**My her** mom’s Kashmiri cooking has always tethered **me Scaachi** 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** **Scaachi** 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 muddied - 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. ”*