My eyes teared...my gratitude couldn't be expressed with a word. That frail hand squeezed mine with a tangible expression of love...understanding...she smiled and said, "Koi baat nahee"...it's nothing".

Everyone was there...my mom and dad and her best friend and her other best friend...and her husband and then some random members of the immigrant physician's club that descended on Brooklyn with the great Indian doctor's migration of the early eighties. But this was a special night. I was the first of the second wave...they'd been here for a while and set up shop and made way for the kids to come over.

Let's consider a social experiment...take a pre-pubescent, almost-teen, innocent kid from a little fishing village just outside Mumbai, rip him out of all he knows and send him rocketing across an ocean to be received by people he barely knows but has to engage...as though he's known them closest...how do you think that would go? Well that's what this group wanted to know and I was the poorly-controlled experimental design.

The setting was the famous...famous? Notorious? Legendary in a troubled history kind of way Smiley's Pizza in Park Slope...back when Park Slope wasn't spotted with bespoke tailors and curated beard oil boutiques. I sat contemplating the fresh hell that had been served up before me. Cheese...so much cheese. Cheese was something Dadda Abba brought back from market once in a while...a tiny, red-wheeled, wax-coated treat. This...was too much cheese. It was all too much...I just wanted some dal and roti. They were all talking and poking and pinching and squeezing...all while thoroughly disinterested in my lived experience.

That was the moment of release...the far-too-big, outsized slice of melted mozzarella infused with Brooklyn's best marinara and doused with excess oil arced across the room and hit flat against the pizzeria wall...suspended for a moment marked by silence, their mouths agape, before sliding far-too-slowly to the floor...looking like domestic disturbance gone horribly wrong. I stormed outside.

Everything was different...the car exhaust smelled different...it was so cold...the people, the energy...I was impossibly far from my Daddi Amma and Dadda Abba. That's when my dad wrapped a second coat around my shoulders...said nothing...and we walked to a corner bodega. There in the harsh fluorescent light...amid people that had long-cultivated the perfect balance of facial expression...somewhere between apathy and aggravation...stood a rack filled with more chocolate bars than I had known could exist. And there was Toblerone...that mythical treat I only saw once or twice a year when my uncle returned from his sojourns with the Merchant Marines. I bit into that first, perfect little chocolate pyramid piece and the sense memory enveloped me. It all felt a little bit more okay. The Toblerone connected me across a chasm of time and space...with what was familiar...safe...grounding. And that was a start.