

Cherry Coke & Mint Pulao

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by Anurag Andra

You're almost grown when you realize it's an odd hour for Dad to head back to the store. That it's almost dinnertime. That what he says about being almost out of the twenty-four ounce Cherry Coke bottles and him needing to be there when the truck comes in to deliver them doesn't add up. You worked the register yesterday. You watched a shipment of them come in. You ask Mom if he meant the diet bottles, and she doesn't look at you because her head's down, her face obscured by the steam of the mint pulao from the cooker. She says in barely more than a whisper that she doesn't know. You start to look at her more closely, start to notice the aversion of her eyes, start to feel like she knows something you don't. You start to press her, and she says, *Set the table, Shivam.*

Mom, what's going on. She looks at you now, but only for half a second before she finishes inspecting the pulao, starts scooping it into those bowls Madhavi Aunty put under the un-ornamented Christmas tree two years ago, in that plain-as-day, unwrapped box, the corners pressed and pushed and bent.

Mom. She looks at you. It's the first time you see — really, truly see — the bags under her eyes, the first time you count, one, two, three creases, deep and black and worn.

Shivu, wait, she pleads, her arms stretched out, fingers grasping for your shoulders. You go to grab your jacket from the coat closet, wrap it around yourself, take the keys to the Camry off the hooks of the wall-mounted wooden "F" by the front door. *It stands for family,* Dad had said, the longest middle hairs of his mustache curling over his lips into his mouth.

She follows you out to the driveway in her pale pink robe, barefoot, hobbling, the bunions at the sides of her feet bulbous like moons of some long-forgotten planet, her silhouette swaying in the porchlight.

The store's neon sign blazes a deep, rich red in the night. You mentioned it to Dad once, asked him what was the need for a sign like this. *This is what brings the new ones in,* Shivam, he said. *What keeps them coming back, too.* You pull into the lot, register the only two cars there, out in front of the store: Dad's cherry Mazda, his pride and joy, next to a silver Nissan, dipped in shadow. You drive around the side of the building to the back, where a lamplight flickers, tall and lonesome, the pale slivers of moths swarming through and below and around it.

You park there, crooked in the unmarked, lineless gravel behind the store. You twist the key, turn the car off, and recall your fourteenth birthday party when Srinivas Mama, his breath reeking of rum, grinned, said, *So you're ladies man like Dad now, no?* You let yourself get cold, shiver, hug yourself in your jacket, feel the tips of your fingers start to numb. You climb out, make your way to the lone white door with its gold knob rusted and dulled, all gleam and shimmer aged and gone. You twist, push the door open, hear the wood whine.

You're grown when you pull back into the driveway at the house. Mom's standing there in the dark, the hem of her robe flowing at her feet. Through the windshield you see her fold her arms across her chest, bow her head. You get out of the car, race across the grass of the front lawn, slick with dew, shimmering in the dark, and throw yourself into her arms, ask her, *How long have you known?* She holds you tight, pinches the back of your jacket, pulls you in as close as she can, whispers, *Oh Shivu, he just...*

The Mazda pulls up by the mailbox, its cherry red glinting in the moonlight. He emerges from the car, eyes wide, mouth hung open, and Mom squeezes the hair at the back of your head. *I know*, you tell her. *I know*. She grazes your cheek with her cracked, dry lips, and you breathe in the warm, brittle earth of mint pulao.

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