She Said, He Said

The Romance of Food in Our Marriage

Bharati Mukherjee & Clark Blaise

Though the authors have lived in many cities on three continents, they still equate feeding and eating with love. The kitchen is Bharati's "room of one's own," which was transformed after making instant coffee for Clark on the second day of their marriage into a place both for writing and for a "spicy impulsiveness" drawn from the world's cuisines.

She Said:

I grew up in a Hindu Bengali family for whom food was a synonym for love, so when twenty-four hours into our marriage, Clark asked me to make him a cup of instant coffee, I happily agreed. We were at the kitchen table (which also served as writing desk and makeshift bookshelf) in our two-room basement apartment in Iowa City, Iowa. Clark, an ardent fan of all American sports that ended with "ball," had taken time off from reading Louis-Ferdinand Céline's *Voyage au bout de la nuit* to explain the mysteries of American football to me and was diagramming potential plays by the Hawkeye football team on backs of aerogrammes my parents sent me every day.

A slow learner when it came to any sport other than ping-pong, I struggled to absorb new words like "linebacker," "running back," "quarterback," "fullback," and "wide receiver," into my Raj-influenced English vocabulary, and was thankful for a coffee break. Clark, who devoured a book each day during the years we were stu-

PHOTO: CHUAN-YAO LING

He Said:

I grew up a Canadian child in the deepest South of the United States, which may not seem a bruising experience unless one translates it into culinary terms. In the north Florida / south Georgia and Alabama of my childhood (1945–50), it meant eating tongue sandwiches, heart and liver, crunchy green vegetables spiked with lemon, iced tea with lemon, and dark ginger bread with lemon sauce for dessert—and praying that none of my neighborhood friends ever suspected. In the Deep South of those years, "organ meats" were sold to black women at ten cents a pound from the Jim Crow back windows or packaged as "pet food" for white women entering through the front. The penalty for violating any of the unwritten codes could be as life-changing as waving a Union flag or planting a Republican lawn sign at election time.

My mother was a socialist from the prairies of western Canada, Scots-English in background and tastes. My father was a French-Canadian from Québec. I was, so far as I knew, a southern boy hungering for a homeland. My mother was all onions-and-garlic, vinegar, tomato, and cucumber; my father shied from any condiment except salt and pepper. I can't say their marriage eventually failed over issues of meat and potatoes vs. chicken and smothered rice, or everything fried vs. baked or roasted, but food was an issue. A level of

She Said:

When we started cooking seriously, or competitively, or adventurously, we of course turned to Julia Child's *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*. That classic is held together by tape and rubber bands, its pages stained with juices and spillage. In those days, cookbooks were squat, utilitarian tomes—now they feature mini-travel essays, autobiographical asides, and luscious photos arranged by food stylists. In the early 1970s, when we lived a few months in Switzerland, I spent my evenings eating fresh gruyère and reading Julia Child and John D. McDonald's "Travis McGee" adventures. When we returned to Montreal, we found a remaindered copy of *The Bengal Lancer's Indian Cookbook* (1976), by Mohan Chablani and Brahm N. Dixit (and named for the Chicago restaurant where we'd also enjoyed a few meals); it now rests taped and retaped, redolent with curry drippings and sticky with old syrup. It has reliable dessert recipes, including the shortcuts for *gulab jamuns* and *ras malai*. When we moved to New York in the mid-1980s, we met the actor, calligrapher, caterer, and dear friend, the late Lilah Kan. Her *Introducing Chinese Casserole Cookery* (1978) offered an easy entree into Chinese cuisine.

dents at the Writers' Workshop, went eagerly back to *Voyage*. I had dipped into *Voyage* because Clark was excited by it, but I had given up after a few pages. Clark could be counted on to ease me into all his passions, be it books, European films, American trivia, and spectator sports.

Clark was, by default, the chef in our newly minted household. Cooking daunted me. In the Kolkata of my girlhood, rich families feasted, poor families starved, and families with middle-class pretensions depleted more of their income on food shopping than they could afford. Wives, accompanied by a servant carrying jute sacks, made daily trips to the vegetable market, the fresh fish market, the eggs-and-live-chickens stalls, and the mutton-sellers' booths in the bazaar, and, after lively bargaining, returned home with filled sacks to prepare (or supervise the preparation of) multi-course, labor-intensive lunches, dinners, comfort was missing. My father and I ate our fried chicken or pork chops at the kitchen table; my mother ate a deviled egg and salad in the corner. My mother's only meats were fish and chicken.

My father also came from an intact culinary tradition, but its cultural legacy, in that time and place, translated to shame. He proclaimed himself French—that is, Parisian—not a humble *canadien*. In Tavares, Florida, or Valdosta, Georgia, or Gadsden, Alabama, in 1947, no one could spot the difference. It took me many years to appreciate the hearty, delicious peasant food of old Québec—the meat pies, leeks ("les asperges des pauvres"), black bread, pork and beans—but by that time my father was long gone from my life.

As for the vegetables: long before the beginning of the school day, cooks dumped leafy greens into giant pots and began boiling them in order to achieve a brown and tasteless lunchtime sludge. In school, we had to eat everything on the plate and leave it polished by a swipe of God's little dishcloth, a good southern biscuit. A goon squad of sixth-grade "monitors" (some of them well up into their teens) loved to push first-graders' faces into the caldera of gravy in any uneaten mound of mashed potato. The introduction of a lemon slice to the vegetables, the fish, or iced tea would mark one as a Yankee, and you didn't want to be seen as a Yankee in the 1947 Confederacy. In those post-Hitler years I was taught that the greatest tyrant the world had ever known was Abraham Lincoln, the unprovoked and single-handed destroyer of America's only true, native civilization. Lemons were Lincolnesque; enough said.

When we moved back to Canada in 1950 to live with my grandparents in Winnipeg, I gained twenty pounds in three months. The villain was honey. My cousins and uncles raised bees, and the honey was candied as well as liquid. It was smeared, or drizzled, on homemade bread and biscuits. At the age of ten, I was back in the world of familiar meats and veggies, with oatmeal and wheat germ for breakfast and lemon curd and lemon meringue pies for twice-a-day dessert. My aunt and grandmother baked breads and pies all day.

A year later, we were back in the States, but this time in the North. The food remained the

and tea-time snacks. While most unmarried Bengali daughters of my generation were taught by their mothers to cook at least basic dishes, such as boiled rice, dal, loochi, aloo-dum, egg curry, fish cutlet and fish curries, mutton chops, and mutton-and-mutton-liver curry, my parents had preferred that my two sisters and I toil over books rather than in the kitchen.

Back in my parents' home, I had rarely stepped into the kitchen and pantry, the domain of our two autocratic, live-in cooks: one a Hindu trained by my mother to please my father's demanding palate, the other a Bengali Christian trained by missionaries in Raj-era soups, stews, and puddings. For special dinners, we added a Muslim *burchi* whose expertise included roast duck, Jewish braided cheese in buckets of brine, and hand-cranked ice cream.

I had no need to learn to cook in my pre-Clark years as a "foreign student" (a term now abandoned for the more politically correct "international student") in Iowa City, as I had lived and boarded in a women's dormitory that disallowed hot plates in residents' rooms. The dormitory dining room, with its profligate portions of red meats, potatoes, pastas, breads and rolls, salads, pies, colas and its fast-moving queues, was my initiation into U.S. cuisine. The roasted chicken breasts (my favorite at dinner) seemed to have been hacked off some gigantic, alien fowl. Even the bananas at breakfast, not bruised, blackening, diminutive as in Kolkata bazaars, but acrylic-bright yellow and the size of a child's forearm, were exotic to me. Several of the dishes, especially aspics and jellos, were decorated with tiny paper American flags glued to toothpicks. For Americans, I concluded, food was a synonym for national pride. I was an intrepid tourist discovering American identity by sampling hotdogs, hamburgers, and meatloaf.

same, until 1954 in Pittsburgh when my parents started their suburban furniture store. They left me five dollars a day to buy a dinner, usually a hamburger, fries, and a Coke from wherever I could walk to, followed by an evening at home, or at the local movie theater, with a bowl or bag of popcorn. I gained another thirty pounds.

I'd grown up pudgy. I became morbidly obese. Sometime in junior high school, I looked down at my shiny gabardines and saw not two legs, but two triangles of fat tapering from my thighs to my knees. How had I allowed this to happen? From the eighth grade on and for the next fifty years, I became a dieter. Thanks to shame and vanity, I have managed to remain "stout" or "husky," with intermittent spells of near-normality.

During one of those spells, while in graduate school at the University of Iowa, I married—a spectacular marriage to a fellow writer from India. But in 1963 Iowa City was pork-and-corn country, fine for me, but a horror for my Hindu wife, who was a Bengali Brahmin from a prominent Kolkata family. She'd never learned to cook (the assumption being there'd always be a cook). Since mine was the dominant cuisine in that time and place, she adjusted to the Blaise imperium. A small steak every night would do for me (she had eggs); boiled vegetables, maybe a dish of ice cream. I gained twenty pounds in my first year of marriage.

If I hadn't been an arrogant twenty-three-year-old imperialist, I might have asked, "What's your favorite food? What do you call it? Where can we find it?" But of course, I didn't, and even if I had, there wouldn't be places to find the kinds of freshwater fishes that Bengalis eat at least twice a day. Down at Hillel House, the rabbi's wife had to drive five hours to Chicago to find Sunday-morning bagels. Indian spices, now common as bagels in every college town, were practically unknown.

Without some sort of culinary adjustment, that is, a restoration of equilibrium, our marriage would have gone the way of my parents'. It's not exactly about food, and taste; it's a question of respect.

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We didn't yet own a kettle—ours had been a lunchtime wedding in a lawyer's office between classes—and we made do with one medium saucepan without lid in which to boil water, heat canned soups, and simmer frozen vegetables, and one heavy-bottomed skillet to singe Clark's nightly dinner of very rare steak.

I read the instructions on the jar of instant coffee. *Place one teaspoon of powder in cup; add boiling water; stir.* I filled the saucepan with tap water while trying to keep straight the specific field duties of "guards," "tackles," "ends," and "safeties." What did a "free safety" do versus a "cornerback"? The burner on the aged gas stove didn't light up when I rotated the knob from OFF to ON. I was terrified of matches and accidental fires, had never lit a match in my life, and, given the domestic staff in my parents' household, never needed to. I appealed to Clark. We had had a two-week courtship, too brief a period for Clark to have discovered that I was match-lighting-challenged. He ripped himself away from *Voyage* and lit the burner under the saucepan. "You can do it," he encouraged. "When the water comes to a boil, pour it into the mug, and *voilà*!" He took out a second mug for me and scooped a spoonful of instant coffee into it. I could do it, of course I could, except . . . I had no idea what water looked like when it came to a boil. Back in Kolkata, the tea had been brewed in a pot in the kitchen; the teapot, teacups, milk, and sugar, together with platters of cucumber sandwiches and chicken in puff pastry, brought on a tray to the

In 1966, degrees more or less in hand, we left for Montréal. I remember with poignancy the day of loading our meager furnishing, our books, on to the rented truck. Our Writers' Workshop neighbors, Andre Dubus Jr., Jim Whitehead, and Jim Crumley, did the heavy lifting. All, now, are gone.

Montréal in the late 1960s and '70s was an arena of competitive cookery. Every week brought dinner invitations; every academic wife and quite a few husbands had staked out areas of expertise. We all learned our Marcella Hazan and Julia Child, some had branched out to Chinese, and others (especially our friends in Toronto) were exhuming historical recipes—Elizabethan, Restoration, Regency, Victorian—gleaned from plays and novels and diaries we'd all read but never, as it were, distilled to their essence. We were a generation that banished the notion of "comfort food." But no one tried Indian. It was still too exotic, the immigrant footprint still too light. And there, Bharati and I made our mark.

It took me seven years to make my first visit to India. I immediately took ill with hepatitis A (on a steamy Bombay day I'd sipped the water in a Chinese restaurant). For three months, I drank only sucrose-laced lemon-water, and a cup or two of my mother-in-law's homemade soups. I lost twenty-five pounds. The aroma of Indian cooking wafted up to my bedroom, but I was too weak, too tired, to join the revelry. No nightly pegs of Indian whiskey with my father-in-law, nothing fried or spicy.

Maybe I needed that, to be in India, but in an isolation chamber. Those loud, late dinners downstairs that I couldn't join. The visitors, the relatives I couldn't meet. And so, three years later we took a year off from our Montréal jobs, took our two young sons with us, and spent a year in Kolkata living as close as we could to Bharati's joint family. I ate nothing but Indian, the nightly curried fish, using my fingers to pick out the myriad bones. The children endured the exotic food but didn't really like it—how could they, at nine and six?

living room by a bearer. I asked, "How will I know the water's ready?" and Clark answered, "when you see bubbles surface."

Et voilà! Sure enough, in a few minutes bubbles broke through, steam rose. It was our first joint effort in *our* kitchen. I savored my warm mugful, suddenly foolishly confident that I was ready to take on Céline and the rules of college football.

In spite of my tentative beginnings in that poorly equipped, sparsely stocked kitchen in Iowa City, I am now a passionate cook. Though Clark, a nomad at heart, and I have lived in many cities on three continents, the Bengali in me still equates feeding and eating with love. The kitchen is my "room of one's own." Though I have a study, with spacious desk and comfortable swivel chair, wall-to-wall bookshelves, and lighting just right for cozy reading in a Backsaver lounger, I do most of my writing at a bistro table in the eat-in alcove of our San Francisco home. The kitchen, too, has a library: of over a hundred cookbooks. Some, like Madame Benoît's *Encyclopedia of Canadian Cuisine,* are falling apart from my determined efforts to master Québecois dishes, especially roast goose and pork tourtière; many are tattered and out-of-print, scavenged from secondhand shops in faraway towns like Hobart, Tasmania. Each book is a periscope into people and places I long to embrace.

For the pots simmering on my range, I cull what inspiration I need from the world's cuisines and add spicy impulsiveness. I didn't know that was my culinary aesthetics until my Québec-born father-in-law said to me one Thanksgiving night—over a dinner of goose braised in a bath of port and wine-plumped prunes—"My dear, even your mashed potatoes have a kick all their own." My secret ingredient for the potatoes that night? Mustard oil and scallions. That's a compliment I treasure.

Another three years passed in Montréal, and then we were back in India for a year, this time in New Delhi where Bharati served a year as the Canadian cultural attaché. We had a house, a cook, and servants. The food was Indo-Anglian bland, heavily inflected by standards of the Raj (our cook, an Indian Christian, had protective impulses toward British digestion, and disdainful attitudes toward Indian cuisine).

It was our older son, Bart, who launched the family's final embrace of Indian food. During the Christmas break from the embassy school, we decided to take a week-long drive through the palaces of Rajasthan, as far west as Jaisalmir, on the Pakistani border. We were accustomed to eating off the Indian menu in any restaurant, and ordering something ersatz "European" for the kids.

But on one of those days we stopped at a tea stall, a typical roadside tea stall, a fire-pit under a tarp held in place by two bamboo poles, where a dented metal pot of spiced Indian tea was on permanent boil. Somewhere behind the hut, giggling little children peered out at us (white faces were still unfamiliar in much of rural India). It was a chilly winter day in the Indian desert. Traffic was so sparse that women spread out their freshly washed saris on the highway to dry. We hadn't noticed that Bart had disappeared; he had to be in the tea-wallah's hut. And seconds later, he emerged, munching on a folded *chapati* dripping with *daal*. "I love it!" he cried, "love it, love it. Can I have another?"

The unstated: *Why did you keep this from me? Where has it been all my life?*

Suddenly, and for that week, and thirty-plus years since, we discovered our comfort food. Not the knock-it-out-of-the-park Montréal fancy stuff (though it is always our first restaurant choice) but home food, basic American food, inflected by India. That's how we eat in San Francisco (although we'd never inflict it on guests); our sons live in New York and Portland, where they shop in Indian neighborhoods. Bart's daughters, two adoptees from China, know the names of Indian spices. It's been a long journey.

San Francisco

Clark Blaise is the author of twenty-three books, ten of them short-story collections, novels, and several works of nonfiction. His *Selected Essays* (volume 1) appeared in 2008.