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Advanced Fiction Writing Portfolio

Original Story:

New Years

"Cheers to a New Year," the gold and black banner read as it was hanging in the living room. I stood staring at the tiny beer images with frothed tops and pondered which hat color I should pick. An array of magician-style hats was laid out on the table: pink, purple, green, gold, silver, blue, and black. My mouth salivated at the dessert table next to me: cheesecake, milk cakes, Kaju Katli (Indian cashew fudge), black forest cake, etc. I had only told my cousin to plan a new year's celebration this past morning, and he really thought of everything. I grabbed a green hat with certainty; I could use some grounding.

"Nana! You need a hat!" I said to my grandfather Yash, ecstatic that he managed to peel himself off his bed to celebrate New Year's with us.

"Ay Riya, I already wore this entire outfit just for you; I wore a black suit for the dress code. This pink hat isn't a part of the dress code!" My brother Sai and I laughed.

"But Nana, the hat is a part of the dress code! It doesn't have to be gold, silver, or black! Here it'll cover your bald spots." Sai said as he placed a bright pink hat on my grandfather's head.

"You people told me to wear black now it looks like I'm dressed for an antyeshti (funeral)!" My uncle Jai exclaimed in his entirely black-covered suit with a black scarf and shoes. My entire family erupted into laughter...

"Jai mama, nobody told you to wear all black! We told you black, silver, or gold!" I said as I tugged on my uncle's scarf.

"You said black!" Jai said.

"Acha acha (okay, okay), it's time to eat!" My cousin Rahul walked into the dining room with a wide array of meals.

Rahul spread out his arms so the Chicken Curry wouldn't spill onto his gold blazer and balanced a Dal Makhni (buttery lentils) and Aloo Gobi (potatoes and cauliflower) on top of it. My cousin's wife Meera followed behind with Rajma Chawal (beans and rice) and Matar Paneer (peas and cottage cheese with curry). As if this plethora of food was not enough, Rahul unpacked three trays of vegan chicken and skewers of vegan meat for us to enjoy. I inhaled the aromas below me, full of gratitude I hadn't had a yummy Indian vegetarian meal in ages.

"Wow, this is so much food!" Sai said.

"You guys said you wanted a celebration," Rahul replied.

"Are yaar (oh dear), it is only us eating! This is too much!" My mother Kareena said. She always has trouble finishing food, and too much of it gives her anxiety. I put my hand on hers and smiled.

"We are gonna finish it all, Mom, don't worry," I said.

We all sat down at the table and started scarfing down the food. My brother and I went for the vegan meat, and I was absolutely pleased with the results. Vegan meat is usually terribly seasoned and made in America; however, India's spice and flavoring are immaculate.

"It's so nice how we keep sitting all together for meals. Do you guys always do this?" Sai asked my extended family.

"No, we usually eat at different times, and Meera and I usually eat out after the office. We are only eating together because you all are here." Rahul replied.

"Oh, I see. Well, it's nice; we should do it every day." Sai said, his eyes carried a pang of longing.

My heart sank a bit. I envisioned our dining table back home, how the cream table had become nothing more than a storage space; we piled old books and items that had lost their homes. If ever a family member wanted to sit and eat there, we would push off the rubble and create a space to place a plate. However, my mother and I would often see Sai eating there alone, with his phone set against his water bottle, watching Breaking Bad. It wasn't that we were too busy to eat together; more like the items, our family dynamics no longer had a home at that dining table. However, we always found a way to reclaim territory and unload the storage to another area during the holidays. Thanksgiving called for the good china, champagne glasses, a plethora of food, and everyone sitting at the table eating. The one time when the empty places felt whole.

"Yes, of course! Breakfast and dinner." Rahul responded.

"OOoo, Mama! Mama!" Aarush, my baby cousin, exclaimed. His Nanny carried him to his mother, and Sai and I stared in shock.

"I thought he wasn't celebrating with us?" Sai asked.

"Yeah, I thought he was sleeping?" I asked.

"He wanted to come to say Happy New Year!" Meera replied. "Rahul, I'm going to the bathroom; take Aarush."

Meera walked out of the room, leaving Aarush's chubby-cheeked face in Rahul's arms. He was also in dress code with a black and gray checkered top and black pants. He began to drink a cup of coke, which his parents allowed him to routinely drink for some reason.

"So much coke; why do you keep letting him drink that? He may as well drink champagne." Kareena said.

Rahul smiled cheekily and glanced at the champagne, "He won't like it." he said.

"He's not gonna try it anyway," Sai said.

As we got distracted by our food, Rahul picked up the champagne bottle and began to pour a little bit for Aarush. He then started to run a little into his mouth,

"Rahul! What are you doing!" Meera exclaimed as she ran in. She took Aarush from him, and Rahul began to laugh.

"It was just a little bit; he would've realized he didn't like the taste and stopped reaching for it," Rahul said.

There always seemed to be alcohol around my cousins. When we went to lunch earlier today, they insisted on ordering a pitcher of mimosa and individual cocktails. The day before, at a restaurant, we requested at least three champagne bottles throughout the meal. I stared at the number of champagne bottles before us and remembered the six more in the fridge. I was not sure why they seemed to need the intoxication so much... I always remembered my cousins as the 'fun party cousins' when they were first newlyweds. However, things have changed; with a two-year-old child, I would assume that a sense of joy could've filled the hole they seemed to have inside them.

As we finished our meals, we brought the celebration to the patio. My cousin lit up a warm bonfire, and we all huddled up together and started to eat our desserts.

I had a little red heart filled with cream and tiramisu. Rahul swore I couldn't eat both, so I would quickly inhale them to prove him wrong.

The bonfire encircles us and dances around like violent arguments and avoidable mistakes. The smell of the fire carries into our noses, and the smoke follows our laughter as we decide, maybe just for today, to be here. To love, for the sake of loving.

"Ooo, it's so cold." My mother rocked from side to side rubbing her arms inside her bright rose gold sweater, filled with goosebumps, and then stopped and stared at my bare arms.

"You're not cold?!" Kareena asked.

"Yes, I am. I have your genetics, unfortunately." I sighed and put on my light brown sweater. "Now I'm out of dress code!" I exclaimed.

"Haha!" Kareena said.

"You guys are crazy. It's India; it's not cold." Sai shook his head.

My mother and I cuddled up under a blanket; I stared at Meera and Rahul, his arms wrapped around her with one champagne glass full in their hands. Aarush had gone off to bed, and they almost looked like the newlyweds they once were. They had the same love and adoration but with a greater sense of care for themselves and others like they suddenly had someone to live for.

I looked around, all drinking more champagne. They wanted to finish up the bottles that they had in storage today. We opened two more bottles, goodness gracious, all obligated to drink.

"You guys are so cute together! And both Capricorns!" I said.

"Oh god, no more astrology," Sai said with a facepalm.

"No, no, no, I want to know everything. Tell me, Joshi (astrologer), you were going to tell me my chart. Do it for Rahul and me."

"No, that's all bullshit," Rahul said. I forgot how much I hated Rahul's attitude. His mannerisms, sense of denial, and marriage to logic.

Sai used to carry a similar sense of rejection for things outside his scientific realm of possibilities. I recalled the days Sai would shout at me for repeatedly bringing up astrology and absolutely refuse to get a reading from my tarot cards. If you don't believe me, I wondered what

the harm is? I would shout, I would be an audience for your magician's card tricks? What's the difference? He would call back; It's different. Case closed.

"I'm not describing anything with Rahul's attitude," I said. It was something I no longer had to put up with, especially by more extensive versions of the family members I fell short of at home.

"Rahul, enough, okay! Joshi, please, tell me!" Meera said.

She's lucky I actually like her.

After two or three champagne glasses were devoured for each person, my uncle and grandfather bid adieu. My mother, brother, cousin, cousin's wife, and I were certifiably quite tipsy and had tiffs about astrology.

"No, no, no, Kareena Ji! You do not act like a Leo! I know Leo's; you are not one. You're a Gemini!" Meera said.

"I told you she's not a Leo; she has a Leo stellium, meaning three or more planets in one sign! So she has Leo qualities!" I said.

Meera made this defiant face, similar to Rahul's at times; she nodded from side to side.

"No, no, no, I'm like Leo, not her."

"Okay, Meera didi (female cousin) read me. Do I act like a Libra?" I asked.

"I don't know astrology, but I can give you my impression of you, Riya," Meera said.

My stomach churned. I worried about what I had asked for; I suddenly felt Rahul and Meera's eyes drilling into me. I looked to the fire for protection, but the warm embers only swirled to reminisce about the past, not protect the present. Rahul and Meera never shied away from their version of the truth and spoke with brutal honesty. I asked with nothing left but a vulnerable skin and an overly tipsy mind.

"Okay, what's the impression?"

"You are very malleable. No matter what situation you're in, you can move your shape to fit it." Meera said.

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"You are easy to control," Rahul replied.

Her words flew to my chest and exploded throughout my body. I felt frozen.

"No, it's not a bad thing. You just keep everything to yourself. You are very quiet and serious, and you will do anything you are told. You are easy to control and maintain." Meera said.

I didn't have any words. I just had to sit and stare and feel bombs of memories blow up in my body.

Meera began to seem worried that she had upset me and tried to go back on her words; however, it was too late.

When I was very young, I threw fits in the house whenever things wouldn't go my way. One evening, at about five years old, I came back to a dining table full of freshly cooked food and ten family members and discovered my seat had been taken from my third cousin. I was so upset by this action I broke down into tears and ran into the other room. I refused to eat dinner and could not even eat my favorite meal, Rajma Chawal with Achaar (rice and beans with pickles). I watched television in my uncle's room while tears as big as rainfall cascaded down my face. Not long after, Meera walked in with Rajma Chawal, Achaar, and Yogurt and spoon-fed me the meal while I sat there quietly, refusing to cry in front of her. I always remember that moment... She was an ally. Another outsider in the family, never quite fitting in, but told to remain quiet and be malleable with my uncle and grandfather to stay married to my cousin.

I wonder if she knew why I acted the way I did when I was younger, I wonder if she knew what the effects of having bipolar disorder were.

Sai stared at me as I sat there frozen; I get lost in memories when I am hurt, disassociating from the present.

"She's not malleable; you don't know what it's like to have her as a child," Kareena said. Not sure if that was helpful, as I know she is referring to my explosions of manic episodes, as we both know she prefers the controlled and malleable version of me.

"She's changed a lot since she was younger," Rahul said.

"We all change; we mature, haven't you both? You guys definitely don't party as much as before." I said.

"Of course not," Rahul said.

"How does it feel like being parents?" I said.

"I guess we used to live and do things without caring. We would travel and drink, and now, I have never loved someone so much. I love my parents and family, but now Aarush comes above them. Aarush comes above me; I've never experienced that." Meera said.

Sai and I glanced at each other in an understanding; I think we both had apprehensions about Meera's motherhood. She was ineligible to carry children years back and had to pay a surrogate to have Aarush; she had stomach damage due to excessive alcohol drinking. My uncle and grandfather, though, refused to not carry their lineage. Therefore, she was inherently forced to have a child.

"You know if anyone is malleable, it's Sai!" I said.

"No, no, Sai is not malleable. He's tough; he can't be pushed around." Rahul said.

Why, because he's a man?

I picked up the champagne bottle and began pouring drinks for everyone, trying to bring my power back to the table.

"He used to follow me around when I was a kid, and he would do anything I said. He will do anything I ask and anything my mom asks. This family has powerful women, like Meera." I said. I felt guilty. I ran my brother under the bus to make a getaway unscathed. However, I don't think that he had said anything to negate their assumptions about me, and there was nothing untrue in my statement.

"You just don't know me; I cannot be controlled. I always do what I want." I said. Sai's face hung down, and his eyes looked like they were spinning internally as if he was watching a memory, consoling himself from the trigger I just shot to him.

I wonder what he's thinking.

Jai Mama and Yash Nana walked out to the patio just as we were lost in thought.

"We came to say Happy New Year! Ten seconds!" Jai Mama said with an exhausted look in his eyes.

We all screamed, "Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one, HAPPY NEW YEAR!!!"

I hugged my Nana extremely tight and thought don't let go, don't let go. I never seemed to form a close-knit relationship with him as I grew older, but I've loved his tiny munchkin self in the past few years.

"Nana, Happy New Year!! A brand new year, you must come to America and see us next year!" I said.

My grandfather's eyes went down to his feet, and he shook his head in worry. "I am so old; I will only go to one place after this. I'm tired." He pointed upwards with his right finger.

My chest began to sting. "Nana, don't say that!" I said.

Since my grandmother passed, my grandfather has not been sleeping and barely leaves the house.

"You can't leave; we barely have talked," I said. I hugged my grandfather closely and watched the bonfire underneath us. It screamed and shouted, forgive, forget, forgive, forget.

We cleaned up and walked back into the dining room as we all finished rejoicing. There was leftover food on the dining table and empty plates with leftover frosting hanging over.

"We have to finish the rest of the bottles!" Rahul said.

"How many more?" Sai asked.

"I think 4?" Meera said.

"We are tapped out!" Kareena said, along with my Yash and Jai.

"Good night!" I said.

Meera grabbed my arm, put her left finger over her mouth, and made a shushing sound, and she pulled me upstairs. I went inside their bathroom and laid down on their mahogany sheets in their massive king bed for a minute. Meera laid down and gave me a hug.

"Come, I brought you here to get the hookah," Meera said.

"Hookah?" I asked.

"Yes! Come, help me!" Meera said.

I picked up a large light blue hookah machine and watched as Meera grabbed the other one. One hooked up on either side of the bed for husband and wife.

"Do you guys do this in your room often?" I asked.

"Every night, we drink one bottle of Rosé and smoke hookah," Meera said.

"Why?" I asked.

"Why not?" Meera said.

We quickly brought the hookah machines down while Sai and Rahul opened up bottles. I promised myself I wouldn't drink more and let them continue tempting me on this trip, but it's New Years?

"We have to finish all of these? And we are smoking hookah now?" Sai asked.

"Yes, boring, come on!" Meera said.

I clinked glasses with Sai and gave him an, Are you okay? Look. He nodded.

"I wish you had seen Riya when she was younger. She was so outspoken and ecstatic that she was always breaking something? Every time you came home, something was broken." Rahul said. He was laughing as he was blowing large puffs out of the hookah machine, yet I don't think anyone else found his comments amusing.

"I was here when she was younger!" Meera replied.

"Guys, breaking things isn't good," Sai said.

Sai jumped in, and my eyes shot up in disbelief.

Protection?

"Oh Sai, I mean, she was outspoken. You were both more comedic, but now you have become so serious. One time, I came home, and she was in the middle of a table just like that."

Rahul pointed to a table in the middle of the living room. It was a large circular glass table with white pointy feet underneath it.

"She had jumped into the table while we were gone, and she was just standing at the middle table, smiling," Rahul said.

"Oh no.." Meera said.

"You were fearless, always yelling, never taking no for an answer. You, Sai, laugh all the time. Dancing, making jokes, asking what everything means."

"I went through things, we both did; you don't know anything about our past," I said.

"I do; I know more than you think I do, your mother tells me."

The smoke from the hookah danced in between the four of us; I blew at it when it came in front of me and then took a large puff of the hookah.

"I did those things because I was sick. I was manic when I was yelling or even in a mixed episode; I was young and had no control over my emotions. For most of my life, I didn't have control. I had to get some control."

"I know that, but that's not what I mean-" Rahul said.

"I think it's time for bed," I said.

Sai and I got up and began to pick up the empty champagne bottles, Meera had started to fall asleep on Rahul's shoulder, and we gathered the Hookah machines and handed them to Rahul.

"Happy New Year, Sai and Riya," Rahul said. He carried up the light blue machines, and Meera waved us goodbye.

Sai and I began to set up the sofa bed, and my dizzy head flopped onto the blue comforter and started to drift off to bed. I felt contentment of being at the right amount of drunk, with a full stomach, and my sugar cravings satisfied.

"I wish I grew up here," Sai said.

I immediately raised my head, my brother rarely shares his feelings with me, so whenever he does, I jump at the opportunity to learn as much as possible.

"Why?" I said.

"Because, all the things Rahul says, I used to always play devil's advocate like him. The mannerism of Uncle Jai and Rahul... I never feel like I fit in at home. Dad, he's just nothing like me."

Dad, a disgrace, truly unmentionable.

"I feel like I'd understand myself so much more if I lived here. I don't talk like Rahul and Jai mama do anymore, but I would be able to understand why I do the things I do." Sai said.

"Yeah, the way you talk to Jai Mama, you guys can talk about anything and everything. And he argues with me the way you do."

"I didn't like what Rahul said about you. But you can't let it bother you; they're just saying it because they don't know you, just like I didn't let what you said bother me." Sai said.

"Sorry," I said.

I sighed and felt a spasm of guilt again.

"It's okay."

"Sometimes, I feel like I'm two different people, the person I was before meds and the person I am now. I've been trying to work through it in therapy, wondering why I've become so passive." I said.

"I think you are stressed because you are trying so hard to become oneself with a bunch of selves. Just be yourself. It's not that complicated." Sai said.

He doesn't get it. If it was so simple, he wouldn't act like two different selves between our family and his friends.

"Right. Well, it's late, time for bed... And Sai, Happy New Year." We shut the lights off and said goodbye to 2021.

Revised Story:

Astrayed on New Year's Eve

On New Year's eve, I found myself curled up on the bed with a mahogany mattress wrapped around me in the basement of my uncle's house in India. I read the front of my '2021' planner, "Wholeness Not Perfection," and "You can be the Greatest." These were the mantras I was supposed to live by and learn from throughout 2021. However, I don't feel like I've accomplished anything this year. I had several goals to create a youtube channel or continue my podcast about mental health, but here I am with nothing to show for it. Why? Because I am a fucking chicken. Trials and errors of recorded and un-uploaded youtube videos haunt me, and my several podcast drafts give me palpitations. I tell myself it's better if they don't see or hear them; nobody wants to listen to a mentally ill girl complain about her life. But if I am not a mentally ill girl sharing her experiences with others to help them, then what am I?

Sometimes I feel that if I can't be something great in this world, like the best writer or famous motivational speaker, or a successful actress, I may as well be absolutely nothing. I don't mean dead, of course! This isn't some Shakespearean tragedy where Lady Macbeth loses everything (even her mind and her life) to achieve unattainable power. No, the girl becomes a fog that travels; obligations and events swallow her voice and emotions to remain unscathed to not 'bother' others. I promised I was nothing; I screamed inside every time I encountered someone, "I'm nothing!" But maybe that's because I'm so deeply terrified of being something.

My mother Kareena hurriedly ran into the room; she was wearing a pink and gold dress that I had gifted her for Christmas. She had this giddy look on her face as she ran around the room in her new dress. I got that from a clothing store usually populated with people in their

early twenties; she only seems to like young people's clothing, something about preserving her youth.

"Eya, we need to get ready; what are you doing?" My mother asked.

"I'm just reflecting," I replied.

I peeled myself off the bed and crawled to my suitcase lying on the floor. I did not want to dress up or celebrate tonight; I did not feel that the year I had just passed through was a year worth celebrating. I slipped on a shimmery gold bodysuit that I had worn several years ago; it didn't fit me properly, my bust came out, and my bloated stomach was tightened, but I didn't have time to go shopping this past semester. I don't even remember having time for sleeping, eating, or even personal time. Now in this crowded and over-populated house, I feel suffocated.

Walking up to the first floor, I was welcomed with a fully decorated living room. "Cheers to a New Year," the gold and black banner read. An array of magician-style hats was laid out on the table: pink, purple, green, gold, silver, blue, and black. I stood staring at the tiny beer images with frothed tops and pondered which hat color I should pick. My mouth salivated at the dessert table next to me: cheesecake, milk cakes, Kaju Katli, black forest cake, etc. I had only told my cousin to plan a new year's celebration this past morning, and he really thought of everything. I grabbed a green hat with certainty. This was the night I would remain in the present moment, no dwindling in regrets of the past year, but I will be here to celebrate 2022 and everything it could possibly have in store for me.

My uncle Jai sauntered in and did a 360-flip to show me his outfit. He smiled with his freshly shaven face, wore an entirely black-covered suit with a black scarf and shoes, and topped it off with a silver hat.

"You people told me to wear black now it looks like I'm dressed for an antyeshti!" Uncle Jai exclaimed.

"Jai mama, nobody told you to wear all black! We told you black, silver, or gold!" I said as I tugged on my uncle's scarf.

"You said black!" Jai said.

"Acha acha, it's time to eat!" My cousin Rahul walked into the dining room with a wide array of meals.

Rahul spread out his arms so the Chicken Curry wouldn't spill onto his gold blazer and balanced the plates of dal makhani and aloo gobi on top of it. My cousin's wife Meera followed with plates of Rajma Chawal and matar paneer. I'm unsure if they knew or not, but these are some of my favorite Indian meals. The Dal Makhni's herbs filled my nose as I admired the creamy white sauce spiraled around the dal filled with spices and lentils. The matar paneer's cubed cottage cheese made my mouth salivate as the green peas floated around the spicy curry. My favorite Rajma Chawal almost jumped off the bowl as I grabbed it first; it's been my favorite meal for ages. I grabbed a dollop of the Indian mixed pickle called achar, a cup of dahi, an Indian yogurt that offsets the spice, and filled my mouth with the kidney beans and rice from the meal. As if this plethora of food was not enough, Rahul unpacked three trays of plant-based chicken and skewers of other plant-based meat for us to enjoy. The skewers looked exactly like steak, beef, or chicken!

My brother, Sai, stood up and gathered different types of plant-based skewers and laid them out on his plate. His glasses hung over his nose as his brown eyes grew wide,

"Wow, this is so much food!" Sai said.

"You guys said you wanted a celebration," Rahul replied.

"Are yaar, it is only us eating! This is too much!" My mother Kareena said. She always has trouble finishing food, and too much of it gives her anxiety.

"We are gonna finish it all, Mom, don't worry," I said.

We all sat down at the table and scarfed down the food. My brother and I went for the plant-based meat, and I was absolutely pleased with the results. Plant-based meat is usually terribly seasoned when made in America; however, India's spice and flavoring are immaculate.

"It's so nice how we keep sitting all together for meals. Do you guys always do this?" Sai asked my extended family.

"No, we usually eat at different times, and Meera and I usually eat out after the office. We are only eating together because you all are here." Rahul replied.

"Oh, I see. Well, it's nice; we should do it every day." Sai's eyes carried a pang of longing.

My heart sank a bit. I envisioned our dining table back home, how the cream table had become nothing more than a storage space; we piled old books and items that had lost their homes. If ever a family member wanted to sit and eat there, we would push off the rubble and create a space to place a plate. However, my mother and I would often see Sai eating there alone, with his phone set against his water bottle, watching *Breaking Bad*. It wasn't that we were too busy to eat together; more like the items, our family dynamics no longer had a home at that dining table. However, we always found a way to reclaim territory and unload the storage to another area during the holidays. Thanksgiving called for the good china, champagne glasses, a plethora of food, and everyone sitting at the table eating. The one time when the empty places felt whole.

Rahul ran upstairs and brought down an unexpected surprise. In his arms was his son Dhruv, my baby cousin. He was also in dress code with a black and gray checkered top and black

pants. He has these gumdrop cheeks, a cheeky smile, and brown hair that is always pushed to the side, just like his father's.

Meera and Rahul's marriage brought on a heavyweight onto this family. My uncle brought on a heap of turmoil onto my cousin when he rejected Meera countless times during their engagement. Rahul found it imperative for his entire family to bless the marriage before they had a wedding, but Jai's uncle would not agree due to her 'party girl' habits. Meera did not represent the 'perfect Indian woman,' which, in my opinion, is characterized as a woman who will help cook around the house, clean, and be a family woman. They also didn't like how Meera's drinking habits influenced Rahul and how he seemed to be partying more with his girlfriend. However, I saw Rahul as a partier from the start, but the external woman was blamed in this situation.

The truth was, Meera did not want kids, it was not in her nature, and her stomach was too wrought with alcohol to be able to carry one. This was something the family could not accept. Eventually, the family had to put their differences aside and allow the marriage. Rahul would either dismiss his family and spend time outside with his girlfriend or sob in front of his father, asking why he won't allow him to have love in his life. The unblessed marriage brought tension into the house that never quite dissipated; it wafted through every family dinner until Rahul and Meera started eating their dinners after the office. The energy in the house didn't change until the child, the newborn Meera never wanted, was born into this household. The little child is the only sign of life in this house, so he's treated like a prince. The family managed to convince Meera to bring Dhruv into this world through a surrogate.

Dhruv began to drink a cup of coke, his favorite drink, which his parents allowed him to drink. Their way of disciplining their child was just to give in so he would stop crying. The coke drinking began with a few sips here and there, now half of the can at a time.

"So much coke, He may as well drink champagne," Kareena said.

Rahul smiled cheekily and glanced at the champagne, "He won't like it." he said.

"He's not gonna try it anyway," Sai said.

As we got distracted by our food, Rahul picked up the champagne bottle and began to pour a little bit for Aarush. He then started to run a little into his mouth,

"Rahul! What are you doing!" Meera exclaimed as she noticed. She took Aarush from him, and Rahul began to laugh.

"It was just a little bit; he would've realized he didn't like the taste and stopped reaching for it," Rahul said.

There always seemed to be alcohol around my cousins. When we went to lunch earlier today, they insisted on ordering a pitcher of mimosa and individual cocktails. The day before, at a restaurant, we requested at least three champagne bottles throughout the meal. I stared at the number of champagne bottles before us and remembered the six more in the fridge. After two years of having Dhruv, I anticipated they would give up their excessive drinking habits and slow down a bit.

My uncle collected a generous heaping of every meal onto his plate, ate some Rajma Chawal with his hands, and licked his fingers clean.

"So, Riya, how is school going?" He asked while continuing to eat.

I sat hunched over, staring at my plate as I moved the matar and the paneer around in my plate and stabbed a plant-based chicken a few times with my fork. I knew what he wanted to

hear: I was preparing for law school, medical school, or business. Either that or headed for a stable job in the future. Well, at this rate, maybe I should, I had so many dreams and plans, and now I feel like I am headed nowhere, to nothing. I responded, as usual, that school was fine, and I was preparing for my future, feeling stressed out. Thus, routinely, my uncle decided to bring out the anticipatory big guns of pitting me against my brother.

"You live too much in your anxieties; Sai is always living logically; he only cares about logic; that's why he will always be successful." Jai mama said.

Jai mama invariably brought in information about how my mother and I live too much in our 'anxiety' and that every tension or worry should be shot down by just 'not thinking about it.' I had a sharp glass shard poking at my chest every time I thought about my future. My dreams of working in television consisted of working twelve-hour days in measly jobs for an indefinite amount of years until I could get my break and write for a television show one day. However, to Jai Mama, that was all ruminations I created in my mind, the physical self that 'could never be successful.'

"They are not anxieties, Jai Mama; they are called emotions. Just because I have more emotions than Sai doesn't mean that I cannot be successful. In fact, that will make me more successful in the creative world." I replied tensely, still moving my food around my plate.

Jai mama proceeded to do the laugh he does when he feels embarrassed or when he has gotten caught. I find it irritating. A way to lighten the mood instead of addressing the tension in the conversation. My mother possesses the same laughter and taught me that emotions make you weak from a very young age. Now I know where she gets it from.

"Oh, Riya, I didn't mean you couldn't be successful. But in the long run, this type of mentality is the most effective! I am saying you must learn from Sai!" Jai mama said.

Usually, I stayed quiet, left the room, or shifted the conversation to another topic. However, I am twenty-one freaking years old. I decided it was high time I stood up for myself.

"Not confessing your emotions and covering them up with logic is not good in the long run. In fact, that mentality can bring you to severe depression or lead you to drugs or alcohol in search of 'feeling something.' Continually releasing and allowing your emotions to come out is the most effective way to succeed." I said.

My uncle continued to eat and put his head down. He could tell by my tone that he had crossed a line. Sai continued to play with Dhruv. He could hear the conversation but refused to engage. He never seems to stand up for me. Be too emotional, sure, but the jabs cut deeper because my family knows about my bipolar disorder. He knows that his way of coping with emotions isn't healthy either. I spent my life trying to regulate my feelings, and to no avail, though I continue to try.

However, my brother copes with life differently. He shuts away his emotions and suppresses anything difficult, and he has spent his life having nothing but positive phrases and affirmations thrown at him. Therefore, he does not know how to deal with disappointment or failure. Recently, Sai had even developed a bit of a drinking problem in college. My mother told me he was found at a party, passed out after drinking too much, and had to be rushed to the hospital. Sai was not afraid of telling the mother who had coddled him from birth, but he was scared to disclose it to me. However, nobody in the family ever found out. To them and my family, he was and always will be Mr. Perfect.

As we finished our meals, we brought the celebration to the patio. My cousin lit up a warm bonfire, and we all huddled up together and ate our desserts.

I had a little red heart filled with cream and tiramisu. Rahul swore I couldn't eat both, so I'd decided to inhale them to prove him wrong.

My mother and I cuddled up under a blanket; I stared at Meera and Rahul, his arms wrapped around her with one champagne glass full in their hands. Aarush had gone off to bed, and they almost looked like the newlyweds they once were. We were all drinking more champagne. They wanted to finish up the bottles that they had in storage today. We opened two more bottles, all obligated to drink.

"No, no, no, Kareena Ji! You do not act like a Leo! I know Leo's; you are not one. You're a Gemini!" Meera said.

"I told you she's not a Leo; she has a Leo stellium, meaning three or more planets in one sign! So she has Leo qualities!" I said.

Meera made this defiant face, similar to Rahul's at times; she nodded from side to side. "No, no, no, I'm like Leo, not her."

"Oh god, no more astrology," Sai said with a facepalm.

"No, that's all bullshit," Rahul said. I forgot how much I hated Rahul's attitude. His mannerisms, sense of denial, and marriage to logic.

Sai used to carry a similar sense of rejection for things outside his scientific realm of possibilities. I recalled the days Sai would shout at me for repeatedly bringing up astrology and absolutely refuse to get a reading from my tarot cards. If you don't believe me, I wondered what the harm is?

I would shout, "I would be an audience for your magician's card tricks? What's the difference?"

He would call back; "It's different" Case closed.

"Okay, Meera, didi read me. Do I act like a Libra?" I asked.

"I don't know astrology, but I can give you my impression, Riya," Meera said.

My stomach churned a bit. I'm not sure how accurate this impression could be since Meera doesn't really know me. But still, for some reason, her opinion mattered to me. She knows a portion of me from times when I was once a thirteen-year-old fashionista who wore too much makeup. Then, a seventeen-year-old unsure about her future, and now a twenty-one-year-old who is driven by only one thing, a slice of hope that someday she will become something.

"What's your impression?" I asked.

"I wish Dhruv was like this. You are malleable. I know no matter what happens, you will go with the flow and say yes." Meera said. Her eyes drooped down as she twirled her big brown hair in her freshly manicured finger.

Rahul chuckled, "Yeah, Dhruv will not do anything he doesn't want to do; he's strong."

Rahul never seemed to want kids when he was younger. His forehead used to spin into wrinkles like hot rollers whenever my brother and I used to act out when we were younger. If we were too noisy or were jumping around too much, we were reprimanded immediately and shot down. I despised his chuckle, a smart alec who believed he was always right.

"What exactly do you mean by malleable?" I asked, leaning forward in deep annoyance.

"Easy to control," Rahul said.

Meera immediately overlapped Rahul's words and shouted, "No, no, no, that's not what I meant."

I felt humiliated. Sure I feel disoriented, but that does not mean that I have completely forgotten my sense of self. I remained in solitude throughout this trip, not because I wanted to be malleable but because I knew what I needed to do to survive. One minute we are having a

peaceful conversation, but soon a shot is flying from one's tongue to the other's ears. From my house at home to here, I'm never safe. I have to be malleable. I have to roll with the punches. There's no point in speaking up. I never seem to win.

"No, it's not a bad thing. You just keep everything to yourself. You are very quiet and serious, and you will do anything you are told. You are easy to control and maintain." Rahul added as he noticed I had grown quiet.

Meera began to seem worried that she had upset me and tried to go back on her words; however, it was too late.

When I was very young, I threw fits in the house whenever things wouldn't go my way. One evening, at about five years old, I came back to a dining table full of freshly cooked food and ten family members and discovered my seat had been taken from my third cousin. I was so upset by this action I broke down into tears and ran into the other room. I refused to eat dinner and could not even eat my favorite meal, Rajma Chawal with Achaar. I watched television in my uncle's room while tears as big as rainfall cascaded down my face. Not long after, Meera walked in with Rajma Chawal, Achaar, and Yogurt and spoon-fed me the meal while I sat there quietly, refusing to cry in front of her. She was an ally. Another outsider in the family, never quite fitting in, but told to remain quiet and be malleable with my uncle to stay married to my cousin. I always remember that moment...

I wonder if she knew why I acted the way I did when I was younger, I wonder if she knew what the effects of having bipolar disorder were.

Sai sat quietly with his hands crossed over his chest as I sat there frozen.

"She's not malleable; you don't know what it's like to have her as a child," Kareena said.

Then, she prefers the controlled and malleable version of me.

You know if anyone is malleable, it's Sai!" I said.

"No, no, Sai is not malleable. He's tough; he can't be pushed around." Rahul said.

"Why, because he's a man?" I said.

I picked up the champagne bottle and began pouring drinks for everyone.

"He used to follow me around when I was a kid, and he would do anything I said. He will do anything I ask and anything my mom asks. This family has powerful women, like Meera." I said. I felt guilty. However, he hadn't said anything to negate their assumptions about me, and there was nothing untrue in my statement.

"You just don't know me; I cannot be controlled. I always do what I want." I said.

Sai's face hung down, and his eyes looked like they were spinning internally as if he was watching a memory.

Jai Mama and Yash Nana walked out to the patio just as we were lost in thought.

"We came to say Happy New Year! Ten seconds!" Jai Mama said with an exhausted look in his eyes.

We all screamed, "Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one, HAPPY NEW YEAR!!!"

We cleaned up and walked back into the dining room as we all finished rejoicing. There was leftover food on the dining table and empty plates hanging over frosting.

Meera grabbed my arm, put her left finger over her mouth, and made a shushing sound, and she pulled me upstairs. I went inside their bathroom and laid down on their mahogany sheets in their massive king bed for a minute. Meera laid down and gave me a hug on the enormous king bed for a minute.

"Come, I brought you here to get the hookah," Meera said.

"Hookah?" I asked.

"Yes! Come, help me!" Meera said.

I picked up a large light blue hookah machine and watched as Meera grabbed the other one. One hooked up on either side of the bed for husband and wife.

"Do you guys do this in your room often?" I asked.

"Every night, we drink one bottle of Rosé and smoke hookah," Meera said.

"Why?" I asked.

"Why not?" Meera said.

I promised myself I wouldn't drink more and let them continue tempting me on this trip. But I can't seem to say no. Each time I drink, my brain taunts me, reminding me that the alcohol worsens the episodes. I am prone to cycle between episodes of mania and depression and fall from high highs to low lows. I want to enjoy this vacation and release the stress from the semester. Don't I deserve that much?

"We have to finish all of these? And we are smoking hookah now?" I asked.

"Yes, boring, come on!" Meera said.

We rushed down the cream spiraling stairs. I twirled my fingers around the slide my cousin and his wife tried to build for the stairs. They wanted to have Dhruv be able to slide down whenever he wanted to, but also Rahul wanted an adult slide for his enjoyment. Sure, parents cannot wait to age, and others crave their inner child.

"I wish you had seen Riya when she was younger. She was so outspoken and ecstatic that she was constantly breaking something. Ham ghar aate hain aur achanak ham dekhate hain ki kuchh toota hua hai!" Rahul yelled to us as we sauntered in with our hookah machines and Rosé.

He laughed cheekily, his eyes bright and his annoying smile that stretched from ear to ear. Yet, I don't think anyone else found his comments amusing.

"Yes, we have always heard this story before," I said. I saw the image in my head of a poem I had written in the semester previously. One line repeated in my head, "destruction, destruction, that's all she is." The number of times I've come to India and the same quips are repeated, Riya the destructor, Riya the demolisher.

"Acha! She was always breaking something?" Meera asked. She raised up and put her elbows on the table, smiling and holding my hands to ease my tension.

"I was not always breaking something. You don't know what I was going through at that time." I said.

"Yes, you were. You don't remember! Plus, I know more than you think I do. Your mother tells me everything." Rahul replied.

Sai's focus has clearly shifted from his inner mind to the present scenario, but he delivered a noisy belch and did not even say excuse me after, "You know," he remarked, patting his chest, "She's still pretty clumsy."

I pushed him backward, spilling a bit of Rosé on his shirt, "Not helping!"

"One time, I came home, and she was in the middle of a table just like that," Rahul said.

Rahul pointed to a table in the middle of the living room. It was a large circular glass table with white pointy feet underneath it.

"She had jumped into the table while we were gone, and she was just standing at the middle table, smiling," Rahul said.

"I don't recall that happening, but I must've felt really impulsive to do so," I said.

The smoke from the hookah danced in between the four of us; I blew on it when it came in front of me and then took a large puff of the hookah.

"You should become like that more. You were a troublemaker, but I liked how outspoken you were back then. I respected you more." Rahul said.

He rested his head back on Meera's shoulder. She did not comment and collected the champagne glasses and empty champagne bottles. Sai's head hung over the chair as he started to fall asleep. I looked over the glass table and imagined the little girl with wide eyes and short black hair and brown skin standing in the middle of the table, ecstatic or confused at her achievement? I wasn't lying when I said I don't remember the incident, but I sympathized with her. I remember the days I was unmedicated and manic. The line between a civilized action and the desired action blurred throughout my childhood. It is not a place I ever want to go back to. My eyes glazed over to the massive packet of 'at-home herbal remedies' for bipolar that my uncle had printed for me a few days ago. Everybody wanted to fix me, my family, extended family, society, and school.

"I'm so sick of everyone having their opinions on me." As I stood and began gathering my comfy jacket and phone, I said, "With all due respect, nobody in this family knows me, and I'm tired of having to hold my tongue every time we meet to keep the peace. I don't want to be that girl anymore, and I especially don't want to be the person Uncle Jai wants me to be. I don't know who I am, but it's definitely not the troublemaker or the person constantly causing destruction everywhere. I'm-I'm exhausted. I can't be here anymore, I-just-goodnight." I said; I stormed off to the basement and proceeded to beg my mother to allow me to sleep with her tonight. I couldn't sleep in the living room or be around my cousins anymore. Her wrinkled eyes fluttered as she coaxed me for waking her up, but she begrudgingly moved to the side for me to

rest. I sat on the bed and picked up my 2020 planner again. I opened up a random page that read, "Record Podcast, Record Youtube, Apply for Internships, Apply for Jobs, no checkmarks." I guess I had passed on the checkmarks, "Find a therapist, get a theater minor, adopt a cat, learn piano, work on my mental health." My fingers touched the words, and I smiled. I grabbed my red pen and crossed out all the empty check-marked goals. I then rolled up the planner and threw it in the trash.

Revision Essay:

I decided to revise a lot of my story, which is evident in the revised story. My first prerogative was to incorporate the narrator's voice more and make Riya's journey clear throughout the story. I wrote in her thoughts, going deeper into her psyche and why each comment or event impacted her the way it did. Next, I thought it would be interesting to incorporate times alone with her; the moments where she is inspecting her planner may seem benign, but to Riya, her work is her entire life, and her planner is like her bible. However, the most critical aspect of Riya's narrative is seeing her skewed perspective of how she views her family. She victimized herself on numerous occasions and has an abundance of low self-esteem, making it easy for her to assume that everyone else is on the attack. Riya can play the unreliable narrator, a theme that I think is recurring in the novel I want to write. Further, she repeatedly notices the depression or tensions her extended family is going through with their interpersonal problems, yet she doesn't address this but instead cares only for herself.

The following important part of my revision was to add descriptions and details about the other characters. I cut out the grandfather character because I deemed his presence unnecessary. I wanted to cut out the mother's character as I feel she did not speak much; however, she is a prominent character in the novel, so she must be there. I also wanted to cut uncle Jai, but I wanted to include a dinner table scene with Riya and Jai discussing school to help justify the bubbling tension inside of Riya throughout the story. I added descriptions of Rahul and Meera's backstories. I thought it was interesting to highlight the decaying emotions in every family member. But then to bring in the possibility of every comment being light-hearted and that the family came together and created such a wonderful celebration. The darkness and anger in every character illustrates the anger that Riya brought to the trip. I also think the descriptions identify

all the characters as hypocrites, they judge each other mercilessly, but they all are flawed immensely in their own ways.

I also wanted to add descriptions of the overall setting of the stories. I added scents, aromas, and descriptions of the foods. I said body language, and I brought in more illustrations of the house and the characters' actions. I also wanted to cut out a lot of dialogue. The descriptions took a lot of space anyway, so I decided on the essential dialogue pieces and included those. Lastly, since there was little space left, I cut the conversation with Sai and Riya at the end. I thought it was a great moment, but I thought what you said in the comments was right; the story isn't about him; it's about Riya. Therefore, I made the ending a turn-around from the beginning, where Riya finally understands that her lack of being enough cuts much more profound than she thinks. This realization, though, is just the beginning.

Professor's comments:

As far as the title goes, astrayed isn't a word. It's not a verb. Astray is an adjective/adverb.

There are tense change issues, we have to decide if this is present or past tense.

You say 360-flip when you mean a 360-spin.

In the moment where the narrator talks back to her family about mental health, it feels a little disingenuous and self-conscious. Too perfect, essentially. It almost feels like a professor lecturing. No one, especially not with their family, can articulate themselves that well in the heat of the moment. It's the right instinct, I just want it to sound more like a human being and less like a robot.

You succeed in a lot of the things you set out to do, according to your revision essay. There was a far better balance of dialogue and scene setting and inner thought. This narrator shines through in this draft. Keeping up a narrator that is this introspective over 300 pages or so is going to be difficult, a real challenge. The introspection works well in this chapter because it's balanced by the other characters and the party. If you can keep finding ways to do that--putting this introspective narrator in situations and places where she must navigate all these conflicting things going on inside of her--then you will write a fascinating book.

My only real question is the ending, which you read as the narrator realizing that her lack of self-worth is much more profound than she realized. I'm not sure that's what I got from the ending. When she throws away the planner, I interpreted that to mean that she is abandoning "the plan" she and her family has set out for herself. She is throwing away the ideal life she has in her head and is going to start trying to live in a more mentally-sustainable way. She is no longer looking to be productive. She wants to be happy. I don't see that ending as some, aw, my family

has messed me up, I really don't like myself, kind of moment. I see that ending as a little triumph that will lead her to the next, bigger triumph.