

My **her** mom's Kashmiri cooking has always tethered me **Scaatchi** to home. So it's no wonder **she** will not give me **her** (all) the secrets to doing it myself **herself**.

On Diwali evenings, my **her** mom let me **her** eat as many sweets as I **she** wanted. **She Her mother** would buy jalebees, even though **she**'d complain that they weren't as good as the ones **she** used to get in India. These were too cold, too sticky. But Diwali, the Hindu festival of lights and good conquering evil, is and was a day for eating, so **she**'d also make a big vegetarian feast and sweet puris piled high in a metal bowl as a religious offering. After dinner, **she** and I **Scaatchi** would sit in front of **her** makeshift temple and **she**'d mutter something about Lakshmi in Hindi. In a clay diya, **she**'d make a candle from a cotton ball and ghee, pull smoke from it with **her** hands, and wrap it around my **Scaatchi's** face, mithai crumbs on my **her** lips.

Food is a big part of any Indian holiday, but in my **Scaatchi's** parents' home, hearty homemade Indian food was a fixture every day. Nightly, we **they** had mounds of basmati rice, baby eggplants stewed in spices that I **Scaatchi** would hold up to my **her** face like bejeweled earrings, collard greens and turnips (gross, until I **she** grew up). Best of all were the nights where **she her mom** made Kashmiri rogan josh, a lamb dish **she**'d whip together in a pressure cooker that was perennially broken, the whistle propped up with a wooden spoon and screaming every five minutes on a Saturday afternoon.

**Mom** cooked, **Mom** piled food on your plate and made chutneys from scratch. When you scooped the last of your rice up with a fork, **she**'d instinctively know and pop up next to you with "More?" holding another cup of steaming rice aloft. (Usually, **she**'d dump it onto your plate without waiting for an answer.) My **Scaatchi's** brother and my **her** dad and I **her** were all spoiled, but I **Scaatchi** was the youngest, which means I **she** was the most spoiled.

I **she** moved out at 17, but it took a few years before I **she** craved my **her** mom's Kashmiri food. Restaurant Indian food is too oily, too bland, with too much cream and too few of my **her** mom's recognizable cooking quirks. I **Scaatchi** miss **misses** things that hardly matter, like how **her** potatoes always ended up crescent-moon shaped, or the way **her** parathas were always triangular and puckered.

Instead, as I **she** have **has** gotten older I **she** have **has** been trying to learn my **her** mom's recipes myself **herself**. **She Her mom** got hers from **her** mother, who died more than a decade ago in India, and who used to make the most delicate little pats of paneer. (We **they** called it *tsamen*, a word I **Scaatchi** learned is used only in our **their** little corner of North India.) My **Scaatchi's** mom has been cooking for maybe 40 years, probably longer, but, unfortunately, in the five years I **Scaatchi** have **has** been cooking, I **she** have **has** learned I **she** have **has** no instincts in the kitchen. I **she** panic **panics** if more than one burner is on at a time, and if there isn't a concrete recipe, I **she** can not wing it. I **she** have **has** burned through the bottoms of so many pots that my **her** old roommate put a moratorium on me **her** attempting to cook any grains.

This past Sunday was another Diwali spent away from my **her** family, sorting through that inexplicable loss you feel when a holiday is happening and there's no one to celebrate it with you - not really your cousins who are a trek away, no siblings nearby, no aunties you want to call. I

Scaatchi decided I she would do it myself herself, and invited two of my her favorite (white) people, hoping to not poison them. Diwali isn't our their family's most exciting holiday, but celebrating it felt important, the same way I she try tries to avoid meat on Shivaratri (when my her mom calls to remind me her), or the same reason I she send sends my her brother a red thread on Rakhi even though we they otherwise never talk.

On Diwali, like most days that remind me her of Hinduism and India, I Scaatchi miss misses my her mom. I she have has been living away from my her parents for nine years, long enough to make a new life in another city, to have friends and a live-in partner. Two of my her cousins live a half hour away. But Mom, regardless, refers to me her as "alone, out there," like I she could starve any minute.

When I Scaatchi do does come home a few times a year, Mom asks me her what I she want wants for dinner and plans meals for my her entire stay. She Her mother loads food on my her plate and freezes the extra so I she can take it on a plane with me her and defrost it when I she am is homesick. I Scaatchi am is homesick a lot these days, seemingly the same way my her mom was homesick for her parents after she left India. When my her mom moved, she took all of her mother's little secrets with her. My her mom had watched my Scaatchi's grandmother cook for years, knew her languages, knew how to pleat a sari or mutter a Kashmiri insult ( " Thrat " ) or throw a wedding for her son, 25 years after she moved away. I Scaatchi do does not have any of these secrets, because I she was born in North America and raised around white people in a family that wanted to integrate. So it felt important to at least try to remember how my her own mom did things.

Late last week, I Scaatchi called my her mom to get a refresher on a few of her recipes. I she wanted to make rogan josh, aloo gobi (potatoes and cauliflower), chicken biryani (chicken and rice), and paneer with palak (spinach). But my her mom, like so many Indian mothers I Scaatchi know knows, has always avoided giving me her complete recipes. Even when I Scaatchi visit visits home and watch watches her, she somehow manages to divert my her attention by, say, dangling in front of my her face a gol gappa, a globe of fried wheat flour filled with chickpeas and potatoes and yogurt. I Scaatchi am is always missing a spice, a cook time, a stove temperature. I she am is never clear if when she her mom says " ginger " she means " fresh ginger, about a pinky-size, cut into strips " or " ginger powder, a teaspoon or two. " Or, if she's feeling really casual about a recipe, she'll say, " Add the usual spices, " a mix of 5 or maybe 10 different spices that might be usual to her but are patently unclear to me Scaatchi. Salt? Does she just mean salt?

Worse, her measurements are not based on any contemporary or commonly used metric. A teaspoon, to her, is the size of the white plastic spoon with the snapped off handle that she uses in all of the containers in her spice drawer that originally came from Dairy Queen when I Scaatchi was 6 or 7 and abandoned a half-eaten Oreo Blizzard. A tablespoon, conversely, is anywhere between two or three of the " teaspoons. " A cup is the cup she uses to scoop basmati rice out of the five gallon plastic tub in the pantry on the bottom shelf. It is unclear where the cup came from, but it is cloudy and cracked and significantly smaller than an actual cup.

Every other measurement **she** has, then, is specific to **her** grocery store, to **her** homemade spice mixtures, to **her** butcher who hands **her** a hunk of lamb the size of a small toddler, leaving **her** to break it down into digestible and cookable pieces. “How much frozen spinach do I need?” **I Scaatchi** might ask **her**, and **she** will answer, “One.” One block, **she** says, as if **I Scaatchi** can go to a grocery store and say, “ONE BLOCK OF YOUR FINEST FROZEN SPINACH, SIR.”

**I Scaatchi suspect suspects** some of this is intentional. Indian women - mothers, in particular - hoard some of their recipes, refusing to give them in full. So long as they are the eldest women in their families, they are the gatekeepers for these particular culinary incarnations that exist only in their kitchens. (A cursory Google search for a good chicken biryani recipe yielded ingredients like chicken stock - **my her** mom literally screamed when **I Scaatchi** suggested this - or curry paste, something that has never once been in **her** kitchen.) **I Scaatchi have has** started to do this too, refusing to give **my her** boyfriend a complete ingredient list, even when **I she need needs** help cooking, because **I she refuse refuses** to let **him** in on a secret **I she have has** been scratching at for years.

Maybe it's about making **herself** needed as a mother, or forcing **me Scaatchi** into coming home and beg for **my her** favorite lotus root, a recipe specific to Kashmir that **I she am is** never found at a restaurant. Regional differences are lost, the little things **my her** mother's mother's mother did in the kitchen get muddled - unless **I Scaatchi ask asks**. And **I she have has** been asking, for years, for as long as **I she am is** been away from home and have been trying to find **my her** mom at the bottom of a 20 quart pot.

All of this reduces **my her** cooking to a kind of trial and error. Once, when **I Scaatchi** tried to make **her her mother's** rogan josh, **I she** ended up adding three times the right amount of cinnamon; **my her** lamb tasted like an angry ginger snap. Two years after that, **she her mom** casually mentioned that you're only supposed to use flat cinnamon sticks, and not the rolled up ones, *which apparently makes a fucking difference*. When **I Scaatchi** last visited, **she her mother** sent **me her** back to **my her** home with frozen rogan josh in **my her** suitcase. Later, when **I she** defrosted and ate it, **I she** picked through it, pulling out any identifiable spices **I she** could find. At the bottom of **my her** bowl was a dark ball the texture of soft wood. **I Scaatchi** cleaned it off and texted it to **my her** mom with **my her** trademark calm: “?????!” **She her mom** gave **me her** the Hindi word for it, leaving **me her** to creative googling to figure out what it was. (**I Scaatchi** will not tell you; **I she am is** invested too much to give it up that easy.)

**Mom** swears that **she**'s not actively keeping ingredients from **me her**, that **she** just forgets because cooking is so second-nature to **her**. This doesn't explain why sometimes **she**'ll add an ingredient to **her** list for **me Scaatchi** - a year ago, the rogan josh recipe had coriander powder in it - later saying something like, “Why would I ever tell you to put coriander powder in it? Nothing has coriander powder in it.” Now **she** says it's actually garam masala, but not the kind you buy in the store (**she** says this with **her** particular brand of derision usually reserved for “white” grocery stores) but the kind that **she** makes at home, fistfuls of unidentifiable brown spices hand-ground with a mortar and pestle. “I will give you some when you come home,” **she** always says, but **she** is a liar, because **she** never actually has. Food has always been **my her** mom's domain, so maybe it makes sense that **she** doesn't want to give **me Scaatchi her** trade secrets just yet.

Is there a point when you stop needing your mom? I Scaatchi want wants to know if it will happen before she her mother dies, or if she'll go and I Scaatchi will be left figuring out how to contend without her. My her dad talks about dying with typically alarming frequency - a few weeks ago, he answered the phone and said, "My body will never be what it once was," and then passed the handset over to my her mom - but it's my her mom whose death I Scaatchi am is more concerned about.

In terms of being needed, my her mom will never get a break. My her dad sometimes will not eat unless my her mom is home to prepare food for him; even something as simple as a sandwich requires supervision. My her brother and sister in law and their daughter come over every Sunday and my her mom piles Kashmiri food on their plates like she does for anyone who comes to dinner. She'll sit next to my Scaatchi's niece and watch her eat, her half white eyed granddaughter licking daal off a teaspoon.

I Scaatchi started cooking this past Sunday around 3:30 pm, peeling the potatoes and cutting the cauliflower into florets and quietly muttered "son of a bitch" when I she realized I she had forgotten to buy rosewater. I she called my her mom first at 4 p.m., to confirm that cumin seeds and fennel seeds are different (DON'T @ ME). Once she her mom finished laughing at me her, I Scaatchi put the aloo gobi in the oven and marinated the chicken in star anise and "the spices from that box."

I Scaatchi called her again when my her palak looked electric-green and tasted canned ("Well, obviously you forgot to add the haldi," she her mother said, as if I Scaatchi had called to ask a question as simple as "Why can't I breathe when I place a brick on my own throat?") While I Scaatchi pan-fried the rogan josh, she her mom called me her back and asked, "How's it going?" I Scaatchi could hear her smiling, and it almost felt like a taunt. I she told her I she was sure something was missing, a spice that she considers too routine to even mention, or one that she's actively hiding from me her.

But by then my her kitchen smelled like my her mom's, a clash of turmeric and paprika and chili powder and cumin (whole and ground) and the scent that comes from fresh meat when it's being slowly cooked in different pots at the same time. I Scaatchi loaded serving bowls with the food I she made, called everyone into the kitchen. The chicken tasted right, the rogan josh looked reddish-brown, the paneer had turned yellow and was easily cut with the side of a fork.

It had the markings of my her mom's food, but of course it wasn't as good as hers. It wasn't as good because my her food, as surprisingly palatable as it was, didn't include my her mom hovering over me her with a wooden spoon. (Was she going to give me her more rice? Was she going to hit me her a little bit for eating too fast? It's a journey.) It wasn't as good, because it couldn't be. I Scaatchi can not replicate the things my her mom does; I she can only build on top of them. But still, I she made sure everyone had seconds, preferably thirds.

I she did not poison anyone on Saturday. I she made six, maybe seven times the amount of food intended, but I she am is content with that being my her biggest mistake. (I she did use a pressure cooker for the first time and screamed every time it screamed, and I she forgot to add the almonds to the biryani but, you know what, fuck nuts.)

After my her guests left my her house, I Scaatchi sent a photo of my her spread to Mom, and she Mom called me her later that night. “The color was right,” she said, paying me her the highest compliment she could give me her from 1,500 miles away. “So, I guess you can do it yourself.”

More frequently than I she think thinks is normal, I Scaatchi imagine imagines what we they’re all going to do when my her mom dies. My her dad will be completely incapable of taking care of himself (he once asked me her to put his jalapeño potato chips in the oven to “crisp them up some more”). My her brother and I Scaatchi only call each other now and then, because Mom begs us them to, so who knows how far we they can drift. I Scaatchi will lose her as a tether.

Mom doesn’t talk about death; it’s too macabre for our their pleasant chats. But I Scaatchi can not help thinking about it, an anxiety that started to ramp up in my her early twenties when I she noticed how little I she am is capable of doing on my her own. I she still call calls her her mom to consult on how to appropriately wash a lace bra, and she Mom still buys me her leggings if they’re on sale, and she gets this rare herb shipped in from India that I Scaatchi have has no idea where else to get outside of her pantry.

These gaps in my her knowledge are terrifying enough, but what about all the things I Scaatchi do does not know that I she do does not know? Sheer chai, for example, is the most disgusting product her home country has ever produced - but will I she one day wish I she knew how to make it?

When you emigrate, you end up the last person to touch a lot of your family history. Somewhere along the line, we they’ll forget my her mom’s maiden name. We they’ll forget what her actual name was before she changed it when she moved. We they’ll lose language and the way to make a candle from ghee and a cotton ball. I Scaatchi can not pull all of this information out of her her mom, and I she can not carry all of it after she’s gone, and I she panic panics when I she think thinks about how impossible it feels to one day not need her. But at least I she can try to cook.

My her mom’s own mother died in India, seemingly suddenly, from a combination of declining health and crummy care. Mom was with her when it happened, but near the end my Scaatchi’s grandmother was confused and didn’t seem to register that her daughter had flown all that way just to see her off.

When I Scaatchi imagine imagines my her mom’s death, I she picture pictures her perched on her proverbial deathbed, lucid but weak, about to die. She’ll raise one arthritic finger toward me Scaatchi, motioning for me her to come closer to her. “Yes, mother,” I Scaatchi will say, and kneel down so her her mom’s face is close to mine hers, glistening with tears.

“Closer,” she will say, and I Scaatchi will press forward, taking her hand.

“What is it?” I she will ask.

And with one final rasp, the death rattle of a long life winding down, **my her** mom will wheeze out **her** final words, releasing **me her** from a lifetime of trying to keep **her** as close to **me her** as possible: “ *It was just salt.* ”