

Hotdog Curry

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THE N-WORD

The first time my brother Alfred heard the word *nigger* he was with our father, headfirst beneath the hood of some beater, learning how to change oil. The car belonged to an “uncle”—the term for any Indian man my parents knew—and had likely been stationed there, immovable, in our tenement’s parking lot for days; no one griped about disabled vehicles in Langley Park. Like kitchen roaches and ice cream trucks, they migrated at their own unpredictable whims, unstoppable.

A cluster of schoolboys had ambled by, engaged in the type of teasing that demands copious cussing. Children are expert cussers. I recall lounging on a jungle gym in the fifth grade lamenting how much I cursed. “I got to stop cussing so much,” I declared. My friends had agreed.

When the boys passed, my father gave my older brother Alfred quick counsel.

“Don’t say that word.”

Then he went back to wrestling the oil filter with an old belt.

“Why not?” my brother asked in Tamil. After all, the boys had used it gleefully. Both an insult and a nickname, a uniterm for everyone, at once intimate and rude like *man*, another referent my brother would learn better than to use with adults. “Why shouldn’t I say it?” he repeated.

At the time, my brother Alfred was wearing burgundy and gold athletic socks pulled over his shins. He was beaming with Washington Redskins gear,

eager to don his burgundy and gold ski mask in a few months when it would—he hoped—snow for the first time in his life. “Why not, Appa?”

My father answered simply, already re-engrossed in the greasy coils.

“They do not like it.”

This was good information for most immigrants: avoid using the n-word, no matter how often it turns up in the movies or how colorfully black people themselves brandish it. Whatever the word’s allure, its legacy leaves it too fraught. Leave it alone is great advice.

Though my father had surely heard *nigger* in Sri Lanka, I do not know how much he knew about the word’s particular historical salience here. Not that he wasn’t paying attention. Like a lot of American dads he was attentive to the evening news and the Sunday paper, but he only occasionally read, cursorily rifling through how-to manuals mostly. At six, I had swooned at the thought of ordering the Time Life Book series on Home Repair and Improvement for him; the first volume was *Kitchens and Bathrooms*. Our kitchen and bathroom were creaky and leaky, one suffering from a layer of yellowing frying grease, the other from the heedless splashing of people who grew up around wells. As much as I longed for the pristine rooms the books offered, I understood that an apartment was not like a house. You did not improve it. You eventually stopped living in it and bought a house. This was the unbending pulse of Langley Park, Maryland, for most South Asian immigrants like my parents: get out get out get out.

Exactly how my father learned of the mandate against the n-word here I (stupidly) never asked, but like a lot of racial reality, his understanding was forged from proximity. This complicating proximity would explain how the white boys I knew in high school both eschewed and enacted “blackness” as they perceived it, at once admiring and disparaging the ethos they felt surrounded by. It clarified how my mother could weep at the slavery miniseries *Roots*, and at the thought of having a black son-in-law (not that a white son-in-law was preferred—the prospect of a white member of the family being equally undesirable, just not as disastrous).

For my parents, learning how to navigate the American landscape was inescapably bound with understanding race, with black people as much at the center as white people. Black voices palpitated on the airwaves; they peopled every street and building; they enacted nearly every social relationship. Proximity attached my parents to (mostly working-class) black people,

a different racial dynamic than they had known in Sri Lanka. As products of the British colonialism there, my parents were half sold on British thinking on all matters, including the inferior nature of all things not British.

This postcolonial British sensibility with which they were so indoctrinated—my braids, “plaits,” my dresses, “frocks”—impugned nearly everyone. That is perhaps why my father was so uncharacteristically eager to advise my brother on the n-word: the word’s ugliness encapsulated a general disgust for all things dark, including himself, though it vibrated with its origins: the denigration of African ancestry. Under the colonial rule of my father’s childhood, the British used *nigger* to dehumanize the brown-skinned people they were tyrannizing. My father knew the word. He knew that my brother, a dark-skinned creature, needed to understand how he might be understood in his new home.

HOTDOG CURRY

My brother Alfred came to America when he was four. When he arrived at Dulles dressed head to toe in red, he had not seen our father since he had been in cloth diapers in what was then still Ceylon. In lieu of love letters, my mother sent my brother’s baby photos.

Though it was 1972, his baby pictures were black and white and had the scalloped trim of postage stamps. My baby pictures on the other hand, taken only a handful of years later, were developed at the one-hour photo kiosk with the dates digitally imprinted on the back. There were no such modern trifles in my brother’s crumb-sized birthplace, where a crippling civil war had such titanic staying power that it would not end, with the rout of the Tamil Tiger separatist movement, until thirty-six years later.

When asked about the violence on the island of his birth, my father deflected.

“It is money that people are looking for, ma,” he would reply.

Though few were pleased when riots besieged the beaches and waterfalls, it was the obstruction of commerce due to violence, as much as the violence itself, that really got a lot of Lankans moving.

Lankans like my Indian-born grandfather. He, the typical shop-owner Tamil transplant that chaffed many indigenous Singhalese, had survived fistfights.

His brother had been knifed. But these incidents weren't what drove them out, my grandfather also insisted—it was the effect of these on business. A blade or a bomb could be guarded against or retaliated for; what could be done about skittish customers?

Like many men of that era and hemisphere, my father fled west.

By the time my brother and mother reunited with him a few years later, my father had cashiered at 7-Eleven, delivered the *Washington Post*, fry-cooked at Gino's—the predecessor of KFC—and would eventually land two full-time jobs that he would hold simultaneously until he died of a heart attack at 70 while changing my brother's oil: hotel night auditor and clerk/typist for the Office of the Air Attaché at the Indian Embassy.

For a brief period my parents hosted parties for my father's coworkers from the embassy. These "functions," as my parents called them, meant purging our normally messy home, ignoring my parents' dislike for each other, and dumping sorbet into a punchbowl of ginger ale. Once, a coworker of my father's congratulated my mother for her wide-ranging cooking expertise.

"What sambar Raj brings for lunch," he exclaimed, breaching custom by addressing the wives while they served everything but the Johnny Walkers (the wives didn't presume to know anything about alcohol).

"Oh?" My mother nodded into the tray from which she was serving. "What is there?" she asked rhetorically, their version of What's the big deal?

"There is nothing like it, I tell you!" The uncle shook his head in amazement. "Superior."

He went on about the irresistible and varied lunches my mother packed for my father, the wide range of consistently delicious dishes, but he saved the most vociferous praise for her creativity, her ability to work with the most basic ingredients, a can of tuna, a packet of ramen, potatoes.

"Hotdogs even, I tell you! Hotdogs!" The uncle gestured to the party, silencing peripheral chatter. "Hot dog curry better than mutton biryani, sir. What a chef this lady is!" His compliments filled the room as he chuckled. "Superior."

My mother never made my father's lunches.

Outside of sweets—which my father left to my mother, though he surely could have bested her desserts too—my mother wasn't responsible for the meals that led to leftovers. She also wasn't much of a sweeper, scrubber, or

duster. She was much like me as an adult, lost in thoughts and reading, put out by obligations that interrupted either. So my father did the laundry, which required dragging bins across the street to a basement with coin-operated machines, as well as the shopping, cooking, and mending. These imbalances in domestic aptitude and duty and the deficit in respect accrued made my mother defensive, understandably. Mostly though, she stood back like the rest of us and watched Appa conduct marvels with time and matter: epicurean dishes with Spam, three workdays in one.

THE IMMIGRATION ACT OF 1965

Despite his astounding work ethic and natural aptitudes, my father had modest expectations. Appa was unlike the bulk of Asian immigrants targeted by the “special skills” provision in the 1965 Immigration Act, a law that lustily propositioned immigrants with graduate degrees. The legislation, tightened in 1976, was impelled by a post-Sputnik panic. The Russians had placed an object into orbit, and the U.S., fearing a Russian takeover, responded by committing to reach the moon. Part of the plan was welcoming hordes of techno-professionals from the subcontinent.

This is how the modern myth of the model minority originates: legislatively. Scores of powerfully educated Asians entered the U.S. just as the Civil Rights era ended with the movement’s crowning achievement, the Civil Rights Act of 1964. This landmark legislation stoked resentment from many white Americans who were somehow confused by the Black Power movement that followed. To these Americans, new Asian immigrants who seemed to succeed without asking for much, without being welcomed, without, it seemed, knowing fully what was theirs to demand in exchange for what they offered, were a preferable kind of minority.

Hyper-educated, often wealthy, and from underdeveloped, oppressive continents, these immigrants were the ultimate unfair comparison to black Americans (and eventually Latino Americans), who were disproportionately undereducated and entrenched in intergenerational poverty. To many white Americans during this time, black Americans, America’s original minority, (re)appeared ungrateful next to this “model” immigrant, armed with various

degrees from his homeland, outcompeting nearly everyone. As early as 1966, the *New York Times Magazine* and *U.S. News and World Report* noticed how well these minorities seemed to be doing.

My father, however, showed up in Washington, DC, in 1974 on a visitor's visa without any credentials: he had only graduated from high school.

"You are feeling well?" his brother-in-law had asked when my father first arrived at Dulles.

"Yes, yes. What is there?" my father replied. At the time he had been staring out of my uncle's steel blue Chrysler, startled by how gray and off-white America was, how asphalt and concrete. DC's twisty Beltway looked bleaker in color than all the streets he had seen on black-and-white TVs in Ceylon. What the bloody hell, mate, he must have thought (a phrase he often uttered and that I heard as bloody *helmet* for years).

This was not how he had pictured the U.S., glimpses of which came to him via snippets of well-coiffed Americans like Elvis and Kennedy. Though he was grateful the traffic consisted mostly of autos not people—he loved cars—the apartment complex in Langley Park he endured with his in-laws was occupied not by blond *velas* but by South Asians like himself, as well as Latinos, Vietnamese, Ethiopians, and American black people. Mostly the latter. Langley Park, a cluster of tenements and strip malls that would eventually flower into one of the most densely concentrated, self-contained Central American communities in the nation, was then a second-ring suburb peopled primarily by black families.

A two-mile-squared swath designated by the census as CU2, a community not associated with facilities, Langley Park was originally developed as a white enclave for soldiers returning after World War I. In the latter half of the century, Langley Park underwent two significant demographic shifts: first, black residents replaced white families in the 1970s via urban spillover and subsequent white flight; next, in the early '90s, a mammoth influx of Latino immigrants supplanted that majority black population.

Many of these immigrants were propelled by the civil wars that ravaged Central America in the '80s. The drug cartels that fueled these civil wars also helped to inaugurate the crack epidemic in DC. During the era of the Murder Capital, during which DC ranked number one in homicides irrespective of city size, Prince George's County's strong middle-class black population was inundated by those fleeing the city's northeast quadrant. The violence of the

drug trade contributed to and/or exacerbated high drop-out rates, fear of police, underperforming schools, lack of sufficient public recreation space, drug trafficking, drive-by shootings, execution-style murders, and white flight. Though an inner-ring suburb that had always been solidly working class, Langley Park began to take on the features of the inner city.

Despite this, I hope all the brown-skinned faces navigating the labyrinthine “queues” at the DMV and Social Security office encouraged my father. But I wonder if the diversity of accents and habits only inflated his desire to be home in Trincomalee, where at least everyone looked the same and ate recognizable dishes.

THE F-WORD

In addition to overall handiness (he built a picnic table in a single afternoon, cross-stitched patches on the too-tight jeans I wore as a teenager) and mechanical knowledgeableness (he repaired televisions, installed toilets), my father fixed cars for extra money. He replaced rotors and timing belts, scrounging around junkyards for starters and undented fenders. We were on the way to his favorite junkyard one Saturday when I first discovered my father had worked at 7-Eleven, too.

“Which 7-Eleven?” I asked.

Langley Park, if lacking in greenery and affordable grocery stores, had its fill of second-ring ghetto staples: rows of Lego-like apartment buildings, liquor stores of all sizes, including the widely fabled Tick Tock Liquor, patrolled by off-duty cops and open late even on Christmas; and half a dozen 7-Elevens.

“The one by the library,” my brother answered from the front seat.

“How old was I then?” I tried to remember Appa dressed in an orange patterned housecoat behind a high pharmacy-style counter, addressing impatient customers in his singsong English. By then I had already grown accustomed to seeing Appa dressed in bright franchise colors; every morning he came home from the night shift at Holiday Inn dressed in a kelly green blazer.

“You were just a baby,” my brother answered, bored already.

I melodramatically envisioned my father’s handsome Ricky Ricardo face with his jaundiced eyes having to deal with cocky teenagers and morning commuters, handing over change and cigarettes, smiling, *yesthankyouhaveniceday*.

Next, my brother pointed at a Kentucky Fried Chicken. “He used to work there, too.”

That was also a surprise. The only fast food I recalled were McNuggets and fried apple pie that came in a sleeve the same green as my father’s Holiday Inn blazer.

“You must have been small baby then.” Appa smiled at me in the rearview mirror. “I used to work in all the places.”

When we reached the junkyard in Laurel, it was already hellishly hot out, the Plymouth’s vinyl seats burning our legs. Neither my brother nor I wanted to shadow our father as metal flashed in the sun and dusty plumes of silky construction dirt stirred with each step. Better to sit in the hot shade where we could at least fight over the radio. So while Appa searched for alternators and fuel pumps among the bleached wrecks, my brother and I sat on the Plymouth’s hood pretending to tan as we had seen white people do, and waited for the freight trains to rage by.

When Appa came back, drenched, he came prepared with sodas because he knew to expect complaints from his bored children. He would eventually learn he could never pick the right kind of soda, however—our preferences contingent upon complex algorithms of what was available—but that day he chose root beers, to our disgust.

“Excuse me, sir,” Appa said in his lilting voice. He hoped to exchange the sodas.

“Can you change the soda? My son, he wants the Sprite soda.” Appa had a long-standing patron’s friendliness. One mechanic to another.

Eyes down, too busy to be bothered with a faithful customer, the man shoved the brown cans from the counter with such emphasis that they cracked open, sepia suds bubbling at the tabs. I never saw the cashier’s face, only the roof of his head that was sunburned magenta; out of his rudeness he never raised it.

“Hey,” he called to another attendant, “Get this guy a *fucking* dollar.”

I knew “fuck.” I knew even then it was a word I wasn’t allowed to say, though I did not yet know what it meant. I knew it to contain violence as well as lightness. I knew it was the worst bad word and also the funniest bad word. As Pulitzer winner Junot Diaz has delineated so carefully, “fuck” might be western civilization’s oldest, greatest word.

When this man cussed at my father, I was five, full of television and the young adult novels I had been precociously reading. I immediately knew

why this man had played Appa this way. It wasn't our poverty—expressed plainly by our seasons-old attire from Sears and the decade-old sedan we drove. Poverty was routine. Laurel, Maryland, was rural in some ways then, mostly patches of inexpensive homes separated by unused plots of land and semi-vacant office parks. It wasn't a vibrant landscape.

We were only nine miles outside of DC and Langley Park, but here were occasional cornfields yet to be overtaken by townhouses and immigrants, yet to become the third-ring suburb it would be in the new millennium. Back then we were always the only people of color in the junkyard, this in part because a minority of *desis* fixed their own cars, a propensity of the upwardly mobile class to which many *desis* belonged. We were Indian yet poor, somewhat uncommon, certainly at this junkyard. No one smiled with recognition during our regular visits, neither the white customers nor the white employees. Unlike my newly immigrated brother on the subject of the n-word years earlier, I did not question this at all. I already understood. I had been born here.

