

Belonging, Biryani and Bacon

Sheereen Khan

I'm not going to tell you how I made my first fairy cake at the age of three or how my Irish and Indian grandmothers fought to have me visit them. They didn't. What I will tell you is how my parents managed to make a marriage of mixed races, mixed religions and mixed cultures work and often it didn't. But food was the bridge joining the differences. A crossing we made daily to enquire and learn about them and ourselves through the stories around the dishes they made and we ate.

Look, it was simple. The deal was, we lived in London and went on holiday to my mother's country, Ireland and we talked and talked about her up-bringing, and what it was to be Irish. The other part of the deal was we didn't go to my father's country, India. It was too far, too expensive to get to and anyway, we weren't welcome. So we didn't talk about him or his family or what it was to be Indian and then Pakistani. He'd married a non-Muslim, a non-Indian and whilst he wasn't punished, we were. To them, we didn't exist.

It was uncomplicated until it wasn't. But before that, I learned a bit of each language which they fought to teach us. In Irish I could count to 10, say 'Sit down my dear', say, 'a thousand welcomes' as they did when you boarded an Aer Lingus plane and sing the National Anthem in Gaelic.

From my father, I learned a song of love in Urdu, the greeting As Salaam Alakum, and Kuda Hafiz when parting and shukria, thank you. He taught me how to grease my hand and make it like a seagull's beak to push through the tiny plastic bangles he brought back from Pakistan. He taught us the meaning of our Muslim names which followed our Christian names. She taught us Irish history and quoted Shakespeare when giving us advice. He said little and lived mostly in the local library for warmth

and quietness. He once bought us books, Lady Chatterley's Lover, The Perfumed Garden and Animal Farm. The year was 1960 I was 9, my brothers 13, 17 and 18. They threw me Animal Farm believing it was a child's book. After reading it, I started to be angry but wasn't sure why.

That was it. I learned quickly what they had in common. They both talked angrily about British Rule and what it had done to their respective countries. Both were Socialists and both came from countries driven by religious beliefs. They were an odd pair of halves trying desperately to make a whole. It was as if the division of their countries was played out again in their marriage. They were divided, and we were halves, not wholes. We were neither this nor that. I could say I was a child and didn't notice. But I did. I noticed the other kids in the Primary school gawking at my brown face and the skin of my porcelain white mother. I wanted to scream, she's my real mother. I could say this to myself or agree with my mother who said I was full of imagination and not to take any notice of my inner thoughts which confused me for years.

If I listened to his stories of growing up, I felt I was betraying Ireland and if I listened to her, I was distancing myself even more from his country so far away.

Food was the glue.

PAKORA POWER

In the last few years of his life, my father, still married and living with my mother, bought his own food, cooked his own meals and always ate alone. It was just the two of them and they lived as housemates, though they never talked about being like this. In fact, they rarely talked agreeably. They shuffled around the small kitchen avoiding each other and tutting when something wasn't where it should be. The tuts were their conversations. He had a small area in the kitchen cupboard allocated to his spices. She no longer enquired about his Indian recipes and never asked to use the spices. He didn't really care about food, but over the years, had shown an interest because it was a route into her heart. Sometimes, he showed her how to make an Indian dish. She was attentive and quiet but it didn't last. She took the information and made it her own when relaying the recipe to others. But one day and only for one day, this all changed. After years of tolerating a stagnant relationship, he erupted and made a last attempt to impress with a culinary showpiece. But I'm rushing ahead.

My father was a man you could easily overlook. Feeling this, he spent his whole life wanting to be noticed, acknowledged, revered. He was a quiet and even-tempered man, who occasionally lost his temper when feeling unnoticed and unlove. He would shout at my mother or my brothers, 'You will never come to my level'. By this, he meant his academic level. Being Indian and born in 1908, his upbringing, though lavish, was permeated with the demand for him to be someone, not simply a wealthy someone. The predictable professional roles were there to fall into; a doctor, lawyer or like his father, a senior civil servant. His culture and family influence determined he should be somebody and he chose to be an academic.

Mumtaz Hussain Khan, B.A, H.Dip. Ed (Hons), M.A., Ph.D (TCD), was a small, muscular man in his mid-thirties when he was sent by his parents to Catholic Ireland to attend Trinity College in Dublin. Being overlooked began as the second eldest in a family of 13 children. His Muslim family favoured the eldest and the eldest was also a boy; a handsome, tall and successful boy. This older brother was also sent to Europe and attended the London School of Economics. They were destined to do well. For my father outward success couldn't endure with an inner voice saying, you're no good. According to my father, there were two Indians in Dublin in the early 1940s. Him and one other. Being well-off, dark, exotic, unusual and single gave him a certain cachet. Free from the matriarchal gaze, he was his own man and was noticed for his outward difference. He dressed smartly; starched white cotton shirt, three piece worsted suit, trilby hat and highly polished black leather shoes. As the years went by, the hat gave way to a Karakul, favoured by Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan. This was later replaced, when he no longer cared, by a thin neck scarf tied around his head, like a cartoon drawing of someone with a toothache.

My mother, Lillian Mary Hickey, attended his Ph.D graduation, except she didn't know him but was invited by her brother who was one of my father's friends. Had they been alive and single today and signed up to a dating website their lives could not have been better matched. My mother too was small and refined and from a large Tipperary family. Both came from countries dominated by religion, both experienced British rule, and both grew up in countries where your surname signalled your religious alignment and your tribe. Ireland was the first nation to gain independence from the British Empire and India, the second. She was a single woman in her early thirties when they met, devoting herself to caring for an ailing mother for whom she had given up a career in nursing. She was stylish and also pre-

occupied with appearance and status. A possible match made in heaven.

He offered the potential for a sophisticated life. A life befitting a woman of the Hickey clan and in the short ceremony of marriage, he denounced his Islamic faith, converted to Catholicism and vowed his children would be brought up Catholic. The only concession she made was allowing us to have Christian and Muslim names. In one half hour, he left all his heritage and culture behind without any chance of finding a sign of it in Dublin, Ireland in the 1940s. His parents, displeased at his decision, never renounced him but never acknowledged my mother or us four children. Blue airmail letters would frequently arrive, which I smelt and touched running my finger over the ornate pattern of Urdu writing on the thin flimsy paper. It was as if he had no family and these letters were from strange people.

In the early 50s, he took an impressive temporary lecturing role for Patrick Gordon Walker, the then Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations. The theme was his thesis, 'The Influence of Western Education on India'. Travelling around the United Kingdom in a chauffeur driven car was in keeping with the dream they shared. My mother's fantasy was soon shattered after several temporary lecturing roles failed to secure him a permanent post. He turned his hand to business, being guided by his elder brother who had dropped out of LSE, married a Scottish woman and had a successful enterprise running large exhibitions about India and the British Empire. Whatever his brother had, wasn't in my father's make up. Long hard times followed. My mother, never one to be idle, went out to work. My father, crushed, started the rants which led him to talk about his position, his education, his level. This was fuelled by my mother's disappointment in him which she made sure he

knew. 'You're a failure', she often said. 'Living as we do, is a hallmark of failure' was a variation on the criticism.

So that early inner voice of never being good enough was confirmed by marrying the wrong woman. The more she took over, the more he retreated, the less he did and the less he talked. Could she have done better in the world? Probably not for a woman at that time. Could she have been kinder? Yes. Could she have tried to support him? Yes. Could she have been more loving as one disenchanted human being to another? Yes. He had many chances to leave us and return to India where his mother promised to find him a good wife (what is a good wife?) and build him a school. Despite his frequent trips to India and then, after Partition, Pakistan, he always came home to us and to the woman he adored.

He retreated to his room, and the local library where he read and worked on a book he hoped to have published. She took over the house and the kitchen was her refuge. It was smaller than an average garden shed but it was her control tower, her laundry room, ironing room, sewing room, entertaining room and office to tally up the household accounts. There was a serving hatch between the living room and kitchen which allowed her to shout instructions or ask questions such as: 'Ask your father if he wants a cup of tea'.

Occasionally they were equal. February 1972 saw a long truce as they played Scrabble by candlelight during the UK miners' strike and they rubbed along reasonably well for a year. It was a good sign and a bad sign. History told us this happiness wouldn't last. At least when they didn't talk there was no chance of disappointment for us.

In the talking times, my father would sometimes spend hours in London doing what, we didn't know. Once home he unwrapped gifts; gifts for her and sweets for us. The gifts, a coat or a hand mirror, or a pair of shoes were not her style. 'Garish, common, take them back', she would say. He re-wrapped them, stowed them in a suitcase and said little. Other times he would return with small bags of spices. A little chilli powder, a few expensive cardamom seeds, some thin fresh green chillies. Hard to track down in 1960s London, so he was the primeval hunter. He'd tell her how far he had travelled to find them, discuss the cost and where in her kitchen he would store them and how he would use them. The chillies went into his suit jacket pocket and reappeared on his dinner plate hidden under her swanky cooking; leg of lamb en croute or a prawn cocktail starter when flush with a bit of money. Despite being an accomplished cook, she rarely cooked the food he loved.

There weren't many moments when the power swung back to him but when it did, it involved him taking over in the kitchen. Sometimes he made a mince curry and she made an onion, tomato and chilli relish. Once he made the Indian carrot dessert, Gajar Ka Halwa, which they discussed for days before, knowing it would take hours to make. I have since wondered how my father knew how to make anything given he was brought up in an 18-bedroom mansion with servants to do everything. I now think he was determined to impress her and win back her respect. She had never heard of these dishes so had no opinion, or more importantly, any knowledge as to their creation and couldn't tell him he was wrong or that he had failed. These were his stand alone moments.

These forays into the kitchen were like a dance of courtship and then once and only once he'd reached the moment of not caring anymore about what she thought or

said, he took back power. He returned from another day roaming London, entering the house hidden by a large bunch of spinach wrapped with newspaper in one hand and a bag of chickpea flour in the other. 'I'm making spinach pakoras', he shouted. For once he had agency. The chickpea flour, yellow, gritty and unlike our ordinary white flour now covered the work surface. The usual order of kitchen life had gone. He asked where things were as if a traveller in a foreign land and we watched, confused, worried, yet excited. He mixed the ingredients into a batter while a large pan of oil gave off exciting smoke. He worked quickly and chaotically. No recipe book but an air of certainty surrounded him. Everything would work. Drops of perspiration stained his collar. My mother, his assistant and pupil, did whatever he asked. A spinach leaf washed and patted dry by her was dipped in batter, pulled out and plunged quickly into the hot oil, as he shouted, 'Lilly, Lilly, get the plate', which she had lined with a paper serviette. Huge, crispy spinach pakoras, bigger than an adult's hand, laid waiting as another one was precariously placed on top. This went on and on until the cooker control knobs were turned off, he sat down, pulled the cotton handkerchief from his suit breast pocket, wiped his face, looked at us and was amazed at what he had done.

COMFORTING COLCANNON

Give me a magnificently cooked roast dinner, or a fancy three course fine dining experience, then mention Colcannon and I'd find room for it. It's the dish I think about when feeling unwell or standing at a bus stop on a rainy night in January. It's bigger and fluffier in my imagination and effortless to eat. The easiest dish in the Irish culinary canon; a massive mash of potatoes, leeks or cabbage with lashings of cream and good butter, topped with loads of parsley and a perfectly poached egg.

That's how I do it. Lack of money excluded the word 'lashings' from my mother's vocabulary as her Colcannon was borne out of necessity to fill us up.

My mother was a potato expert and would examine each one before the greengrocer's lad shot them into her trolley-bag. People jeeringly put her knowledge down to being Irish and the Famine as if that's all the Irish know. Sensing this she'd leave the shop or the person, saying loudly, 'It was the land of Saints and Scholars but what would you know anyway'. She was Ireland's best ambassador. She wouldn't have been surprised if it was reported on the telly an Irish person had rescued someone off the coast of, Samoa, or had scaled the Empire State building.. 'It may be a small nation but we're everywhere doing great things', she'd say proudly. She had no friends but a few acquaintances and this sat easily with her. If someone said they were Irish, she'd lean into them with interest, turn her back on others in the group and enquire as to their family lineage.

She liked Mrs Twomey who lived on the ground floor of the block of maisonettes. It was her well-coiffed hair and her resilience in mothering a large family which she admired. But she was a Protestant and from Belfast so they kept their distance. She taught us Irish rebellion songs, drummed the history of the fight for independence into our being and prayed devoutly for our souls. She was 14 when Ireland became a Free State in 1922, the eldest of three girls in a family of eight siblings and her father one of 17 also strong nationalists. The Hickeys were known as a firm. Throw them together with 13 close by cousins and they had two hurling teams. She wasn't a character out of Uncle Ted, she wasn't crazy. She was an educated Irish nationalist and she loved her country, her children and sometimes her husband.

I hated cabbage, brussels, carrots and the vegetable list went on. She'd mash up my food, batten it flat and cut it into squares which she hand fed me up until the age of 7 or 8. She felt me seeing the squares disappear was encouragement to keep going. It was bland and a bit lumpy despite her using a fork as fast as a whisk to remove the hard bits. It was a desperate meal when her purse was empty. Large dollops were put on our plate with a couple of bacon rashers. My father smothered his in pepper in the hope of a lively spark in his mouth.

In Ireland in the 17th and 18th Century it was considered the dish of the common man meaning a cheap staple with which she would agree. It filled you up with two simple cheap yet nourishing vegetables.

It has an association with Halloween and All Souls Day which is celebrated in the Catholic Church on 2nd November. A long gone tradition was to hide fortune trinkets in it; a piece of rag meant poverty, a coin, wealth and a bit of stick foretold you'd be getting a whipping from someone. Make your own fortune trinkets or write the name of a person you miss alive or dead. Make of it what you want or do nothing other than make this comforting dish. I prefer to use leeks as they bind well with the mashed spuds.

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