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White Coats and Black Magic

Supreetha Gubbala

In my village of Dodavaram, the fullness of one's life is measured in rice. Miles of perfectly aligned rice paddies flank the dirt road leading to my grandparents' home; feeding the aching bellies of our coconut farmers and fishermen when they return home at sundown. Each morning, steamed rice cakes with coconut chutney are piled on banana leaves snatched from the courtyard and each evening meal, plates are filled with hot rice, mangoes and fresh yogurt.

This place is the where my mother first stole ripened mangoes from a neighbor's yard, and where I took my first steps. It is a small village of about 100 families, but as a child, that acre of coconut trees around our home served as my entire world. I still find it difficult to find a happier memory in my life than that of sitting in the tall grass, feet just kissing the Bay of Bengal, as I folded strips of coconut leaves into toys for the day.

Life, however, had grander plans for me, and ten years and two continents later, I find myself in Marlborough, Massachusetts. It's November of 1998. I have decided that the first coat I want to own in America must contain purple fur, and discovered although not a single person in my family had ever seen it, there was in fact a word for snow in my native language of Telugu. "Manchu." It seemed perfectly formed for that strange white overgrowth that people insisted on calling snow. Although, we can't make yogurt from our own cow milk, we have discovered Daisy's Sour Cream and in this way, we find America to be even richer than we dreamed.

My mother becomes a modern woman. She packs "Cheki mix" in our lunches, questions my unhealthy relationship with "that Harika Putter;" and learns English from her first TV show: Days of Our Lives. I undergo a punk phase that never quite ends and become American right before her eyes. In a truly shocking turn of events, I, an Indian-American immigrant, choose to become: a doctor. If you didn't pick up on that; that was sarcasm.

In Dodavaram, there is just one village doctor. He has cabinets stacked with bottles of dark liquid and always smells like old pills capsules. We dreaded his arrival at my grandmother's house so much that he started to become a villain in our stories. Story goes that when my brother sliced his Achilles on the folding bed, the doctor stitched up the wound with no painkillers and a giant glob of brown liquid. This was my family's only experience of medicine.

So you can imagine my surprise when on the day of my white coat ceremony, I find a long note written in a card from my father. He tells me for the first time that his sister was planning to start medical school when his father suddenly passed away. As the eldest siblings they immediately did what they could to take care of the family. She got married and my dad found a way out of the village. "She never became a doctor," he wrote, "but it's funny, how life can come full circle like this."

These are the kind of people my family are. They believe in full circles; stars that align to predict the nature of a person and arranging bed frames to place one's head in the south rather than the north to avoid ill-fate. And you never cut your nails at night. In my family, nothing is a

coincidence, and everything is magic.

When we arrived back home after the ceremony, my mother ushered me into the living room. At this point, I am pretty familiar with what happens next. She lights a small flame, places it on a plate of rice grains and orbits it clockwise, then counter-clockwise around my head. As she finishes chanting, she takes salt in a closed fist, spits twice on it and then requests I do the same. Then she hurries into the backyard without speaking to anyone to throw the salt out.

This is how we remove the “evil eye,” the active villain of black magic that others can wish upon you, particularly when you have succeeded in a public way. My brother and I had experienced this ceremony after almost every major event in our lives and never stopped to consider it unusual. However, sometimes in life there are these moments where the entire absurdity of your existence can kind of smack you right in the face.

This was that moment. Sitting in my white coat watching my mother spit onto a fist full of salt, chanting with fervor for any God to protect me from the wrath of this evil eye, I finally felt my identity splinter in two. What was my mother actually doing? And where was I ever going to fit this black magic into medicine?

Over a year of medical school passes by, and the more I come to understand about disease, the less this magic, and my family’s way of life, seems to have a place in mine. Diabetes, cholesterol and heart disease were rampant in our family, and given that our diet primarily consisted of fried everything on rice, this was not a particularly shocking revelation for me. However, I felt I finally felt I had to tell my parents the hard truth. “Mom, Dad. Rice is a sugar,” I said to them on the living room floor where we ate dinner. “You should stop eating so much of it.” My mother actually teared up, and refused to hear anything further. So began a raging war between the world I was becoming a part of and the world that had raised me.

Two months later on Christmas, my mother loudly suggests I eat a South American berry to prevent myself from getting cancer. As I stare at the Step 1 oncology pages in front of me, I feel myself splitting again. “I hear cancer is not even real,” she yells in Telugu, “that people just say it’s a disease so they can make money from the drugs. Chemotherapy makes people sicker, you know. That’s what Dr. Oz said. Is that true?” I look out the window at the frigid Cape Cod landscape and sigh in exasperation.

“We aren’t stupid, you know.” She suddenly blurts out. I look up at her, and for the first time, I see she isn’t angry. She’s scared. Somehow in this war of facts versus beliefs, I never stopped to consider why they weren’t ever as eager as me to embrace the new known.

In my village of Dodovaram, the fullness of your life is measured in rice. To my family, rice was everything. It wasn’t part of a food pyramid. It was the fields that we played hide and seek in, to cool ourselves under the scorching sun; that flanked the dirt paths leading to my grandparents homes; that my father taught me how to tell a newly planted crop from an old one. It wasn’t about rice at all.

It was about wondering if we didn't have rice, what would we have left connecting us to this country we were from? And if we didn't eat rice together, what could they possibly have left in common with me?

"I know you are not stupid," I told her. "I'm sorry." I grab a napkin from the table and begin to pen out the basic cell cycle. Over the next hour, with Dr. Oz buzzing in the background, I slowly teach my mother the steps that could go wrong. One hallmark Christmas special later, she is satisfied. She turns to me during a commercial break. "So... if so many things can go wrong, it's a miracle we all don't have cancer!" She exclaimed proudly. I smile, and for the first time in a long time I say, "You're right, it is."

My parents have switched to brown rice. My father has finally agreed to very tentatively give statins a shot. And I still don't cut my nails at night. Sometimes when I fall asleep, I still crave the sticky, sweet taste of hot rice and mangoes and feel the cool water of the Bay of Bengal wrapping around my feet. And in this strange and tenuous truce, I have found a way to carry a little piece of black magic in the pockets of my white coat.