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Curried Shrimp and Dhalpourie

Sam grew up dirt poor in rural Trinidad. Mayaro to be exact. During his boyhood days, Sam's household was routinely fed a diet of dizzying chutney music, rounds and rounds of *puncheon* rum, and endless guffaws arising out of the most popular card game on the island — All Fours. When a jack was hung, the place went delirious, just like the roll of a head in the Colosseum.

For many years, Sam would sit on the derelict steps of his back porch and observe his parents doing the same thing, every Friday, Saturday and Sunday, without fail, come flu, flood, or Easter.

Black rum, white rum, and tap water.

Chug and repeat.

The truth of the matter was that Sam never connected with this insouciant lifestyle himself, but knew, at best that it made his parents happy, and at worst, that the booze, music and dance provided momentary insulation from weekday troubles and mounting financial woes.

As much as they argued and cussed each other out during the week, the weekend brought a certain kind of quiet between his parents, a solemn transformation, if you will. Not unlike like the way insufferable people show up in Church masquerading as if they are worthy of the blood. Blasted hypocrites!

As Sam got older, he would take unnoticed leave on the weekend and venture into the world of smell and taste at Tanty Shirley's Shack just down the beaten road.

"Tanty!" Sam would scream as he walked through the aging wooden front doors of the shack.

Inside, the ground was dried earth and there was a modest scattering of faded plastic tables and chairs. A corroded ceiling fan with two missing blades spun so slowly that it seemed to become part of the humble décor instead to serving its intended purpose.

This was the only food stop for a mile along the Mayaro stretch, which naturally equated to a hearty trickle of hurried patrons proceeding to their various outings at the beach. Tanty's Shirley's Shack was never a place of static, but in constant flux, much like people in an airport with a final destination in mind.

Multiple dishes lined a glass food display case as bright light from an overhanging bulb illuminated curried chicken, curried potato and *channa*, pumpkin, stewed liver and gizzard, saltfish, and dasheen and eddoes. To the side, still in the displace case, were oven baked bread, *sada roti*, and *fry-bake*, all piled neatly into three separate towers near one another.

"Tanty! De smell, it's so good. Ah love it bad bad bad!" Sam would always say.

"Look do-do dahlin, come give yuh tanty a big hug," was always the response. "Ent yuh know boy, food is love!"

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Tanty Shirley was an imposing lady, but lovable, with her head always wrapped in cloth and her teeth as white as paper. She was not of course, his real tanty, but for all intents and purposes, Tanty Shirley was the closest person to Sam.

Over the years, Sam graduated from casual chit-chat and admiring the food in the warmer, to washing dishes for a few dollars, to the observing the cooking process, to finally helping Tanty Shirley prepare the food.

On weekends, he could not wait to help Tanty Shirley. Sam felt solace in the kitchen, in the same way, he presumed, that his parents felt getting high. He found happiness in cutting and cleaning chicken, understanding seasoning, balance, taste, and technique. With Tanty's ever so watchful eyes, Sam experimented and created new additions to the menu, including tamarind fried chicken and smoked herring with roasted pickled tomatoes. All of which were raving hits.

"Tanty," Sam had said, shyly, one Saturday morning in his early twenties. "I tink I wanna be a chef."

Tanty Shirley stared at his eyes for a deep second and then to Sam's utmost surprise, she pulled him in for a beefy hug. After that episode, Tanty Shirley and Sam rarely spoke about Sam's desire to become a trained chef. From time to time, Tanty Shirley would encourage him to save his dollars even though they both knew that the word "savings" was meant for a funeral or wedding, but not for education, and especially not for a *culinary* education.

In fact, it was not until one day when a tourist had accidentally left a gourmet magazine in the shack, did the conversation reignite. Sam walked up to Tanty Shirley and flipped through the glossy pages of the magazine. He stopped at an advertisement taken out by Le Cordon Bleu in England, offering programmes in French cuisine and hospitality. Tanty Shirley studied the page for a bit before she pointed to the cost of each programme and multiplied the number by ten on her beat-up calculator; this left them both feeling giddy and downtrodden.

"Boy, de way dey design this world. It rel hard for de small man to rise up, yuh know. Makes yuh tink that dreams are only for de rich and famous."

"Dat's okay Tanty, in meh next life ah go be a chef. Mark meh words."

"How ah go mark yuh words, boy, if I eh go be around next life to see if it come true?"

Sam frowned at Tanty Shirley before they busted out in laughter. The way that most Caribbean people laughed: carefree and rambunctious.

Call it whatever you will, good fortune, divine intervention, or destiny, but Sam did not have to wait until his next life to become a chef. In the end, tragedy was his triumph. Sam's parents died in a crash. It was suspected, though never confirmed, that his father was intoxicated, lost control of the vehicle and slammed into a light pole on a bright, rainless Friday morning. At their wake, the villagers drank rum, cried, danced, and reminisced about the good old days. It was just the way Sam's parents would have wanted it.

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A few weeks after the funeral, an agent from an insurance company in Port of Spain called and informed Sam that he had heard about the untimely demise of his parents through a mutual friend. After the usual commiserations, the agent, Mr. Singh, proceeded to inform Sam that his father had a life insurance policy which named Sam as the sole beneficiary.

The insurance pay-out was more than enough money to his cover fees, tuition, housing and food while in the United Kingdom.

On the day he went off to the airport, which was also the first time Sam saw an airplane, Tanty Shirley cooked his childhood favourite food—curried shrimp and *dhalpourie*—and fed him a bite with her own hands. The taste of the spicy *dhal* mixture complimented the deep earthy flavour of the cumin, turmeric, and bay leaf perfectly.

“Tanty! Ah love it bad bad bad!”

“Ent yuh know boy, food is love!”

She cried as Sam walked out of the front door and into the promise of a better life.



Sam’s first few months in the United Kingdom was a seesaw. His heart pulled and tugged between the draws of home and away. He liked fish and chips but missed *bhaigan and fry aloo*. He loved ginger beer but missed the bitter taste of fresh sorrel juice.

Above all though, Le Cordon Bleu was *everything* to him.

He learnt the art of French cooking. He learnt subtle and bold techniques. He learnt balance and elevation. He learnt smell and taste. He learnt texture and presentation.

Sam only wished that Tanty Shirley could experience this with him. To see what a commercial kitchen looked like, with rows and rows of metallic pans and pots hanging precariously above large stainless-steeled sinks, and stoves and ovens and refrigerators which could easily engulf the size of her shack.

At times the void left him with a pang of dread. Other times he was spirited. He would mentally write down stories which he would tell Tanty on his return, most likely over a nice cup of lemongrass tea and cassava *pone*.

By the sixth month of his tutelage, Sam was the most accomplished student in his class. He had mastered all the techniques taught to him. Demi-Glace, En Papillote, Julienne, Mirepoix, Mise en Place, Roux, Sauté.

“Magnifique! Magnifique!” one of his instructors would always say when critiquing Sam’s techniques.

On the very evening of the last day of the culinary programme, Sam walked into *Alain Ducasse at the Dorchester* hoping to solicit a job in the kitchen. As he walked into the posh hotel and into the equally posh restaurant, the maître d caught his attention.

“Hello,” Sam said. “I would like to speak to de chef about any openings.”

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"Very well," the young lady responded. "Do you have a resumé that you can leave, he is very busy at the moment as you would expect...preparing dinner."

Sam blushed.

"Oh gosh, ah sorry. Can I wait? I doh have de resumé on me."

"Sure," she said and set Sam up in a small waiting area.

As Sam waited to speak to the chef, he stole delicate glances of the woman. He loved the way her golden hair locks fell neatly on her pale, freckled forehead. He loved how her otherwise plain face was accented by burning red lipstick, perfectly contoured around her voluptuous lips.

"So, where are you from?"

"From Trinidad."

"Oh, Trinidad. How exotic. The name's Emma."

"Samraj on the birth paper, but Sam is how everyone knows me."

That night, over close to a three hour wait, she would come back every now and then with small updates that the chef was still very busy or that he would be out shortly. At one point, likely feeling terrible about the situation, Emma offered Sam an amuse bouche, a blood tart (which he found to be overly sweet) and a glass of Laurent-Perrier champagne.

She told him that she was a hospitality major and that this was her internship. He spoke about his time in London and how everyone was obsessed with Michelin stars. As a natural consequence of this mania, Sam explained that he decided to seek work here in order to see what all the fuss was about.

She spoke about her dream of owning a restaurant some day and he told her stories of his weekends in the food shack. Some sad, some happy.

Emma told Sam that she liked his accent which only made Sam more conscious of it, to the point where he stopped talking altogether. She had to coax him to speak again and even insisted that she loved the vernacular, especially the way he pronounced 'th' as 'd'.



Sam worked at *Alain Ducasse at the Dorchester* for a little over four years. Despite his culinary certificate, which he had been soberly led to believe was some sort of golden ticket, Sam started off by cutting up meat, vegetables and sorting grains. It was only during his lunch breaks, unbeknownst to the head or sou-chef, that he experimented with dishes.

While Sam cooked, Emma was never far away, having worked her way up to restaurant manager. The two fell in love quickly. She told Sam that it was his naivety about everything English that charmed her most. What she took for granted, he cherished.

Sam and Emma married a few years into their courtship. Emma's parents adored him. They were happy that he made their daughter happy, but most of all, they admired his determination despite all his ill fortunes.

One night, in bed, Emma whispered that they should go to Trinidad

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and open a restaurant. Sam sprung out of the bed, like a rising soufflé, but quickly cooled, wondering how they would ever amass enough money for such a risky venture.

Emma placed her hands on Sam's face and told him to hush.

"Why do you even cook? Why is it something you like?"

"What?"

"Just answer me, babe."

"Well when ah make a dish, iz all me. Iz my life on ah plate. Iz everything I am, right dere, staring back up at me."

Emma kissed him and begged Sam not to think about finances for the moment, but to just dream.

They spent the night sketching the layout of the restaurant and fantasizing about tables with iron pressed white fabric and minimalistic lights and chandeliers.

Sam took out his notebook and began conjuring dishes using only local ingredients. He was possessed. He did not stop until he had several appetizers, entrees, and desserts all fleshed out in copious detail. He figured that it was best to elevate local ingredients to a standard never before seen in Trinidad. If done right, just maybe the Michelin guide might come knocking on their door.

Eventually, Emma's parents agreed to lend them the money. At first, Sam was hesitant, like any self-respecting man in comparable situation, but Emma convinced him that she wanted to experience living in Trinidad and that the restaurant would make the money back in no time.

The restaurant opened on a Sunday in Maraval and was a hit. For five consecutive months upon opening, Peridot & Topaz, their birthstones, was completely booked. Emma, in her capacity as restaurant manager, featured in quite a number of press and magazine columns, while Sam focused on cooking.

Reviews included the words: different, shocking, wonderful, and Sam's favourite: bold. One critic even wrote about the restaurant's careful attention to detail, that every spoon and knife seemed to be precisely spaced between themselves and the edges of the tables. Articles and magazine spoke about the handsome husband and wife who revolutionized fine dining in Trinidad. They were a power couple of sorts.

Sam even tried to persuade Tanty to join him in the kitchen, but Tanty said that she was born in Mayaro, would live in Mayaro and would die in Mayaro.

When the day came that Tanty died, Sam did not attend the funeral. Instead, he made his favourite childhood food, curried shrimp and *dhal-pourie*, the same dish that Tanty had made for him before he left for England. He closed the restaurant and sat by himself in silence and ate the meal over a slow burn of two hours. Eventually he came to realize that he had not eaten this in ages. Three years? Five? It did matter, each bite of the crisp, slightly charred *dhal-pourie*, enveloping a single aromatic shrimp, transported him back to Tanty Shirley's shack.

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He could see her. Stoic and smiling. Happy. Laughing about something trivial. Always trivial. It made for the best kinds of laughter. He missed her dearly in that moment. At the same time, he appreciated the way that food had the strange power to instantly connect people to their past. Food, he thought, was familiarity in a tough and vague world. It was home.

Later in the afternoon, Emma came out of the shadows and tousled his wavy, black hair. After a few minutes, Sam got up with the curried stained plate, and the two of them went back to the lives they had created.