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## Shawarma

Anukriti Upadhyay

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The metal spit rotates slowly. Layered meats ooze their juices into the circular tray underneath. A young man in a tall white chef's hat cuts shavings from the thick roll of meat and stuffs them into freshly baked bread.

“Shawarma!” my companion says. Her eyes shine. “The very dish I have been craving, if you have no objection, shall we eat here?”

“Sure.” I answer. Shawarma is fine with me. Anything is fine with me today, anything at all. Today she is here with me. The hazy sky of Hong Kong is bright with the promise of early winter and the lunchtime bustle is festive.

We are colleagues, Jaya and I. We work half the world away from each other for an Information Technology company, a giant with offices in all major countries, she in Chennai, I in London, and meet occasionally at work-related events. You might have come across colleagues who seem constrained in groups, avoid each other's eyes, address only the most superficial remarks to each other but if you observe closely, you find an undefinable sympathy between them. They seem to be in tandem in parallel orbits, apart and connected, as if the same wave touches and moves them, never bringing them closer, never allowing them to stray too far. We are that type of colleagues. We both know this, we are both aware of our danger and are very, very careful. Only once had we forgotten our masks and props, only once had we revealed ourselves to ourselves and the need which lay coiled between us had enveloped us. Only once. To both our credit. We are two very pragmatic, careful individuals. There are important, practical things like families and careers, shared homes and children and pets to consider.

Jaya and I are in Hong Kong to attend an off-site, a work-meeting where people who work together, or are supposed to work together, gather to discuss new ideas, new ways to collaborate. We have all come leaving behind our homes, offices, routines. Old rivalries are being revived, new alliances are being built. Work, politics, gossip and bickering. Days are spent in manoeuvrings in conference rooms, evenings in drinking at pubs in Soho. Jaya and I have slipped out for lunch by ourselves in the office-goers crowd in mid-levels. Streets are lined with eateries on both sides. Whole glazed ducks and pigs hang in the display windows of Cantonese restaurants and fish and lobsters squirm in large glass tanks. Red-and-white check table cloths gleam in Italian restaurants and men sporting large sombreros hand out menu cards outside Mexican ones. Out of all these, Jaya chooses the small Lebanese restaurant tucked under the Mid-Levels escalator. And Shawarma.

We enter the low-ceilinged irregular room dominated by the high counter with its magnificent Shawarma meats and are shown to a small alcove. There are leather seats around a low circular table. We sit side by side, our knees bent awkwardly, almost touching.

“What would you like to drink?”

“Virgin toddy. Lots of honey.”

I signal to the waiter. “Two virgin toddies, bring some honey separately.” I turn to Jaya. “You’ll share a Mezze platter?”

“Yes, please. Don’t forget the Shawarma.”

The waiter walks away briskly. Jaya tries to find a comfortable spot on the back-and-armrest-less seat, “You won’t believe how I have been craving Shawarma.” She rests her knee against the edge of the table, “Just an irresistible craving.”

“Which you clearly managed to resist till now.”

She smiles. I look at her kohl-lined eyes. The light falls on the planes and angles of her face as she moves on the comfortless leather stool. I too have irresistible cravings. The waiter brings our drinks. Jaya adds a spoonful of honey to hers. “Don’t you want to taste it first?”

“It is never sweet enough.” I watch her as she carefully fishes out star anise and cinnamon sticks, cloves and lime leaves from her drink and lays them neatly in the plate. I can smell the fresh, clean fragrance of her hair. I remember the night we had clung together like two desperate, drowning souls. I feel her heavy hair come undone on my shoulders again, my fingers tear at the buttons of her dress, her whisper sounds in my ear, there’s wine on her breath, I silence her words with my mouth. I shake my head. That one night always waits in the wings when we meet and tacitly, mutually, we ignore it. She raises her eyes and reads mine. Something opens softly between us, throbbing and urgent. We look away.

“How is your time-travel working out?” I ask. She still works with the California-based product development team she was part of till she moved to Chennai from US a couple of years ago. The product-lead did not wish to lose her and convinced her to stay on the team. She works US hours on cutting-edge robotics technology. I am senior in the corporate hierarchy, but she is the real rocket-scientist and we both know it.

“It’s alright. I am working on quant-robotics these days. My objective is to cheat young math-whizzes out of opportunities. I am building an intelligent robot to take over not just solving the financial math problems but figure out the sequence in which a series of problems should be solved for optimality, which variables to apply, which to disregard. I am going a bit slow though, little sleep has that effect on me. Eventually I plan to make a robot that replaces me, it will work while I sleep.”

I look at her smiling eyes. The fine skin under them is stretched, bruised-looking. “This time-zone commute is not such a great idea, Jaya.”

“Yes, it isn't,” she agrees, “but I can't leave Chennai right now and I am too selfish to give up working so I have given up sleeping.” She takes a sip of her warm drink, “Actually, I am lying. I haven't given up sleeping, just changed the style and rhythm of sleep. I have become an expert napper. Give me ten minutes and I can sleep anywhere, anytime. I can compete with your cats now! Which reminds me, how are the cats doing?”

Cats are part of my life or rather, I am a part of their life. My role might be limited but it is not insignificant. “They are as usual.” I click my phone open and show their latest pictures to Jaya. “I have no complains. They still allow us to share the house with them and sometimes condescend to pat. They still dislike my travelling though. No pet kennel seems to be up to their taste. When I fetch them back home, they behave like teenagers, grumpy for days, won't eat, and stay out all night.” The cats are my responsibility. My wife refuses to care for them in my absence. She dislikes the insinuation that the cats are a placebo for the children we don't have. This is one of the many things which I have never said to Jaya. There is no need to. She knows.

“At least they don't argue and bang doors!” She answers laughing. She has twin daughters, fifteen years old. “In any case, I am on the cat's side. You are incredibly lucky that no one at your home is allergic to cat-hair or considers them bad omen.”

Our food arrives. There is something special about Shawarma. The succulent meats and greens encased in fresh-baked bread, go right to the core of your hunger. We share the food and eat with our fingers, dipping fluffy triangles of pita in flavourful dips, tearing pieces off the Shawarma rolls. Our fingers occasionally touch.

“This babaganoush is very flavourful.”

“Hmmm. The humus too. Creamy.”

“I saw the sales-figures for your sector recently. The new products are doing very well, aren't they?” Jaya turns the Lazy Susan around so I could reach the dips more easily. “I hear you are being tipped to head entire Europe soon.”

I laugh. “Do you really want to talk about all this?”

She laughs too. It sounds like an echo of mine set to a sitar tune. “No, I don't. I actually want to talk about concerts and musicals. Did you watch anything interesting in the West End?” Jaya is devoted to music. Classical, instrumental and vocal. She often regrets not being able to sing or play. There's never been time to learn, first engineering degree, then an advanced degree in math and computing in US, a PHD, job, children. At least I have my ears, she says.

“I haven't. But I have been reading incessantly.”

“Don't talk to me about books please, I won't be able to eat for jealousy. All I have been reading these past few months are course books to help my girls through their boards.” Her daughters are in high school. I know they are brilliant like her. “Music's good though, music is too pure to evoke jealousy. Besides, this summer I managed to attend some concerts during the annual classical music fest, not as many as I would like but a few good ones.”

“Now I am jealous. There's no one else I know who is interested in classical or chamber music and it is a chore to go alone.”

“Going alone is fine. In fact, it's the best way to hear music, being alone with music is like being alone with memories, you can add flourishes, tune out the bits you don't like, enjoy them more deeply. The music heard alone is music deeply felt.”

I look at her animated face. I want to say that experiences are complete when shared, Jaya. I ache to take her in my arms. No one has ever stirred me as she does, this colleague of mine whom I meet perhaps twice every year. I change the topic. “Tell me about the driving lessons. How are they coming along?”

“Oh, they are not coming along at all. In fact, I have stopped taking lessons. I am not learning to drive anymore.”

“Why?” She had been enthusiastic about driving when she had begun. It is a life-skill, like swimming, she had said. “I thought you were fed-up with drivers and wanted to take matters into your own hands, so to speak.”

“I...” she begins and then hesitates. Jaya never hesitates, so I know something is the matter and wait. She wipes her fingers carefully on the napkin. Her hands are small and pale, narrow palms and short fingers. She had once mentioned that her husband found them ugly but cute. I had wondered to myself what it would be like to be able to hold those hands anytime one wanted. “Yes, that was the idea.” She does not look at me. I remain silent. She sighs and says, “Really it's nothing dramatic. In fact, you can almost say I have learnt driving and given it up.” She looks at me through her lashes. I remain silent. “It's just something with not much point to it.” I continue to remain silent. “I have no issues in telling you if you really want to hear...”

“I really want to hear, Jaya.”

She breathes through her nose and attempts a smile. “Sure. You know that I took lessons for some time. I picked up driving without difficulty. In fact I wondered why I faced the inconvenience of taxis and metro in the US. As it turned out, I have a good sense for direction and am a natural at traffic rules. I have a slight problem with judging distances. I have never been able to see what is close, what is far. But my instructor was confident. He said I will learn from practice. So I practiced. I did pretty well. I'd drive short distances by myself, you know, fetching the girls from classes or getting mom-in-law's medicines, simple things like that.”

I raise my eyebrows, “Without a license?”

“I have a license. I have had it for years from when I was ridiculously young. At that time I just went to the Road Transport Office with an uncle or a neighbour and they gave me one. You know, like everyone else.”

“I don’t know. Doesn’t sound like the right standard operating procedure? Did they at least ask you whether you could drive at all?”

She looks at me now and blushes. “I was too young to know anything, and I did drive a bit in the courtyard of the Transport Office while the officer watched from a balcony above. But if you are going to interrogate me like this, I will turn defensive, I am warning you.”

“Isn’t that warning a little late? Sorry, just ignore that question. You have a license, it is valid, you picked up driving, all’s fine. Then what isn’t?”

“Ouch, such sarcasm. We folk who belong to Chennai are less judging. We are quite liberal and let people who are learning to drive, do so without making them feel guilty about immaterial details like licenses.”

“That is not the answer to my question. Besides, you do not belong to Chennai, you only live there.”

“Oh, I never belonged anywhere and it seems that I do not live anywhere either. In Chennai I pretend I am in California and in California, somewhere else.”

“Have you ever pretended to be in London?”

“No, never.”

“Good. I would have been offended if you had pretended to be in London without letting me know. Now, how about telling me what happened without hedging?”

“Hedging? I wasn’t hedging at all. Since you are determined,” she picked a dark olive from platter. “This is from a few months ago. Late summer, right after the concert season ended. I think it was one of the US long-week-ends. I remember because only I had an off, everyone else had a working-day. The girls came home from school a bit early. I think a theatre practice got cancelled. I had prepared lunch, as usual.”

“You cook every day?” Jaya found everyday cooking boring. It isn’t creative to do the same thing over and over again, she would say, that is for system-implementers, not for solution-developers.

“Yes. Everyone prefers my cooking and since I am home and don’t work during the day, I thought why not. I do a decent Indian meal. Besides mum-in-law is not comfortable with house-help cooking.” One of the reasons for leaving California was her aging mother-in-law.

“But you work US hours. You need your rest. This isn’t sustainable, Jaya.”

“It isn’t a big deal. Really. The help do all the hard work of chopping and cleaning. I just prepare simple vegetarian food. No non-veg at home, mom-in-law is a bit particular that way. Again, no big deal, we are none of us big meat-eaters in any case.”

I smile.

She shakes her head. “You don't need to doubt everything I say just because I happen to have an out-of-turn driving license!”

“Continue, Jaya.”

“Well. As usual I gave lunch to the girls and mom-in-law and sent a tiffin to the Institute.” Jaya’s husband is a famous professor at a premier science institution in the city. He is an authority in his subject, Oceanography and under-water excavations. His articles appear in journals and he regularly features as expert on international fora. “I wasn't hungry so I decided to skip lunch. Besides the girls had a Chemistry tuition class. They were getting late for it.”

“Tuition for a science subject?”

“Just because you know no science you over-estimate my knowledge of it! Chemistry's never been my strong point the teachers at their tuition class are very sure. They know which element is stable, which isn’t, which can be kept together safely and which will explode, which ones react with each other and how. I have never really understood all this.”

There is a brief silence. I sit looking at Jaya. Given a chance, I can do this for a long time, a very long time.

“Anyway,” Jaya continues, “The driver had not returned from the Institute and the class was not far from home. So I thought I'd drive them to their class. Traffic's slow in the afternoon and I needed to do some grocery shopping as well, so it kind of worked from all angles.”

“Too many explanations, Jaya. It was a holiday, you wanted to go out, isn't that perfectly fine?”

Her eyes flicker like candles. “I dropped the girls and then browsed a bit in the shops. Bought some household things, you know, some detergent, a sewing kit, a box of cereal which no one ends up eating,” she says facetiously. “The usual things a woman buys.”

“The usual things a very unusual woman buys.”

“My moral integrity is being relentlessly attacked today! First you undermine me over my driving license, and now you are trying flattery!”

“I never try,” I try to match her facetiousness, “someone said that I can't remember who now. But what has all this got to do with your driving?”

“I am coming to that. After shopping as I walked towards the car park, I noticed a new restaurant tucked in a corner. At least it was new to me. You know the kind of place that is all plate glass and blonde wood furniture?” I nodded. I knew the kind of restaurant she was describing. Modern, new, wildly successful for a while and then suddenly closed. “And would you believe it, there on the open-plan counter was a Shawarma spit, just like this one. I was suddenly famished for Shawarma. It was like everything inside of me yearned for Shawarma. I felt it was ages since I had tasted the succulent slices of meat layered into fresh Taboon bread. I just had to have some Shawarma right then. But there was no time to eat. It was time to pick up the girls from their class. I mean I couldn't just sit in that pretty, air-conditioned place and enjoy Shawarma while the girls waited for me. So I got a few rolls packed. If I weren't a lady,” she looked at me intently, “I'd describe to you how I felt carrying those rolls to the car.”

There was no need, I could picture her - a certain look in her eyes, her mouth moist, her fingers holding the food with an urgent pressure.

“I quickly got into the car, strapped up and drove off. You've not seen late summer in Chennai, from inside an air-conditioned car, the blue sky and brilliant sun seem so beautiful you wonder why the roads are empty, why more people out enjoying the afternoon aren't. And then your glance falls at the temperature dial and you notice it is 102 Fahrenheit outside. It was that kind of a day. I reached one of the big junctions. The traffic light was on the blink but it hardly mattered. The traffic was thin. I drove across the junction and just as I was approaching the mid-point, I saw this green bus coming in my direction. It was a typical city bus, rickety, clinking and full beyond capacity. There was plenty of room on the road for me to give way or turn aside or even just stop where I was. I mean there was hardly another vehicle on the road. But I just kept driving straight towards the bus. On and on. Just directly towards it... At the very last moment the bus swerved and passed inches away from me...”

I released my clenched hands. “Jaya...”

“I wasn't afraid or panicked at all. You understand that, don't you? I knew what to do, I knew my options but still I just drove on towards the bus. And do you know what passed through my head as the bus rushed towards me like a metal wall? It was that now I won't be able to eat that Shawarma...” Tears pooled in the corners of her eyes, hung from her lashes. “That was the only thought in my head... the lone thought... I haven't driven since...”



### BIO-NOTE

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Anukrti Upadhyay has post graduate degrees in Management and Literature and a graduate degree in Law. She also wrote a doctoral thesis in Hindi Literature in a past life. She writes fiction in both English and Hindi and poetry in Hindi. An English novella has been accepted for publication by Speaking Tiger and Hindi poetry by Rajkamal Prakashan. Short stories in Hindi have appeared in prestigious literary journals and have attracted attention and interest. She has worked in global investment banks as Compliance and Risk Officer and at present is working in the area of wildlife conservation. She is Indian by nationality, married and mother of one and leads a more or less unsettled existence between Bombay and Singapore. She is grateful for both the richness and vacancy in her life that compel her to write.

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