

Tales from the East (Autobiographical): Jalebi

At the end of 1999, when the Western world was abuzz with the emergence of a dystopian Y2K era, life remained largely unaffected in the small coastal city of Karachi, Pakistan. A six or seven-year-old girl sat on a plastic stool in her tiny front yard. Her hands were sticky with sugary syrup, and her forehead was matted with small beads of sweat. A soft breeze ruffled her long open hair. Perched somewhere above her on naked electric cables, a crow cawed, eyeing the sweet treat in her hand. She carefully ate one coil at a time, savoring each bite. With every crunchy piece she broke off, her eyes lit up with pure joy from the adrenaline of sugar. The girl's mother reached over with a napkin to wipe her sticky hands and face. Fanning branches of the coconut tree in the yard shielded the mother-daughter from the harsh glare of the sun, and a gentle breeze every few minutes broke the stillness of their momentum.

"Razia beta, that's your third jalebi. That's enough. *Bas* no more, or you are going to be running around like a spinning yo-yo from the sugar rush," the mother gently reprimanded her young daughter.

"No, mama. I can eat a million jalebis, and I will be fine. Jalebi is like my medicine for everything. I love jalebi" her mother smiled at her daughter's innocence.

If I had a time-turner like Hermione in Harry Potter, this is the exact moment in time I would like to go back to. Eating jalebis with my Ami on our lawn in my childhood home in Karachi. No other care in the world. Just my sweet crispy companion, my Ami's smile, and the cool breeze of Karachi evenings. Karachi, my hometown, is Pakistan's coastal capital. If anyone has ever lived in a busy urban coastal city like Karachi, they will know that during the day, the weather is hot and humid, and the air is alive with the smell of gasoline fumes from the overload of cars, buses, rickshaws, and motorbikes, mingled with a robust balmy scent of the sea. Mixed

with the city's humidity and its poor air quality, it can get hard to breathe. But in the evenings Karachi is a different city. Often called the city of lights after dusk, the city lights up with the hustle and bustle of night markets and eateries, street food vendors, and hoards of people out and about to cool off in the cooler evening air. Evenings are remarkably cooler because of the sea breeze that blows from the direction of the Arabian sea. It provides much-needed relief from the day's hot weather and allows its people to enjoy the simple joys of life like a crispy jalebi in the cool evening air.

Jalebi is the name of sweet delicacy prepared with a wet dough that is deep-fried like a coiled fritter and then immersed in hot sugar syrup. If I was to describe it to someone who has no idea what I am rambling about, I would say it is a South-Asian version of an extremely sweet and crispy syrup-dipped funnel cake. Generally, I do not like comparing Jalebis to funnel cake because they are two very different desserts, except for their coiled shape. South-Asian foods have been compared to their western look-and-taste-alike foods, which has recently started the trend of fusion foods. However, my preference remains loyal to the authentic fresh and warm jalebi from the *mithai* shop. For me, it is not just a condiment; it's the feeling of belonging and of coming home.

When I was a young girl, about six or seven years old, my parents struggled financially a lot. Although half a kilogram of jalebi was a mere five rupees in the late 90s, my father could only afford to buy it once a week. He would always bring it on Wednesday. I recently asked him why he always got it on Wednesdays and not reserved it as a weekend treat? He replied that he wanted it to be our mid-week motivational boost. So that we have something in the middle of the week amidst our daily grind to look forward to. He was right because Wednesdays came as a breath of fresh air in the middle of the hot and challenging week. Overtime Wednesday became

my favorite day of the week, and it still is to this day. Thank you, baba, for making a midday weekday my favorite day. I remember doing my very best in school on Wednesdays so that later in the evening, when I would sit down with my parents, I could share the small achievements of my day at school with them. It is a priceless memory, one that I now spend over two thousand dollars on a ticket from Canada to Pakistan to reminiscence. My father still brings jalebi every Friday for my younger siblings in Karachi. Conversations have changed, of course; sometimes it is Facetime with me, and other times my not-so-young siblings sit around discussing Tiktok videos and the latest viral trends.

Somehow amidst the changing trends and the thousands of kilometers of distance between us, the Wednesday Jalebi still holds us together with its sugar syrup. To me, Jalebi is not merely a sweet dish. It is a depiction of life itself. Eating it one coil at a time, savoring each piece, and waiting to eat the meatiest center part in the last is like wading through life's maze one turn at a time. Like jalebi's spiral circular shape, life also tends to come around in circles deflecting us from the center again and again. But if, with patience, we keep navigating around, we are bound to find it was worth it. Those five rupees worth of Jalebi every Wednesday taught me to navigate life like a jalebi – with sweetness, some icky stickiness, and above all, with patience.