

Vinamrata Singal
Halva

The last time Radha's muscles tensed this hard, she ended up in the hospital and on blood thinners for a week. The other chefs stared at their notepads, oblivious to the conflict brewing above. Their heads floated slightly above their triangular shaped bodies, which were covered in their finest white aprons. Radha took a deep breath, inhaling the vanilla infused lavender scent of the room, and leaned towards the other side of the conference room table.

"Roger, the idea of combining pistachio halva, our signature dish, with creme fraiche is the dumbest idea I've ever heard. In case you forgot, one of the core values of *Bhog* is to use Indian ingredients in a creative, fusion forward manner. Last time I checked, creme fraiche was a French ingredient, not an Indian one. Did they not teach you this at *Le Cordon Blue*?" Radha emphasized *Blue*, resulting in a tiny spit dribble in the corner of her lips. She wiped her face with the back of her hand as her veins changed colors from red to blue.

Roger scowled as his bangs dripped green colored sweat on his apron. "I mean, it's just cream. And it's *bleu*, not *blue*"

"Yes, but it's not the same type of ingredient-" Radha's voice was eerily balanced. The other chefs looked at each other with confusion at the missing aggression.

"It would add more wetness to the desert. The halva is dry, and it would be a good complement-" Roger's cadence increased with every word that came out of his mouth.

"I'm not done speaking Roger." Radha gave him the Kamala side eye until he motioned for her to continue speaking. She'd been practicing this look in the mirror ever since she had watched the debate, the perfect cherry for the next time she'd be served a microaggression cake.

"I get what you're saying, but as the executive chef of this restaurant, this is my call to make." Her hands floated into a fist. "Last time I checked, creme fraiche is a non-Indian ingredient. Now, unless you have proof saying otherwise, or even better, an actual Indian ingredient, I'm all ears. Otherwise, either get on board or get the fuck out of here."

Radha leaned into Roger's face until she was close enough to smell the green sweat on his lanky body. Roger, who had grown up with an alcoholic father and a drug addicted mother, wasn't a stranger to invasion of his personal space. But seeing it come out of his female boss perturbed him. He retreated back, his body shriveling like a raisin as his cheeks turned a dull pink.

Radha's gold marker floated to her hand as she marked off the halva on the whiteboard, the letters glittering with possibility. "Good. Now, does anyone else have any other ideas for our menu tonight?" Radha looked around the room as her manicured fingers tapped on the table.

She folded her arms. "Meeting adjourned."

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Her heels clacked behind her as her body descended into the darkness of her corner office.



“*Karahi Gosht!*” she blurted out. “We need to redo the *karahi gosht* dish. It was very popular during my time in Bhojpur.”

The sound of her own voice jolted her awake. The room reeked of fish and cardamom. There were words and arrows scribbled in black ink on the whiteboard on the front. There was no gold marker, no glittering gold words. Reality hit hard.

She could feel Roger’s garlicky breath on her face as he started speaking. “*Karahi gosht* is an overdone recipe. We need to invest in reinventing a classic recipe, like the biryani. Or chicken tikka masala.”

Radha stared at her hands, which no longer had blue veins criss crossing the lines of her arms. She dropped her hands, and took a look at all the other white apron donning chefs, whose heads were firmly attached to their bodies.

Ed, the executive chef, nodded emphatically and snapped his fingers. “I love the energy coming from Jay. Team, give me more classic-.”

“I think you meant me mate,” Roger quipped.

“Ah yes, sorry Roger. Love the energy coming from Roger, though Jay I’m sure you also have fantastic energy. Let’s brainstorm more classic Indian dishes to spin.”

For a second, she thought about interrupting to explain the logical fallacy of Roger’s last statement. If *karahi gosht* was an overdone recipe, then didn’t that make it a classic dish, which is exactly what Roger was proposing? She looked around the sea of male chefs around her- Roger, the 26 year old British *Le Cordon Bleu* graduate who always had to get the last word, Sabeek, the only other Indian guy on the team, Matt, the white dude desperate to prove his brown street cred by talking about his time in the ashrams of India, Carlos, the Mexican dude who dreams of changing the Mexican food game by introducing a Mexican Indian fusion (someday), and Jay, the ethnically ambiguous quiet new guy.

“Excuse me Ed, I’d like to make a quick point about Roger’s feedback about my idea.”

Ed nodded.

“Thanks. I think I might not have communicated what I meant more clearly. Yes, *karahi gosht* is a semi-overdone recipe, but that’s exactly why we should feature it in the menu. We can twist it in a more original way, similar to what Roger was suggesting. There aren’t many restaurants twisting the *gosht*, and this could be a great way to establish our niche.” Radha placed her hands in her lap and straightened her back, hoping that the confident posture would help the reception of her idea.

“That’s interesting, but I still disagree with the fundamental premise about the *gosht*.” He leaned his neck over to her and whispered, “Also, I didn’t misunderstand. Next time, don’t prescribe intent to my actions.”

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Radha felt the heat rise to her cheeks as Ed clapped his hands. "Let's get back to our earlier discussion: brainstorming new dishes! Jay, what do you have?" Ed's pep rally cheerleader voice had started to come out.

Radha gritted her teeth. She found herself asking the same question that had plagued her for the last 10 years at *Bhog*: why was she here? There were so many times she could have left: when Ed, who joined the same time as she did, was promoted to executive chef, or when Roger was promoted to the same level as her, even though he is younger and more inexperienced.

Radha thought about the woman in her dreams: the executive chef Radha who could shut down ideas of Indian food from white people who treated it like an exotic vacation rather than their home. Radha had spent the three years prior to *Bhog* training in kitchens across India. She would travel from state to state, learning from the local grandmothers to the *dhaba* owners to the street food connoisseurs to the 5 star hotel veterans. She often worked for free, supporting herself by tutoring English to rich Indian kids, just to get a chance to learn the nuances of the food that had defined her life. When she got the job offer at *Bhog*, it felt like all the stars had finally aligned: she finally had learned enough to add unique value to a restaurant back home.

Initially, she felt lucky to just be there. She took extra shifts despite the impact of the hours on her health and spent the four hours of sleep every night dreaming of new dishes. She tried to make friends with the other chefs, drinking every night even though she hated the taste of alcohol. But six months later, something changed. She started noticing the interruptions, the schedule configurations further away from the action, the repackaging of her ideas, the momentum of others. When she brought up these concerns with Jeffrey, the previous executive chef, he listened. He optimized the schedule for her growth. He gave her more credit. He created space in conversations for her to contribute. She worked her way up to station chef. But years of smoking to cope with the executive chef stress took a toll on his health, and he retired when he was diagnosed with lung cancer.

She looked up at Ed, who was wildly gesticulating to the room. When Ed took over, he tried to build a similar relationship with Radha. When her grandfather had passed away in India, he insisted on paying for her ticket back to India, and gave her extra time off. He even sent flowers to her family. But when she asked him about scheduling decisions, or feedback on the way menu brainstorms were led, he'd acknowledge her feelings, but nothing would change. With Jeffrey's departure, it felt like a big rock had replaced him. No matter how hard she tried, the rock would not budge.

She had resigned herself to this purgatory state for the past year. After all, life was simpler this way. She slept better because she no longer dreamed of dishes. She worked better hours because she didn't take any extra shifts. All she cared about was clocking in and out. Sure, she wasn't really moving towards anything, but did it really matter?

Ed and Roger were now facing each other, their eyes getting bigger as the cadence of their voice quickened. Ed patted Roger on the shoulder and

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turned around to scribble something on the whiteboard: *Gosht karahi with chicken tikka masala*. He turned back around, threatening to pick on another white apron wearing chef unless one of them would speak up.

Radha felt her breath increasing at a rapid pace. She tried to take deeper breaths to calm herself down, but her body didn't cooperate. She grabbed her pen to scribble her anger into her notepad. She put the full weight of her powerful fingers into the pen and the tip snapped, landing on Roger's nose.

"What the hell?" Roger brushed aside the pen tip. "Is that from you Rada?" Roger could never pronounce her name correctly.

Her heart felt like it was going to jump out of her chest. "Yeah, it was aimed at you."

"Woah woah," Ed jumped in. "Let's settle down here. Radha, this aggressive behavior is really unnecessary. What's going on here?"

Radha laughed. "Really Ed? You don't realize what just happened? He just took my idea and made it his own! And you're going along with it, even patting him on the back! Do you not fucking see this shit?"

Ed took a step back. "Radha, if you had been paying attention, you'd realize that Jay proposed combining chicken tikka masala that Roger suggested with the karahi gosht. I was patting Roger because he initially proposed this direction of remixing old dishes. I feel like he really exemplified great thought leadership, and deserved some credit. What's wrong with that?"

"What's wrong is that you won't acknowledge my idea. Karahi Gosht was my idea. I came up with it based on my training in Bhojpur, which is a town that none of you can pinpoint on a map, let alone understand the culture and cuisine." Radha saw Carlos pull up his phone to record her outburst, and she smacked it out of his hand.

Ed shook his head. "You know Radha, I didn't want to say this in public. But you are not being a team player right now. One of our values at Bhog is team first. Caring about credit is not aligned with that value. Maybe we should talk about this in my office--"

"Ed, no one gives a shit about your values. Credit is how people get promoted in this industry. Credit is the only reason you're head chef, because you made sure Jeffrey knew everything you had done for this restaurant. Why is it aggressive if I want to promote myself?"

"You know Radha, I was going to give you the sous chef position for this month, but this behavior is making me seriously reconsider that thought." Ed looked at her with sad eyes. "I am really trying to help you, you know. But you're making that really hard for me right now."

The heat in her body had spread to every single crevice, a molten ooze desperate to escape her body. Before she could think, her mouth had started speaking.

"You're pathetic Ed." Radha took off her apron and dumped it dramatically on the floor.

She could feel the weight of their stares as she exited out the door. She

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felt the cool of the wall on her back and brought her hand to her chest. Her heart was slowly returning back to its normal rhythm. She ran her tongue over her lips, tasting relief twinged with dread. Thoughts of what she should do next filled her head. The loudest ones were the words from her old mentor Maneesh: today's quitter is tomorrow's trash.

I am not trash. I will never be trash. I need to make a move.

She reached into the pockets of her pants for her phone.

I can't believe I left my phone inside. Now I'll have to face all those bozos again.

She took a deep breath and held her head high as she pushed open the door. The chattering white aprons came to a dead silence.

"I forgot my phone," she said flatly as she walked to her chair. She briefly glanced at the white board, now donned with assignments for the day. She saw Roger's name next to the head chef position, with Jay's name followed in the sous chef position.

She scurried out of the room as quickly as possible. She closed the door most of the way and stood next to the door, eavesdropping on the conversation. Ed summarized the menu for the month and asked if the room had any questions. Silence, followed by the scramble of chairs against the floor and light chatter as the workday began.

Radha felt the pressure in her feet as they were conflicted on where to go next. A smile crept on her face. She felt like she should feel angry that they had replaced her so quickly, no words spent discussing what had transpired. But all she felt was relief and lightness as the big rock had finally moved out of her way. She was now finally free to pass through.

So, Radha ran. As her sneakers swished against the floor, she smelled the scent of possibility in the air. She didn't have a destination for where she was headed next, but for now, this was enough.

She was enough.