

We begin as guests, every single one of us. Helpless little creatures whose every need must be attended to, who for a long time can give nothing or very little back, yet who – in the usual run of things – nevertheless insinuate ourselves deep into the lives of our carers and take up permanent residence in their hearts.

Our early dependence is indulged in the expectation that we, in turn, will become dependable. Maybe reaching adulthood really means learning to be more host than guest: to take care more than, or at least as much as, to be taken care of. Implicit in this outlook, it seems to me, is still an assumption that each person will, eventually, become a parent – the ultimate role, at least in cultures where the nuclear family is considered the foundation of society. A role I decided to forego. A choice that left me questioning what my part can be in the life-play of hospitality.

Whether you have your own kids or not, it's hard to avoid the general shift from guest to host, which is the

hallmark of maturity. This switch is perhaps most challenging in relation to our parents, from whom we can't help forever expecting certain protections and ministrations.

Nobody in the world welcomes us quite like our parents do. The reception, if we're lucky, is a simultaneous cossetting and taking for granted. An experience that's, at best, comforting and exasperating in equal measure, unique in its loaded history of give and take, its private parameters of permission and expectation. Mothers, of course, host us as no one else can — in their bodies. A nine-month gestation. Guest-ation?



'THAT'S NOT ENOUGH!' I stare into the brimming pot of kadhi, a creamy curry made with gram flour and yoghurt.

My mother ignores me, goes on stirring the turmeric-tinged sauce.

'I could eat that all on my own — for breakfast!' I'm aghast at the prospect of running short of one of my favourite dishes in the world. Give me a ladleful of this atop a mound of freshly boiled rice and I will take it whatever the hour, over whatever else is on offer. There have been times when I've eaten kadhi at every meal for days on end. Why on earth has my mother made so little?

'Eyes bigger than stomach,' she sighs.

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Her words are the oldest censure of my eating life, the most frequent, and the most unheeded. They have little to do with the size of my body, which is slender, and everything to do with the size of my desire, which is vast, unwieldy, panoptic. Mum plunges the wooden spoon deep into the pot for a last stir. The paddle emerges coated with translucent slivers of onion, specks of tomato, a scattering of coriander leaves. My mouth waters, all reason drowns. I start scheming strategies to control how much might be eaten by our imminent guests. We have to use the small bowls to serve. And Mum shouldn't insist on extra helpings. And whatever happens, she can't offer anybody a portion to take home.

'Stop being so silly,' Mum says. 'There's plenty here. And anyhow, I can always make more for you.'

But it doesn't matter how much she cooks. She can never make enough. Not for me.

Mine is perhaps an odd strain of a common affliction, a variant of the consumption epidemic ravaging our capitalist societies: those of us who have the most still want more, much more, than we need. Could it be otherwise in a system premised on the false conviction that our existence as we know it depends on the continuity of one thing alone: economic growth? Our appetites must keep increasing to propel the economy. *Eyes bigger than stomach* – the refrain that sums me up also epitomises our contemporary condition. But are there situations where

greed, if not excusable, is understandable, and maybe even necessary?

Kadhi is what awaits me every time I go see my mother. Mostly in London, but wherever she happens to be – Australia or Kenya, the countries where my siblings live – whenever I come, kadhi is cooked. It is what I take away from each visit as well; my mother prepares and freezes batches of the tarka, the spicy tomato base at the heart of much North Indian cuisine, the most time-consuming aspect of the dish. Roasting spices, browning onions, reducing tomatoes – this alone can take up to an hour, before the main ingredients of the dish are added and the whole mixture cooked further. In the case of kadhi, the tarka is a mix of whole fenugreek and mustard seeds, ground cumin and coriander, curry leaves, onion, garlic, turmeric, green chilli and tinned tomato. All I have to do at home in Berlin is heat up Mum's tarka, add yoghurt and flour, sprinkle fresh coriander to finish, and I have the taste of another home, the feeling of time turning in slow, savoury spirals. Each bite holds the flavour of the past and the present, a lifetime of my mother's love, her unstinting hospitality.

Things my mother has long done for me almost effortlessly become, with age and illness, more burdensome for her. This has not curbed her generosity, but every gesture costs her more. I suspect I began to notice the change long after it had started to happen. One day I went home and

there was no kadhi. Mum was all apology. She had bought the ingredients, but had simply not felt up to cooking. 'But I'll do it now!' she said quickly. No doubt my face had betrayed my disappointment, which was not just about the setback to my stomach – substantial though that was – but the letdown of love. I knew that my mother would do anything for me, and the fact that she had not managed this relatively small task pained me. If even her boundless adoration, always ready to express itself, had not succeeded in pushing her over the threshold of limitation, she must be really unwell or really old. I felt her mortality, a frightening chill. She had never seemed so fragile, not even lying in a hospital bed, not even when she was totally grey from depression. I felt tremendously sorry for her – but also for myself. And I became angry, because my sense of what was most dependable in the world had been shaken. 'It won't take long.' Mum set a pan on the hob, started rifling for ingredients. I protested, both earnestly and falsely, that it wasn't necessary, I could wait, kadhi didn't matter. 'If you help me with the chopping we'll be done before you know it.' The sound of her voice was accompanied by the static of mustard seeds popping in hot oil, releasing a smell that pierced my nose as sharply as the tears welling in my eyes. 'It's the onions,' I insisted to Mum when she noticed. It was not the onions. It was life, tipping the scales of give and take.



THE WAY WE COOK for and eat with others is one of the more tangible, quotidian ways of measuring generosity. The type and amount of food offered, how it's served and to whom – these things define hospitality at the table, and beyond. Around the world, more people may be spending less time cooking – in the UK, US and Germany right now it's between five and six hours a week – and eating. In my family the ratio of food–time to life–time remains high, though, of course, we consider such a distinction spurious, because for us food is one of the most intense ways of living. We visit supermarkets as others do art galleries. We cook as others run marathons. We offer, at one spread, flavours of a number and variety that others might only encounter in a packet of pick 'n' mix.

Our family line of food fanatics may well stretch back over generations: the greed-gene honed over eons, mutated to fixate on the gratifications of grub at the expense of everything else. However, for me, it all begins with my maternal grandmother, an ardent eater, force-feeder and devout believer in the stomach as the only way to the heart: Mumji almost everybody calls her, the motherly moniker perhaps partly an acknowledgement of her role as arch-feeder. Her cooking swells sympathies and bellies, raises tempers and temperatures, sends some running and brings others back begging for more. She wields ingredients like weapons and has made food the front line in a fight for first place in the affections of the

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family. At her hob or her table, hospitality often holds hands with its brother word *hostility*. Both are birthed from *ghos-ti*, their ancient Indo-European root, which meant host, guest and stranger – the trio of roles through which we shift all our lives. So apt that this inescapable flux was once contained in a single word.



FOOD HAS LONG BEEN wielded as a form of power, a potent means of commending or condemning, of flaunting extravagance and displaying largesse. Ancient Roman history is replete with tales of excess, feasts as the stage for vanity and vengeance, like the notorious Emperor Elagabalus whose legendary spreads were spiked with sadistic surprises: at the end of a lavish meal that might include nightingale tongues, parrot heads and peacock brains you could be escorted to a guestroom for the night, only to find a tiger inside ready to devour you.

Every century and every territory has its fables of exorbitance: the Manchu Han Imperial Feast hosted by Kangxi, the fourth emperor of the Qing Dynasty, where 108 courses were served to more than 2,500 guests. The hundred-dish spreads laid out regularly at the behest of the Mughal Emperor Akbar. The fifty-course banquet that marked the wedding of Marie de' Medici to Henry IV, King of France, in Florence at the turn of the seventeenth century. The

night in 1817 when the future George IV of England held a dinner in honour of the visiting Grand Duke Nicholas of Russia, where 127 dishes, prepared by Marie-Antoine Carême – then the greatest and most expensive chef in the world – were served. The eighteen tonnes of food flown to Persepolis in 1971 for a three-day celebration, apparently ‘the most expensive party ever’, held by the Shah of Iran to mark his country’s 2,500th anniversary. Such occasions hint that excessive hospitality can be a form of hidden hostility: feasting as a friendly warning of the host’s means and power.

While some have been subjected to extravagance, food has also always been punitively withheld from others, sometimes on an enormous scale and with horrific consequences. Since grain became a free-market commodity in the nineteenth century, profit has often been prioritised over humanitarian protection. In his book *Late Victorian Holocausts*, the historian Mike Davis describes the extreme weather fluctuations in the last quarter of the nineteenth century that led to severe drought and monsoons in parts of the global south, including China, Brazil, Egypt and India. Davis shows how colonial administrations exploited these natural disasters to trigger and exacerbate famines that led to mass deaths, which weakened the affected lands and therefore strengthened foreign control.

When drought hit the Deccan Plateau in 1876 there was actually a net surplus of rice and wheat in India. Yet the



viceroy, Lord Lytton, head of the British colonial administration in India, insisted the surplus be sent to England. Almost simultaneously, Lytton was planning a spectacular Imperial Assemblage in Delhi to proclaim Queen Victoria Empress of India. Its climax, Davis writes, 'included a week-long feast for 68,000 officials, satraps and maharajas, the most colossal and expensive meal in world history'. During the course of that week, Davis adds, an estimated 100,000 Indians starved to death in Madras and Mysore. At the height of the Indian famine, grain merchants exported a record 6.4 million hundredweight (320,000 tonnes) of wheat. Peasants starved, but government officials were directed 'to discourage relief works in every possible way'. Davis's book exposes Western imperialism at its most deliberately inhospitable: destroying people by keeping their own food stocks from them. Suffering colonised subjects were treated not like enemies or strangers, but as if they were not human. By 1902, between 12 and 29 million Indians had died as a result of British policies in the face of famine.

Power often asserts itself through excesses of both hostility and hospitality.



I IMAGINE MUMJI FIRST truly understood the power of food in her own small way after she used it to save her

future husband's life. Soon after their betrothal in India, in the summer of 1947, my grandfather, Papaji, got caught in the brutal upheavals of Partition. He had travelled from Amritsar to Lahore, intending to head on from there to the village of Gujranwala, where he'd been born and where his family had lived before migrating to Kenya in the 1930s. The borders arbitrarily drawn up by the British as they withdrew from India in 1947 left Gujranwala part of a new country called Pakistan. Papaji became one of the millions displaced by the chaos that accompanied the division of India – considered predominantly Hindu – to create Pakistan – conceived from the outset as an Islamic republic. This led to splits along ethnic lines across the whole subcontinent. The announcement of the new borders on 17 August, two days after the declaration of independence, triggered a mass movement of people who, fearful of what the change might mean, sought the supposed security of being amongst their own kind: Muslims in India headed to Pakistan, while Hindus and Sikhs in the territory that had become Pakistan left for India. Around 15 million people were uprooted. Communal violence erupted between all groups and up to a million died either in the fighting or from one of the diseases that were rife in the hundreds of refugee camps at which so many ended up. Papaji was stuck in one such camp for several weeks and caught typhoid. Eventually he managed to travel, with the help of a relative, back to Mumji's family home in Amritsar. He arrived utterly

wasted, hardly able to walk. She had to save him. He was her only chance to escape an existence marred by a youthful mistake: a brief love affair that had ended in pregnancy and an illegitimate child. Papaji, having come from abroad, knew none of this – yet. She needed him to get well so she could get away. And so she cooked.

She painstakingly prepared all the most restorative foods, like khichari, the classic Indian comfort food, a one-pot meal of rice and lentils cooked for the ill with almost no spices so it's easier to digest. Mumji laced hers with fat dollops of butter to help Papaji gain weight faster. Soon she had him on panjiri, a delectable crumble of wheat flour, nuts and spices browned in ghee, traditionally given to nursing mothers as a nutritional supplement. Spoonful by spoonful she restored him to health. Months later, when he was fine again, they were married and travelled together to Kenya. There, Mumji often told the story of how she had saved Papaji, but other rumours were already circulating about who had really saved whom. So many hearts to win, so many tongues to still! How would Mumji manage? As with many women of her background and era, her means were limited. Food was one force she could harness, and so the kitchen became her combat zone. She would destroy any doubts about her past by cooking up a most flavoursome present.



IN ENGLISH *TO COOK something up* means to prepare food, but also to invent stories or schemes, to concoct something out of fantasy. When I first started writing I also baked a lot, mostly on days when the writing wasn't going well. It soothed me, alongside the slow and intangible creation of a novel, to cook up something that was quickly ready and edible. A cake can bring simple, instant self-gratification and appreciation from others, whereas writing – for all its rewards – is always accompanied by self-doubt. Moreover, the reactions of others, even when positive, are rarely enough for me. I'm perpetually hungry for some extra validation, which nobody in the world can give. Only in the act of writing is that hunger satisfied, for I become, briefly, bigger than myself, capable of hosting the entire universe and yet treating every single person in it as if they were my only guest. This feat feeds and sates my ravenous self, my need to be and to have everything.

Stories enact a form of mutual hospitality. What is story if not an enticement to stay? You're invited in, but right away you must reciprocate and host the story back, through concentration: whether you read or hear a narrative – from a book or a person – you need to listen to really understand. Granting complete attention is like giving a silent ovation. Story and listener open, unfold into and harbour each other.

