

There Are No Mango Trees Here

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the quiet

Central Park is quiet on Tuesdays. Except for the sweet whisper of warblers and the subdued rustle of pages, I'm alone in this verdant pocket of the city. There is a couple across the pond, sharing a blanket and a chocolate-covered strawberry. Tied to a woven picnic basket are translucent balloons filled with gold confetti, plucked guitar strings as the rubber bumps together. I'm too far to tell if they're smiling, but the woman is holding the man's face with one hand, catching chocolate flakes under his chin with the other.

I brought three books with me in the hope that I'd start one—but I've been here an hour and a half and my tote bag is still a few feet away, pressed down on the grass haphazardly, untouched. A woman walks by with three little girls dressed in matching blue skirts and white, ruffled shirts. Triplets, I assume, and surprisingly well-behaved.

"I love your skirts!" I call out, and the woman nods. The girls barely look up.

September sunshine is kind on my shoulders—soft, like a massage. It bends through leaves and oak branches, emerging in aureate mosaic. The couple is leaving. They walk along the edge of the pond and I imagine their reflections as one body, darkening the quilted water as sunlight rolls through them.

My phone rings from inside my bag, deflating the quiet around me. A photo of my mom appears on the screen. I had taken it from our seventh-floor hotel room somewhere in Europe. She was walking back from a lunch date with my dad, and my sister and I were waiting for them upstairs. Her head is tilted slightly to the right and she's smiling.

"Hey Ma."

"Hi *beta*. Just calling to check in—how are you? We miss you everyday," she says.

"I'm good, just reading outside. How is your back? Has it gotten any better?"

"Still hurting but it's okay," she says, sighing, and I can hear the tense spine in her voice, the tight knots pulled tighter with time. She is perpetually bent over a life that runs and plunges when she reaches down to grab it. Mother is night and poet is shadow and the sun hasn't risen yet. "I tried a heating pad yesterday—it helped for a little while but the pain will only really stop when I die."

"Mom! Stop saying things like that." It's quiet for a few minutes. Not a Central-Park-on-Tuesday quiet but an epiphany quiet, a jolt-I-can-feel-in-my-own-back quiet, a quiet that glides from my phone to my spine to the sinew inside.

"Just a joke, *shoni*," she says after a while. I'm twenty-two but she still calls me the same sweet nicknames that ring out from behind the camera in shaky home videos of me eating cheerios or playing with my sister. "Only joking."

"Made anything interesting lately?"

“Same old, same old. Your dad tried a new fried rice recipe last night that was nice. Not as good as PF Changs, but it’s as close as he can get.”

“That’s nice. I had Chinese last week.”

“I hope you’re not ordering in every night. I taught you enough recipes to last you until winter break. When you come home I’ll teach you some more, okay?”

“Yeah, yeah.” The conversation is soft, and I imagine I’m still at home. I’m sitting on the couch and she’s sitting across from me, knitting or reading or writing in the hand-sewn journal we made for one of her birthdays. She used to keep it in her purse, brought it everywhere she went. The whole world was a poem to her: melting ice cream, morning walks, math homework. I’ve only seen a few of her pieces—not because I don’t want to, but because it’s hard to translate poetry. Literal translations don’t carry meaning and literary translations get lost as looping *Devanagari* straightens into Latin script.

“What are you doing today?” she asks. I almost want to tell her I’m coming home, but I’m seven thousand miles and several hundred bad decisions away from that.

“I finished my work for the day, so I’ll probably just take the subway somewhere for lunch then come back to my place and watch some TV.”

“Sounds fun. Be safe please.” I can hear she’s tired.

“Of course. Bye Ma, love you.” I can’t bring myself to ask her what’s wrong.

“Love you, *betu*. See you soon.” I let her hang up the phone, then keep it pressed against my ear as I listen to my breath replace hers.

mango street

The subway is almost empty. I take a seat next to the door; the plastic is cool underneath me. There are newspapers strewn on the floor, dark footprints covering headlines and an image of a frowning politician. I twist one around with my toe so I can read it.

A man had been arrested for stealing four hundred dollars worth of mangoes from a local Indian store. Guilty, he told the cops as they approached the store, you got me. He held his hands above his head; in his palms was one of the six bags of mangoes. An officer told him to drop it. He did. Mango Street, they called it in the headline—*Man Steals Mangoes, Turns Fifty-Second into Mango Street*. The mangoes rolled into traffic, bursting open under worn tires and tired feet. As the cops struggled to reach the man through the falling fruits, he tipped the other bags with his right foot and spilled the rest.

Mrs. Patel, the owner of the store, watched, motionless, as the last of her mangoes for the year turned into roadkill. She was unable to give the reporter a comment, just pointed at the orange stains on the asphalt and watched taxis and white cars ingest the ambrosia until she couldn’t tell the difference between the juice and the crack sealant.

Even though it's the middle of the day, it's dark outside the train. I imagine the road on the tunnel wall, black and fleeting and smeared a faint turmeric color. Mrs. Patel is pressed against the curved bricks, her back stiff and pained as she bends to gather the tumbling mangoes. The train presses her elbows into her body, and she stands there with her hands outstretched as mangoes roll from under her, behind her, above her, bursting like berries and bleeding sugar onto her aching shoulders. What a great poem, I think, and close my eyes.

memories

Mango Street
reminds Mrs. Patel
of India. A white man
unleashes his saccharine
wrath on a woman and she
watches and dreams of home.
She remembers street vendors &
cracked-open coconuts on the side
of the road, plastic straws waiting to
be drowned, sipped, cooling the body
from the inside. She remembers how the
fruits were sweeter from the back of a bike
than from the cold shelves of a grocery store.
She remembers how her mother used to carry
lychees in her purse like candies, how she would
roll them from calloused palms to fresh skin. She
can taste motherlove on her tongue, even fifty years
later. She remembers peeling, biting, bursting. Poetry
between her teeth.

conversation with a man as he leaves the train

“Go back to your country lady. We have enough smart-asses here.” He spits a cloud of vape smoke into my face.

It smells faintly like mango.

salt spills stories

I'm so in shock I can't respond. The other three people in the train don't even look up. I cough, choking on a smell that, growing up, had been my home. The only thing I can think to do is message my mom.

hey ma are you awake. need to talk

I realize it's one-thirty am for her.

can call in the morning

I put my phone down on the seat next to me and wait for the air to unsweeten. We reach the next station and everyone else gets off, and suddenly I'm alone in this metal pocket of the city. My mom calls about six minutes later.

"Is everything okay?" she asks, breathless and groggy. I don't respond. Everything I want to tell her has suddenly dissipated and there's something hard caught in my throat and I know if I swallow I'll cry. I feel like a kid again. It wasn't even that big of a deal.

"Is everything okay? You're scaring me," she tries again. I open my mouth. Suddenly there's an ocean on my cheeks and I can taste salt as it runs past my lips.

"It's okay, *beta*, you can tell me."

So I do. I tell her the last five minutes and then I tell her about Mango Street and Mrs. Patel and the triplets at Central Park and the couple and their balloons and the way the sun was like a massage and how it reminded me of her massages and how I missed her and I wished that she didn't move back to India or that I didn't move away. I tell her how I ordered takeout for a month straight, how I never got Indian because it reminded me too much of her cooking. I tell her I brought three books with me and I haven't read a single word.

She lets me talk, lets me break down in the middle of the subway, sobbing like someone had died, drowning in tropical breath and seasick tears. When I'm finished, she speaks; her voice is clear but I can hear the longing I've torn out of my body and sent to hers in the way she trails off every few sentences. She tells me, it's okay, it's okay, I'm here, I'm always here.

"You know, when I was in college, my classmates would make fun of my accent. They'd mock me behind my back when I asked a question, putting on a show for their friends, laughing as soon as I raised my hand. 'Curry breath,' they'd call me, and throw sucked-on mints at my head. I didn't even bring curry to school. They pulled my braid. I cut my hair short before sophomore year but they just kept pulling. They'd say, 'Do they even teach anything in *India*?' The word sounded disgusting coming out of their mouths. Imagine that. The country you were brought up in, the country your parents breathe, the country below your feet and above your head, that's always rolling right through you like sunlight; it's perched behind your eyes, coloring everything you see with such vibrance; it's what you were born into, what your ashes will inherit when you die; it's house and home and family and beautiful—and for someone to be able to mutilate that, it's just—it's sad, is all."

There's a catch in her throat and the story subsides. For a few minutes, the only sound on the line is the rush, the metal clanking, of the subway. It's a comforting soundtrack to imagined embrace.

"We'll never be truly welcome here and that's okay. Let them keep pulling, is what I've learned. You just push ahead and let them follow. You're *young*. Your dreams are still in front of you—reach."

I don't know what to say.

nana & nani

After lunch, I find myself on a bench outside Coney Island. I remember a story my *Nana*, my mom's father, used to tell my cousins and I when we were younger. All six of us would pile into the bed; he'd be on one side, my *Nani*, my mom's mother, on the other. Like bolsters, they would turn to face us, wrapping their arms around our small bodies and holding hands in the center.

"Tell us the mango tree story, Nana!" we'd say, "Show us your scar!" And he would lift his soft, gray hair, take each of our fingers, and gently press them against the rough skin on the back of his head. Then, switching to Hindi, he would begin.

"I must have been ten or eleven; it was summer and it was mango season. There was an orchard a few minutes from our house with hundreds of mango trees, at least 30 varieties, all red and orange and ripe. We could practically taste the juice dripping from branches above our heads as we ran under sweet-leafed shade. Seventy years later, that juice is still on the back of my tongue. Mangoes the size of a small pumpkin, flesh that bled sugar down our fingers and arms. You don't get mangoes like that anymore. We knew how to tell which mangoes were the ripest, which would be ready soon, just by looking. We would climb the branches to reach them, compare our treasures.

"One morning, I was eyeing a particularly juicy one. I pulled myself up onto the tree, stretched out my arm, and, with one finger grazing the soft skin, I tumbled. I hit my head on some bricks and passed out. The last thing I remember seeing was that mango, hanging amongst the green like an infant sun.

"Our village was small and my family was large. It felt like everyone was crowded around our house. Someone burned an old shirt, placed the ashes on my head to stop the bleeding. They rushed me to the hospital on a bullock cart, my head in my *Amma's* lap. Mangoes had fallen all along the sides of the road, spilled from small fingers, rolling under the wooden wheels as we bounced along. If you looked closely, you could see faint orange stains on the dirt road, but the aroma, God, that was something else. It smelled like the orchard, like *Amma's* hands, like burning clothes and summer skies. It healed wounds, made us forget. It was home. We called it *Aam Marg*."

Mango Street.

"I was awake when the doctor wiped the ashes away. Two of the village wrestlers had to hold me down by my shoulders while he stitched up the cut on my head. I recovered quickly, though, and

within a month I was back in the orchard, plunging into mangoes, lychees. It was as if I breathed ambrosia in the summer.”

He must have thought we'd fallen asleep by then, and he gently turned onto his back and closed his eyes.

“All for a mango,” he said quietly.