

MY DINNER WITH SALIHA

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What delivered me to the dinner table of Saliha Sardar is the sort of thing that vilifies the timeless cliché that ‘things happen for a reason’. And God has a keen sense of poetic irony and justice, crafting the whole story and not necessarily catering to your liking. So, the Grand Narrator would deem that Saliha’s husband, Zia, would have no small role to play in our world’s colliding. Curiously, it was actually thanks to cancer that I would be dining with Saliha on this particular evening – the prostate cancer plaguing Zia at the time – and it would be cancer, yet of a different kind, that would be to blame for my not being able to dine again with her, at least on this plane, in the near future. I was at a bit of a crossroads in my own life; and to progress certain other events needed to take place. So, when you find yourself with time to kill, why not relax and have a quick bite or a nice cup of tea.

I am in a home. Taking that much needed break *à la* the British institution of the Four O’Clock Tea. The steam of my own piping hot cup fogs the images in front of me. The images are mostly dismal. Suburban London on an average day. Glum is a word. Rainy is another. I have to admit I love it. Heaven is a rainy day with a pile of books and good coffee. My fascination is set upon the rapidly setting sun, which I haven’t seen for days, but the gradual dimming of lightness gives way to the assumption that the sun must be going somewhere. I am not surprised. I have a surface level understanding of the Earth’s rotation axis and seasonal change. ‘Daytime’ from place to place will not necessarily be the same. But to experience the sun setting at four in the afternoon is a bit jarring when you are not used to it. Sitting in the Sardar living room, surrounded by the artifacts and *objets* of lives lived – of a living family – I could just as easily have arrived from Mars, let alone the opposite side of the Atlantic. I was certainly a stranger in a strange land. Although that trope is evaporating in our

contemporary age. One could easily seek out strange new worlds, seek out new life and new civilisations, to boldly go where no man had gone before by simply taking a walk down the street, much less charting a voyage to the far side of the globe or solar system.

But for an American, the United Kingdom is another category. Dishearteningly familiar, yet strictly foreign. An old friend put it well by saying its 'Bizarro World'. What's up is down and what's right is left. The language itself has a certain madness, at times one side holds all the logic, to only lose it in the next moment. Z is not 'zee' it is 'zed'. Full stop, not a period, but a period is a period and so the women who hear me talk about grammar begin blushing for some strange reason. Even the roads and thus the mobility of society are inverted. Right of way is rights of way and the direction does not carry on so intuitively. Honestly, I could not afford to be surprised if it was asked to put hats on my feet and shoes on my hands.

Out the window I looked on. Sipping my tea, which was much more delightful than I had thought, coming from the land of black sludge coffee and its usurping bastard of a brother, iced tea. I bit from my biscuit, which was not the dinner biscuit you'd get in the US, and certainly not a cookie – whatever that is. Though I give credit to those who try to expand the categories of things to include both the American cookie, something of a monstrous biscuit, and a British biscuit in the same continuum. French fries were chips and chips were crisps, but what of crispy things? Never mind. Aluminium, not alumin-um, herbs with a hard 'h' because it has an 'h' in it. Who'd have thought! My mind was a three-ring circus, complete with *matinée* showings.

Zia sat across from me on the couch. Oblivious to my inner toil with cultural conjugation, he placed his empty tea mug on the coffee table in front of him. He shot me a glance that would almost have me believe he was, in fact, quite aware of my turmoil, or at least questioning why I would expend so much mental energy on silly matters. Also noting the diminishing light, he proceeded to shutting all the front blinds and igniting every lamp and overhead light in the living room and along the stairway to the upper rooms. Zia's efforts to seek continuity of illumination into the darkness of night was a ritual of sorts. He continued to repeat these steps everyday he was at home as he had for many decades. Even as the furniture

in the living room changed. Even as the lamps changed. Through the seasons, as the world continued to ignore the reality of climate change. *Swish* and *click* while wars were fought – mostly the unjust variety – as each new injustice grew more horrifying than the last. Economies boomed and busted. Through each new Prime Minister, Zia would keep closing the blinds and switching on the lights. Zia liked light.

Sitting next to Zia, a man not likely to sit still for more than a few silent moments without the news in front of him, sat Saliha. She sat in what I would later find was her usual spot, layered in jumpers and shawls to keep warm from the bitter British air. She was quite used to Zia's frequent springing from the couch to attend to whatever needed attending. Unperturbed, she ate away with small polite bites at her biscuit. Her tea sat on the coffee table, minding its own business, exhausting trickles of steam. Mid-illumination, he offered her a few words in Urdu. She would respond without looking up from the iPad that had her attention. Zia's words began with *Begum*. That was the title Zia had bestowed upon his beloved long ago, honouring a tradition with a most uncertain future. While Zia and his venerable colleague, the Welsh Dragon Woman, Merryl Wyn Davies, were no strangers to giving all in their path silly and often diminutive (though the holders were none the wiser) nicknames, *Begum* was no jibe. She was the queen of his world. *Begum* was, after all, the name given to Muslim women of exalted stature throughout Central and South Asia across history. And Zia knew well, and would freely admit it if you asked him, that the woman of a Desi house is both symbolic and administrative head of home. They often see no need to flaunt this reality. Let the Desi men live in their imagined patriarchy. They hold about as much power as the British monarch, and like the royal family, every couple of years the public asks if we really need them. May God have mercy on the Desi man who also has a daughter.

In line with the standards and practices of a Desi household, the kitchen was clearly Saliha's domain. But she upheld an equitable division of labour. The making of the afternoon tea was remedial enough a chore to be left to the man of the house without too much cause for concern. As Saliha worked during the day at a nearby school for special needs children, it became the expectation that the preparation of the tea would begin as soon as she arrived home. So much so, that if the door was heard opening and

the kettle had not been put on, Zia would hop from whatever task had his attention to remedy this misjudgement of time. Credit where it is due, Zia did well to meet this expectation. While Zia is not much for schools of thought, he did subscribe to the one with regards to tea. That of the twentieth century English writer George Orwell. In particular, 'tea is meant to be bitter,' and it has to be damn bloody hot. Pipping. And it would do no good to add cold milk straight from the fridge. Zia was a man of ritual, one minute twenty seconds did the trick on the microwave model they had. The Professor also liked his tea strong. A delicate balance lied between maintaining hot fresh tea and providing for ample steeping time. The temperature cannot be stressed enough. When you believe the tea has reach a temperature that might be described as inhumane, it was necessary to take it a few degrees further. With time, I too would learn and adopt for my own the method and even take on the job of preparation from time to time. This household had a fondness for Yorkshire black tea from Betty & Taylors Group. Always loose leaf, unless the situation grew truly dire. I learned what a tea cosy was – a device that maintained the heat of the tea as it steeped – not to be confused with what we in the US call 'koozie' – a device that keeps one's beer or soda pop cold longer. I would even learn the specific likings of the family. Where Zia preferred a dark, strong brew. Saliha and their daughter Maha would prefer their tea a bit lighter. Colour mattered in the game of tea. Raw sugar for Maha, no sugar for Zia. Only after my time with Saliha did I learn the Desi trick of adding a cardamom seed or two to the tea which delivered both a nice aromatic flavour and various health benefits to the drinker. After my time in the UK, I still find myself craving tea when the clock strikes four, regardless of where on the planet I am.

Zia drank his tea very quickly in all its scalding glory before moving on to what accoutrements accompanied the cup, sweet biscuits, chocolate, and savoury munchies. Saliha and I, who preferred to taste our tea finished slower, complementing our tea taste with the accoutrements. Following the tea, Saliha would collect the empty cups and secure what biscuits were spared. All of it back to the kitchen.

A routine developed quickly during my time there. I was lodging down the street and around the corner at their son, Zaid's house. So, each day I'd set off to arrive around about half past nine in the morning. After a quick

breakfast and coffee, it would be upstairs to the attic to begin the day's work. Zia and I would work hard until about one in the afternoon, when we would break for lunch. Lunch was often leftovers from the night before or something quick and easy that Zia and I could manage. We would proceed again to the attic until the hour of four demanded tea. During lunch and tea, we would catch up on what quickly became how terrible a shape the world was in on any given day by scanning the news. Zia would tap the remote between the BBC and Sky News comparing what each saw as the 'most important' news of the day, switching the channel if they obsessed too long over what Zia referred to as 'nonsense' or 'rubbish'. Occasionally, he would change the channel quickly for cricket update, or even to watch a match. Zia's favourite sport. I would look upon the game before my eyes with complete confusion. Familiar with what the Americans call baseball, all looked similar, but the gameplay, scoring, vocabulary used, and other details threw me into the uncanny valley. As the bizarre game played out, Zia provided a lavish commentary. His words were most certainly English, but followed a grammar completely foreign to me. If the workload demanded it, following our tea break, we would retreat again to the attic to finalise anything before dinner. Some days we would be finished by tea and could have a leisurely afternoon.

Regardless of what our programme specified, it was also understood, that following teatime, for one hour, Saliha would flex her power and wield the command of the remote. Every day she would check on the news coming from Pakistan. Zia would often audibly scoff at the state of Pakistan which he was not to demean in Saliha Begum's presence. I watched on in fascination, attempting to make sense of the images, trying to use the occasional breaks into English as clues. For me, Pakistani news was much easier to follow than cricket. This is largely owed to the fact that most news today, all around the world, has been colonised by incessant screaming and debates devoid of any desire to reach conclusion, heaven forbid progress towards understanding. Throughout the hour, Saliha would juxtapose complaints around corruption and Pakistan's woes (usually directed at Zia) with tongue clicks and the occasional call for someone to save that beautiful land (inferring that Zia's time would be better spent finding solutions for Pakistan's woes than whatever other issues he was dealing with). After an hour of biting his tongue raw, Zia again relinquished

control over the remote with a long breath under which numerous curses and blasphemes freely flowed, in numerous languages, both real and made up. Saliha would retire to the kitchen. There she would set about her next task, the preparation of dinner.

What would take place in that kitchen can best be described in the English language as magic. While the observer would witness a rather simple, yet well-timed, combination of ingredients and heat, a higher power of artistry was at work. 'What would everyone like for dinner?', Saliha would ask. She would receive the same answer every day: 'whatever you like'. But the question was unnecessary anyway for whatever Saliha cooked would be an event of flavour and sustenance. Western, Asian, it didn't really matter. Even fish fingers and potato wedges, something any chap with a microwave could *cook*, she would *make* into a delicacy. When I asked her how she did it, I received only humble simplicities and 'nothing special, just add this to that and let it get hot' as a response. Only now, many years later, can I appreciate that she was not raised into her skill, as I had simply assumed, but that she painstakingly cultivated her craft through independent study and I assume a perfectionism that would have many of the great masters saying, 'I think that's good enough, let's move on'. Yet she occasionally complained about her own dishes, and to my dumbfounding, as I was practically licking clean the plate she claimed was 'not her best'. The idea that anything could be 'wrong' about what she made was entirely inconceivable to me!

During our down time or upon finishing either a major or head-cracking task, Zia often liked to take a break. One of his favourite types of breaks was for Urdu poetry. Since, at this time, we were putting together *A Person of Pakistani Origins*, these breaks occurred more frequently. Through the films of Dilip Kumar, to the elegant verse of Munni Begum, and even into the bombastic presentations of Coke Studios, and later of Nescafé Basement, Zia, a true lover of Urdu poetry, made it a point to educate me in the beauty of the language with ample exposure to the art and its performative expression. While he would point out and translate numerous words and phrases, what was retained can only charitably be described as a passing familiarity. But this did not get in the way of appreciating the self-evident beauty in the poetry. Yet if I was asked what the first Urdu word I truly learned was, I would have had to say *khana*. Even before I

knew it was Urdu – or was even sure what the word being uttered was – I knew what this word meant. Even the first time I heard Saliha holler the word from the kitchen, my body knew before my mind could process that it was time to move. The word rang through the house daily, sometimes with a louder, or at least more upstairs directed manner, if no response was conveyed. This word, Zia did not need to translate. Only months later would I ask quietly if ‘khana’ was what I thought it was. ‘It had better bloody well mean what you think it means, you’ve only been responding to it for the last several months when Saliha yells it!’ Indeed, I had known what it meant. The word reverberated with an almost universal familiarity, despite its rather intricate etymology. In certain cultures, it may be the ringing of a gentle bell or the rapping of a musical triangle. In a greasy American diner, it’s the impatient *ding-ding* of the same bell you find in certain hotel lobbies. In your more elaborate Chinese restaurants, it might be the sounding of a gong. In lieu of an audible calling, the waft of a sensational meal will also do the trick. I knew its meaning as clear as when my own mother would howl from the kitchen: ‘Dinner!’

All present in the house would descend upon the kitchen to find the meal laid out in an assembly line of delicacies. Beside the microwave, the queue would begin with a stack of plates and numerous sets of the necessary cutlery. Beyond the plates a large bowl is loaded with steaming rice – the base of many an Asian meal. On more special days the more elegant *ghee* rice will replace it. On the truly special occasions, one will find the supremely elegant *biryani*. While the rice featured on this night could be mistaken for *just* rice, anything prepared by Saliha is never *just* what it appears. The grains would be quality and the water used would be precisely what was needed. The salt would be balanced. Everyone has their preferences and tastes, but neither overcooking nor undercooking was acceptable. No dish must carry the burden of another. Next was a bowl full of *dhal*. The yellow soupy concoction of lentils with a brilliant trans-sensorial dance of onion and garlic was unfamiliar to me. Nevertheless, my nose told my brain this would likely be the star of the show. Following along, we continue to the stove top where a wok filled with a smoky and seasoned-to-perfection medley of veggies redefined how attractive a vegetarian’s pallet could be. The frying pan next to this wok housed a kingly portion of meat, soaking in its red curry. I cannot recall, was it

mutton or was it lamb, would it really have made a difference? Last, but not least, sat a towel upon a serving platter. Fresh and hot *roti* was nestled within. As Zia and I entered the kitchen, Saliha placed one more bowl of yoghurt sauce mixed with cucumber and some other seasonings I couldn't quite make out.

'Can you handle spicy food?'

'Yes, but I'm not one for diving into things headfirst.'

'Then take this!' Saliha emphasises the yoghurt dish she had just finalised.

Normally, the routine was every man for himself when it came to dishing out plates. But since this was my first time, Zia took the liberty of preparing and portioning out my plate, and decorated my plate with each of the parts of this meal. Once properly full, Zia plopped a large piece of *roti* on top and passed the hearty plate to me. I was then instructed to proceed into the other room and begin eating. To the man who drinks scalding beverages, to let a beautiful meal run cold was the greatest of sins. Such politesse, as waiting for all to join before commencing in consumption, need not be observed here. Maha, the couple's daughter, would come to the kitchen once she finished her last call of the day, and the two sons, Zaid and Zain, would not be home until well into the night when Saliha would reheat their food for another round.

Dinner coincided with another evening ritual at the Sardar household, the beginning of the Channel 4 News broadcast at seven o'clock. There was even a bit of a game to see if you could guess what would be their lead story which would be teased in the opening segment before rolling the credits and bringing it to then lead presenter, Jon Snow, to see what eccentrically flamboyant tie and sock combination he would be showing off that day. Would it be the latest Brexit drama? Or perhaps updates on one of the ongoing domestic court cases? The odds were good that it would be a piece on climate change in one way or another and you could always count on C4 to cover the globally disadvantaged community of the week, covering their plight with grace and detail. The best shows began with a news item not featured in *The Guardian* or on the BBC and Sky News reports seen earlier in the day.

As Jon Snow's electric hyperbolic socks cried out for attention, I set out upon the plate handed to me. I began by trying each item individually. First the meat. Oh, that was fantastic. Then the dhal. I could possibly live on this alone without bother should the situation arise. Then the veggie. Admittedly, I had sort of dreaded this dish as my veggie pallet had been exceptionally boring for most of my life and most of the health benefits garnered from such dishes were overridden by the amounts of butter and pepper dowsing the cutlets. But this was something different. You could taste the vegetables and they tasted quite delicious. And they held firm in a rigid structure that often is lost on cooking methods that disregard the vegetable as a box to be ticked rather than a part of the meal. The yoghurt I was most sceptical of. In the US, yoghurt is a dessert dish or perhaps a breakfast dish that is accompanied by fruits or granola, not meat and spices. This was a role reversal I was not comfortable with, but as I tried it, I was pleasantly delighted. It especially went well after the flavourful red curry from the meat.

By the time I had sampled all the delights on the plate, Zia and Saliha had joined me with plates of their own. They asked what I thought, and I had confirmed the meal was superb and one of the best I had had for a long time. Jon Snow handed it off to Matt Frei who was reporting from the lobby of the House of Commons. I fell pretty deeply into the meal, only really listening to Channel 4 in the background. As bread started most of my meals back home, I began by eating the roti as plain as it was put to me, loving its freshness. I'm sure I was not doing much to conceal my enjoyment of the meal. But I noticed I drew the attention of Saliha and Zia. I assumed they were looking to see if I may be masking any inadequacies I may have felt over the meal. So, I smiled in response as I swallowed the roti. 'Would you like another piece of roti?' Zia offered as I took note of Saliha tearing from her own roti slice. She had taken the portion and fashioned it into an absorptive scooping utensil and mixed the contents of her plate into this newly formed pouch. Down the hatch it went. 'Ah, yes' I responded. Zia sprung forth and grabbed another roti for me. As Zia had handed me a spoon and fork, I did not think that the bread could then be used to effectively eat with one's hands. Now equipped with a new piece of roti, I followed Saliha's lead, tearing a bit off and wiping it across the bottom of the plate to soak up the juices, then grabbed a pile of veggies

and threw it all into my mouth. Clumsily perhaps, but no mess made! And I admit I did it in such a way that both Zia and Saliha could see, as if approval would get me further through this meal. The reception of the feat I had performed gave me the impression that the fork and spoon ought not be totally disregarded at this point.

I then proceeded to eat each portion upon my plate separately, with fork and knife, and in a bit of an order. First up were the vegetables, the real underdogs of the night, but nevertheless, despite how high a quality the veg could attain, the meat would certainly go even higher. The *dhal* would be the *pièce de resistance*. You see, I was a son of the American Midwest, from a family that retains the living memory of the Great Depression and Dust Bowl of the early twentieth century. Food is one of the purest extensions of love. And it must never, never be wasted. So, what was on my plate was what was my key concern, and a lot of pride (or in Asia, face) was at stake. I am also what is referred to as a 'sectioned eater' one who likes to eat each dish separately, never shall two sauces touch. To make sure every dining experience was taken to its fullest, I would eat in an order that would end on the best dish. First take care of the veggies, then the potato or rice, and finish with the meat or the main dish so as to take the palate on a ride. Better yet if it ends on a succulent dessert. Admittedly, this style has its extremisms. I would also break each dish down, eating from the outside in, assuming the centre of any given piece would be the most treasured bite – or at least the core of the message any chef was attempting to convey. I respected the language of cuisine. The love letter within each dish. Even a simple cheeseburger would be consumed in a circumferential manner, finishing on the central piece of meat, melted cheese and condiments. And as I became more educated in etiquette I had taken it for granted that what was presented to you by the chef was how it was intended to be consumed, so to wash a steak in a sauce or allow dishes to flow together was a slap in the face to a delicatessen.

So I ate the vegetables first, beginning with any parts of the veg that had run into the rice or the nearby yoghurt. A clean crater left in the wake of the plenty delights. Next, with the spoon, I ate the yoghurt sauce by itself. I did take a tear of roti and wipe up its residuals once the bulk of it was gobbled up. Then I took to the rice, in its hefty plainness and ate it bite by bite with the fork given to me. Overcome in the ecstasy of the meal, I was

unaware of the fact that Zia and Saliha were watching me eat. Saliha had even placed her glasses on, unsure if she could trust what her eyes were presenting her with. As I noticed their stare, I give an audible 'Mm-mmm' and perhaps a few broken words of appreciation between the mouthfuls of food. Spoon after spoon went the dhal with much appreciation. Saliha threw a sentence of Urdu to Zia. He accepted what was put to him in silence. After a few moments, measured in my spoon heaps, he offered back a quick word or two in response. 'They must be impressed that an American boy can so enjoy their South Asian meal!', I thought. I had reached the meat, it was mostly cut up, so with my hands I took to separating the meat from the bones. The way Zia and Saliha were looking at me, made me think I must have had the dopiest smile on my face. As I took the last little sliver of roti, I wiped the plate clean, leaving behind only a few bones. Saliha shouted more Urdu at Zia, then smiled at me.

'Would you like some more?'

For Saliha, food was indeed an extension of love. A mother's love or at least the compassionate love one ought to spread to strangers met along the road of life. She was a traditional South Asian woman. No one is allowed to go hungry. Food must always be made available. Full stop. The hardship of the Great Depression rang through two generations to my core, even though I had never experienced it. The greatest sin next to wasting food was to turn down food when offered. All must be accepted and all must be finished.

'Sure! That was lovely, really a wonderful dinner'

Saliha smiled with a laugh and then shot a sharp look at Zia. He nodded in response and took my plate. Though I said I could get it myself, he insisted. For Zia was on a mission. What I was unaware of was that in a Desi house, the separate dishes of a meal would be served separately on one's plate, so as to insure their constitution prior to consumption. And as an unwritten rule, either bit by bit or as a grand mix in the beginning, all the dishes had to be mixed. This was not to balance the flavours and the tastes per say, but so that each ingredient could work to enhance the

flavours and the appreciation of the spice from dish to dish, seamlessly. It was in fact an insult to allow each dish to be eaten on its own, preventing their full potential from being realised when put side by side with the other prepared dishes. Knowing what was to be eaten with what was critical to a successfully planned South Asian dinner, for if they didn't gel together, then disaster.

As Zia entered the kitchen, he knew that he had no choice but to resort to desperate measures.

He made a central rice mound on the plate. Then poured, in a less than elegant manner, all the various dishes onto the rice mound. To drive the point home, he then took a spoon and mixed all the ingredients into a rather evenly distributed jumbly fusion. Satisfied with the truly South Asian plate he had made, I imagine he smiled, adding a piece of roti on top with an impatient plop. He knew I could eat, but didn't realise how daft I was to eating in the way it was supposed to be eaten.

Very proud of himself, he handed me the plate as Saliha smiled with a rare gleam of satisfaction over the solution presented by her husband. As Zia sat again, I noticed both looked on in anticipation for me to begin. And who was I to let food be left as an object to be admired when it begged to be consumed? I took the roti, tearing off an ample piece, forming the pouch that I had seen Saliha make before. And a bite was taken and enjoyed. I almost expected Saliha and Zia to begin applauding. Progress in our times. I was beginning to feel like I was a child using the 'big boy' potty for the first time, much to the relief of parents overwhelmed with the unenviable task of potty training. The prospect of a new trade deal between the UK and the EU post Brexit seemed less an impossibility despite what the discourse on Channel 4 purported. But then I went on.

Unaware of the trap Zia had laid for me, I proceeded to dissect my meal casting aside the rich complexity of the mixture Zia had woven. I separated the vegetables from the mixture, then the yoghurt, then the meat, finishing with the dhal which had sort of blended with the rice. Then I ate everything, one by one, separately. In the final analysis, there I was with a white mound of rice, eating away at it, with a fork. The jubilation turned to bile. Much like the Massacre at Glencoe, a good meal turned to treachery. I might as well have murdered thirty of the Clan MacDonald as I scooped the last grains of rice onto my fork. To add insult to injury, in my

ignorance I uttered ‘Wow, when the rice and the dhal mix, it actually makes for a delightful blend! I noticed the yoghurt also added a lovely note to the combo. It was almost as if they were intended to be mixed...’

I had found myself in a higher state of being before this meal. It was a spiritual experience. Was I not learning culture in the best way possible. Yet, for Saliha and Zia, I was spouting out words with horrible pronunciation and calling that language. Where was the grammar, the meaning, the flow? There was no beauty in this. No amusement either.

Saliha spit a fiery roar of Urdu at Zia. It certainly gave me the impression that he had done something wrong. He often did. He looked back at her, as confounded as she was. Defeat was eminent. Noticing that again my plate was clean, I wondered. Could I have done something wrong?

This was not my first experience of a new culture’s etiquette towards food. I had been to China and knew that, at least in East Asia, one demonstrated their enjoyment of food by eating bombastically and chewing with one’s mouth open, even speaking with food in their mouth, and audibly slurping their tea. It was quite the shock to me, but it held a certain logic, even if that logic was different from my own. Should I have been sloppier? Though I did try to throw in expressions and language to demonstrate my enjoyment. Did they think I was masking or even being sarcastic? After all this was Britain and despite what ethnic cultural particulars carry forward into the contemporary multicultural United Kingdom, it seemed safer to err on the side of what I perceived to be the Queen’s etiquette.

We were at an impasse in expressing love. The route taken by one insulted the other and the only ways to proceed were rife with further insult. It was the Queen’s polite society that prevented Saliha and Zia from pointing out what I was doing wrong, if wrong is what you could call what I did. Even my, granted rather strange, face deserved to be saved. In my consumption, I sought to express my love, but in my mode of consumption I insulted Saliha’s cooking. To point this out would insult me and deny the love she showed to extend through the meal in the first place. Zia was hopelessly caught in the middle. He was no stranger to defying convention. He would see no problem in pointing out in no uncertain terms that I had consumed my meal in the completely wrong way. But he also knew Saliha Begum would not tolerate such abuse, especially when, technically, I had done

nothing wrong. After all, Americans need their codified rules and written constitutions, they cannot deal with the more abstract notions of justice and logic that the Brits follow. Should he let me have it, he would face a proper scalding of fiery Urdu and a week-long sentence of the silent treatment. The centre had to hold, but with what material could this be done?

We often over dramatize the collapsing of one world for the other or the impact of two supposedly in competition. Yet more often than not, the 'clash of civilisations' that the late American political scientist Samuel P. Huntington so feared would plague our new century are often more subtle encounters so thick with ignorance that you may not notice a confrontation had even taken place. Just a passing brush, left un-reflected with no opportunity for learning, much less understanding, taking place. The Sardar dinner table was between Scylla and Charybdis. This is not because the difference in worldviews found at the table could not easily be overcome, but instead because good, and truly pure, intention, as it so often does, has got in the way.

The twentieth century British writer and lay theologian, C.S. Lewis shines the light on this during his 1940 work, *The Problem of Pain*. While the focus of this treatise revolves around the question of why an all-powerful and good God would create a world that allowed for pain – something Zia, in his situation, might be sympathetic to – Lewis spends considerable time giving 'kindness', which he does not consider a virtue, a proper dressing down. His criticism revolves around the fact that kindness is not exactly what we think it is. For instance, in our more contemporary world we have the notion of 'kill them with kindness' but he also references the kindness of killing a horse whose broken its leg. Lewis notes, 'are we not really an increasingly cruel age? Perhaps we are: but I think we have become so in the attempt to reduce all virtues to kindness.' His usage of kindness can be equated to mercy, even pity. Which is interesting since his best friend J. R. R. Tolkien holds pity as an essential motive for the unfolding of his *The Lord of the Rings*, but this is because he holds that all things in Middle-Earth (and frankly our own world) must happen for a reason, another diatribe Lewis, I believe, would have significant problems with. Both this and Lewis's problems can be easily summed up. A lot of horrible shit has been and can be justified with a simple 'everything happens for a reason' or 'really, it was a kindness' a bloody mercy. As Lewis said, 'the real trouble is that

“kindness” is a quality fatally easy to attribute to ourselves on quite inadequate grounds’.

The first Thanksgiving feast was a three-day event that took place in October 1621 in the Plymouth Colony of the New World. It was a kindness visited by ninety of the Wampanoag, one of the native peoples of America, upon the fifty-three surviving refugees who fled persecution in England aboard the famous ship, the *Mayflower*. While I do enjoy a bit of speculation, I don’t give it much credence. But there was a real opportunity for a new type of civilisation either coming out of that feast or that could have been inspired through this story’s survival. But sadly, the refugees became conquistadors who eradicated the natives. Fearing the next refugees to come to their shores will either wipe them out and take their place or die, they amplified the fear of further refugees. The cycle has been repeated many times. This seems to be fate, but need not be destiny.

Indeed, the line between virtue and vice is disappointingly thin. For our values to stay the course and maintain their virtuous nature, they require a holistic and interconnected appreciation. A virtue that stands alone is no virtue, it must cooperate and uplift another. While demonstrated in our actions, it is in how we live that virtue is attained and progressed through time. In fact, it is a bit disingenuous to note a virtuous individual. In reality there must be virtuous communities or societies. But how monumental a task is that summit?

But could it begin somewhere? If it is folly to begin with the individual, then perhaps we should begin in the home. In the ninety-nine names of God, ‘homemaker’ is conspicuously absent. Perhaps it could be derived from a combination of the others, but there is something profound in the notion of a homemaker. Not your Suzy Homemaker. I am not talking gender normative roles or the stereotypical family unit. But are not those who make homes among the blessed? And a home is more than walls, ceilings, and floors – the compendium of world literature tells us, at least, that a house alone does not make a home. But what about a dinner table? Such a remarkably simple structure that has given host to great discussions as well as the transcendental thinking that has bridged understandings across cultures and generations. Lessons learned and differences appreciated. But to make this proverbial omelette, a few eggs need cracking.

‘Would you like some more? You are not allowed to be hungry’, issued Saliha.

Zia’s hard swallow following that question could be heard even in the boisterous lobbies of the House of Commons. To ask that question was to condemn them to further defeat. Was she not satisfied with the fine mess this meal had become? He was beginning to put two and two together. She had to offer him more to eat. He knew I could not refuse the offer of more food. This truly is what results when an immovable object confronts an unstoppable force.

Zia often notes my ability to consume all and in vast quantities. Only when I say, ‘actually I am quite full,’ does he know that something was not quite right. Once in China, I had visited a vegetarian monastery where we were served one of the greatest lunches I had ever experienced. But none of the servers spoke English. Before we began, they said to signal that you’ve had enough, put your hand over your bowl and do not waste anything. These folks are poor and that is a grave insult, you must finish all. Only three quarters of the way through the meal did I realise that my smile of appreciation was being taken as a signal for ‘can I have some more please’. In agony after many more bowls full I collapsed over the bowl preventing any more food from being dished into it. I spent the afternoon keeled over in agony. I would not abandon my principles. Nor would Saliha. Saliha was love and she must express that love. I would eat myself sick at the least. Images of former US President George H. W. Bush vomiting into the lap of former Japanese Prime Minister Kiichi Miyazawa. A dystopia was flashing before Zia’s eyes. There would be no food left for the boys. They would starve. The house would be freely given and freely consumed. They would be beggars on the street! Yet Saliha would continue to give every scrap to me the personification of modernity ignorant to the limits of growth. Empires rise. Empires fall. Collapse. Ruin.

‘Bloody hell’, he shouted. ‘Have you not had enough! . Are you a man or a horse?’. Then he turned to Saliha. ‘Will you not save some for the boys! What are we to have for lunch tomorrow? Is there no end to this madness!’. There was a pregnant pause. ‘Jesus Christ! Jesus Christ’, Zia kept mumbling.

A moment of silence. I was embarrassed, but relieved, freed from my duties of politeness. I imagine so too was Saliha. Nevertheless, she let him

have it. One did not need to know Urdu to understand the verbal lashing he received. I do not think she spoke to him for a day, maybe two. But order was restored. Zain and Zaid had their dinner. The home and its centre held. And something resembling a deal followed Brexit.

I have no idea if the universe began with a big bang or with something resembling a sleepy cat's whimper. But I am almost certain civilisation began with a dinner table.

In the 1987 Danish film, *Babette's Feast*, the titular character reveals near the end that she had spent all of her lottery money, the ticket to her freedom from the indentured refugee existence she was in, on a top tier French meal for the two sisters she had been serving and their guests. The sisters were perplexed by her decision to spend so much on the meal, which was deeply spiritual for all who enjoyed it. Anguish overtook them; they felt she would surely be poor now and stuck for the rest of her life. Babette responds by saying 'an artist is never poor'. In utter gratitude, one of the sisters declares: 'this is not the end, Babette. In paradise you will be the great artist God meant you to be! Oh, how you will enchant the angels!' Indeed, I would add the homemaker is never poor either. For the home is one of the few sustainable units we have left to us on this dying planet. Saliha will indeed enchant the angels. I imagine her treating the heavenly messengers with her *biryani* and *dhal*. I just hope, for their sakes, they know the proper way to eat a *desi* dinner. And have the ability to politely say 'no thank you', when she asks: 'would you like some more?'

