

## CURRY FINGERS

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NANDINI DHAR

Trina can put a date on the day she stopped eating anything remotely Indian in public—April 4th, 2000. In 2000, Trina was in middle school. A seventh grader, to be precise. Alice was her best friend. Alice whose father was a Gulf War veteran. Alice whose father banged his head on the bathroom wall every six months or so. Alice whose mother worked in the school cafeteria and had dark circles around her eyes. Alice who used to follow Trina home every evening after school.

On April 4th, 2000, Trina and Alice walked after school to the Starbucks a block away from Trina's home. Trina's mother was having one of her moments. Moments when she did nothing but shut herself up in a room and mutter to herself. Mutter and blame Trina's father. Blaming him for bringing all of them to America: "You, you, you dragged me into all this. This loneliness, emptiness...I have never wanted to leave Kolkata. What do I have in here? Not even a neighbor I can talk to. Nowhere to walk to. Drive, drive everywhere. No bus, no tram, nothing. In Kolkata, I never had that problem. I was a professor in a girls' college, remember? I had friends...my own." Trina could repeat this litany with her eyes closed and ears shut. And she did. Whenever she wanted to get her mother's voice out of her head. Repetition made it irrelevant.

Outside on the kitchen table was a twenty dollar bill under a teacup. At the Starbucks a block away, Trina had bought herself a hot chocolate and an ice cream drink for Alice with that money. What that ice cream drink was called, Trina does not remember any more. Alice had asked, sipping on her drink, "What's that stink that never leaves the inside of your house, Trina? It's like no one cleans up the dining table after eating or something." Trina could not understand if it was a serious question or not, or if Alice *really* wanted an answer. So she shrugged. A shrug is the absolute answer to any question to which there can only be no answer. Or to questions which one does not want to answer.

Five days later, Ben and his boys encircled her in the hallway, shouting *curry fingers*.

There was nothing unusual about this, since everyone knew Benjamin Nielsen was the school bully. Overweight and older, *the* Benjamin Nielsen who was kept back to repeat seventh grade twice. Benjamin Nielsen who came to school in a maroon baseball cap and oversized sweatshirts. Benjamin Nielsen who knew how to rhyme and chant whatever would hurt most. No one knew why he hadn't picked on Trina yet. No one knew why he had picked on Trina that day. But during those minutes of being encircled in the school courtyard, Trina had seen, from the corner of her eye, Alice stopping for a second and then moving on. Vanishing into the walls. After Ben had let her go, Trina hadn't broken off with Alice.

She did not talk to Alice for the rest of the day. Alice, too, did not try to talk to her. Next day, Trina feigned a headache, took two Tylenols along with her breakfast milk and had stayed in her room the entire day. No one knows if Mother believed her. But she let Trina spend the day at home. Next day, at school, when Alice had whispered a hesitant *hello*, Trina had smiled and nodded back. As it is, Alice was the one of the three girls in her class who talked to her anyway. The other two were the Lithuanian twins: Amalija and Aurelija. Who had not lived long enough in United States, were new to this school, and with their limited English skills, didn't provide much of an opportunity for complex conversations. During the recess, they had practiced together the vocabulary for the Spanish test. Alice had shoved a gummy bear onto Trina's palm. Trina thanked Alice, and put the bear inside her coat pocket. A couple of hours later, she threw it in the trashcan in the restroom. Otherwise, they continued as before.

But Trina had stopped inviting Alice at home. Or anyone else for that matter. She never treated anyone she met at school with espresso-smelling ice creams and chocolate chip cookies at the Starbucks. Even during her birthdays. Mother never asked why.