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Dining

by Marc DiPaolo

2003. Taste of India II, New Dorp Lane, State Island

“This is one of my favorite Indian restaurants. I’m really hoping you like it,” Vincent said, excitedly, to his mom and dad. He was twenty-seven and still living with his parents after returning home a college graduate.

“I can’t believe we went to an Indian restaurant,” Luigi said.

A wistful, nostalgic expression settled upon Carmella’s face. “You know, I had Indian food once, when I was in London. It was right around the time of the Kennedy assassination. I had some kind of curry. It was too spicy. I haven’t had any Indian food since.”

Vincent smiled, sympathetically. “Well, different restaurants put different amounts of spices in their food. I think Indian restaurants in America now expect Americans to have a low threshold for seasoning, so they don’t make the dishes too spicy. I bet if they had their druthers, they’d add tons of spices. But they know who they’re dealing with. So, it should be less spicy than what you had in England.”

Luigi flipped through the menu multiple times, looking frantically for a dish he recognized and not finding one. “Do they serve any hot open-faced sandwiches?” For some reason, whenever dad decided that he hated a restaurant, he usually felt a craving for hot open-faced sandwiches that weren’t actually on the menu. There were no other situations in life in which dad expressed any interest at all in hot open-faced sandwiches.

Vincent pointed at one of the pictures on the menu his father held. “I love chicken saag myself. Also, lamb vindaloo and lemon rice. Wait. No vindaloo for you. Too spicy. I’d recommend mango lassis for drinks and a serving of naan. The saag is my favorite. I could eat that every day. But any of those I mentioned are good options. Oh! I forgot chicken tikka masala. That’s fabulous. And we

don't have to order from the menu. If we go up to the buffet, we can sample a variety of dishes, and you can figure out for yourself what speaks to you."

"I've been worried about coming here for weeks," Carmella admitted. "I just wasn't sure I'd like it. I thought it would be too spicy."

"Well, isn't it time you tried it again? Fifty years is a very long time. Maybe your tastes have changed. I don't like the same foods now I did as a kid. I remember when we ate cake together one time, and you said it was too rich. I thought at the time, 'Only an adult with think any kind of cake is too rich.' Sadly, these days, I'm always bumping into cake that's too rich."

"I really think that I'll always find all Indian food too spicy."

"So, you avoided trying it a second time for fifty years? That's intense, Ma. What is that, 'Fool me once, shame on you, fool me twice, shame on me?'"



"It is way too cold in this place," Vincent's dad declared. He waved the waiter over.

"Oh, Dad, it isn't that cold," Vincent said, embarrassed already.

The waiter appeared by Dad's side. "Yes, sir?"

"What are you trying to do, freeze us to death?" Luigi asked a shocked and confused waiter.

Vincent provided a translation. "Can you adjust the air conditioning? It is too cold."

The waiter cleared his throat. "Ah, yes, sir. I will see what I can do." He walked off.

Vincent tried not to let the incident shake him up too much, but

he was already not enjoying the meal at all. "Listen, Ma, it took me three tries to figure out that I liked Indian food. The first time, I got something I didn't like and still don't like. The second time, I tried lamb vindaloo and thought that maybe I liked it. That was when I was almost about to decide to never have Indian food again. Then I met Anne, and she encouraged me to try again. She loves this."

"We have Anne to thank for this," Luigi muttered.

"When I tried lamb vindaloo again with Anne, I realized I liked on the second try. I had chicken saag for the first time, and it was love at first bite. And a mango lassi, which was sweet and not spicy and just magical. If I had given up on all Indian food after the first try, I'd have never met chicken saag and gone my whole life without knowing it even existed. And it would have been a big loss because chicken saag and I have had a passionate, many-years-long love affair. My life is all the richer for my torrid relationship with chicken saag. And if I had waited fifty years between each Indian meal, it would have taken me one-hundred-and-fifty years to discover chicken saag. And there would have been no affair."

Carmella looked furtively in the direction of the buffet. "I guess we should go up?"

The three went up to the buffet looking for food. Luigi got lots of nan, some white rice, and some chicken korma. Carmella decided to try the chicken saag, lamb vindaloo, and the lemon rice. Vincent got a sampling of all of his favorites. They sat down and found that the waiter had left three pint glasses of water and three mango lassis on the table. Carmella stared down at her plate, frightened.

"It is really good for you," Vincent said. "It has beta carotene."

Luigi tried his first. He ate a piece of chicken and chewed it slowly. "This is good," he declared. "Very, very good. But I never want to have it again."

Carmella bit into the chicken saag.

"Oh!" Vincent leaned forward. "What do you think?"

"Too spicy."

