Naam

By Naomi Parikh

"I want my *hulla*!" she screamed, although it sounded more broken up, like *hul-ul-la-a-a!*

Paloma was crying. Not just whimpering, but not hollering yet, just upset, with tears streaming down her cherubic face.

Our babysitter, Joanna, could not understand what she meant. Joanna was a tall college student with dyed red hair; as usual, she wore cargo pants. She was smart, but she was also flustered at this moment. Her face looked scrunched as she tried to decipher words that came out of my sister's mouth.

It was soft, like all *hullas*, and it had bunnies that scampered down the fabric. She was attached to it. At four, Paloma could still go nowhere unless she had her hulla. Bedtime was always *hulla* time. She wouldn't even go near her bedroom if her hands were empty.

Joanna did not know what to do. Even I, a 7 year old, could tell something was wrong. My sister sat motionless except for her face, which was scrunched up, shining from the tears. Joanna did everything she could to calm her, but nothing worked. Finally, Joanna realized what was missing, even though all along, I was telling her, "it's her *hulla*! She wants her *hulla* before she goes to bed! " I saw the click in her expression that meant she understood.

"Does she sleep with a blanket?" Joanna asked, although I think that she actually knew the answer before she even asked me. I have never been fluent in any other

language, but my dad had taught me some words in his native tongues, Guajarati and Hindi. At the time, I didn't understand that the words I knew had come from different languages. And it usually never mattered, except in cases like this, where Joanna was forced to cross the language barrier to finally understand the source of the trouble. That one word was the only thing standing in the way of my little sister's happiness. Because of cultural differences, a blockade of sorts had halted the understanding of a simple request. Finally, after we tore through her bedroom, we found what we were looking for.

Paloma slept happily that night.

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When my mother sets the plate before me, my mouth begins to water with hungry anticipation. She has always said that you eat with your eyes first, and now my eyes are hungrily absorbing the mounds of Indian curry in front of me. Pearly white, fluffy rice piles, like clouds. The green spinach in my *saag paneer* steams in front of me, the homemade cheese cubes just fall apart with one gentle prod of the fork. A bright, red sauce envelopes the *koftas*, or dumplings, covering them snugly, like a blanket covering a baby. Across the table rests a metal bowl of *raita,* a cucumber yoghurt that cools the palette after the hot, spicy food that practically radiates off the plate. The kitchen smells like India at this point, a mixture of exotic spices and curry with the sweat of manual labor, and slight smoke, too, thanks to the way my mother almost burned the *naan* bread. Luckily, she saved it, and the fluffy piece on my plate is dripping with melted butter. Steam sends white swirls in the air that smell of a tandori oven and garlic.

This is the food that I like, that I crave. When I was in elementary school, my mom would sometimes pack me the leftovers for lunch. I would gingerly open the

Tupperware container, like a mouth slowly opening for food. The smell would hit my friends like a wall, causing many pinched noses and even some rude remarks. I felt like an outsider. All I really wanted in these moments was peanut butter and jelly, like everybody else. For a long time, I could not explain to my friends what I was eating, for I only knew it as the Indian name, and the fact that it was Indian food, but that they did not understand. Why was it that I knew what I meant by "*kakras*" and they had no idea? I would try to annunciate to them, saying the words slowly, proud that I had something to teach, yet embarrassed that they thought I was strange.

"It's *chapatti* bread," I would say, but because they didn't know what the word was, they were averse to trying the food it represented. They let the language barrier prohibit a worldly experience into my culture, closing off India along with myself.

Somehow, though, as the years progressed, and the minds of my friends became more open and mature, they realized that no matter what it was called, it would still taste delicious. It took time. I began to notice the change around junior high, when it suddenly became the cool thing to stand out, to be noticed. People would remember that I was not that *Indian* girl, but *that* Indian girl. Finally, the words causing me to be different also caused me to be riveting to them. And after that, every time I visited the country, my peers attacked me with questions and asked for stories and food from an exotic, far off land.

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My *Ba* is little. At four foot ten inches, she shuffles slowly down the narrow hall, inching along like a sleepy caterpillar. Her frail hands hold on to the cracked wall for support as she stands and beckons me to her room. She doesn't say a word, just motions

with the bony hands. We sit together on her lumpy mattress. With her fingers knotted together, she begins to talk in her broken, quiet English.

"Tell me, what you want to be?" she says, her clear blue eyes looking into mine, saying so much more than her words ever could. I tell her about my life plans, how as a high school sophomore, I have a guidance counselor to help me, and how I really like biology. I go on and on about my interest in nutrition and how some colleges I am interested in offer great programs in this area, and how I am preparing for the PSATs. Although she doesn't speak English that well, she remains vigilant in her attempt to understand. She nods her head in the appropriate places, and from her further questions I can tell she gets the gist of what I am saying. This is the first time in my whole life that I have ever had a heart to heart with my grandmother. Usually there are people talking to her, or she's engrossed in the TV, reading, or even praying, but quite often lately she's been sleeping. So this is a huge deal to me. And I wouldn't let a small miscommunication get in the way.

"What did you spend your time doing when you were my age, Ba?" I ask her.

"Took care of all my brothers and sisters. I am oldest. It is my duty," she begins. Then, something wonderful happens. Words start flowing out of her mouth like a waterfall, beautifully mangled words that are a cross between English and Hindi and Guajarati, the native language to her hometown. She is trying to tell me her life story in this rare and fleeting moment during my visit in India (at 6 am, India Standard Time, but 5 pm Boston Time, which explains why I am awake and fully functioning). She wants to tell me so much but can't get it all across in English so she just tells me in every way possible. Her hands, which lie still before, are moving like puppeteers, as if she is

making invisible marionettes dance across a stage. She emphasizes certain words and phrases, and repeats some too, which allows me to understand the big picture. And in her eyes I can see the excitement of some parts of her tale and anger or jealousy for others, even though many of the words I hear were gibberish to me.

As she rises to boil the milk for the morning's *chai*, I walk Back to my bed, thinking how I have just heard the tale of my grandmother's life in a different language. Yet I still understood.

* * *

Watching Indian soap operas is probably the best form of entertainment. The actors not only dress in ridiculously good-looking outfits for a "night in" but they also overact when reciting every single line. Anyone, speaking any language, can infer this from the way the actors portray themselves and the storyline.

The last time I went to India I was eighteen years old and a senior in high school. One of the nights we stayed in Mumbai with my dad's brother and his family. My sister and I had makeshift beds on the cool marble floor in the middle of the living room, the biggest room in their small house. Right in the middle was the king of entertainment, the big, flat screen TV. Our beds lay right in front of it, and behind us on this particularly humid night was the leather couch, sticky with condensation. My *kaki,* or aunt, and *Ba* were sitting on it, engrossed in the soap opera that was flickering in front of me.

The woman's face emanates from the screen, her perfectly overdone makeup emphasizing her natural Indian beauty. Precise, symmetrical arched eyebrows encompass mile-long eyelashes and the deep windows of her soul. A slight pink flush sits on her cheeks, the color of a sunset, and her lips are slightly moist and parted, her gleaming

teeth ever so straight. Her expression was poised, but then she whined about something to her husband, and he retorted something funny to her, a joke against the stereotypical housewife in India. The words were in Hindi. But I understood. I used the live television audience and the scripted laughter in the Background to judge whether or not I had comprehended the joke. When I chuckled along, my family looked twice at me, cocking their heads to the side and saying, "you understood that?"

"Yes," I replied, shaking my head forward. "It's really not that hard." I saw the blunt expressions of the actors, realizing that this is one way to actually learn, acquire knowledge about language that I had never thought of before. I could not understand exactly what words they said, but I could understand what was going on because of the motions and expressions associated with the words. Therefore, I was prohibiting the language barrier from hindering my experience of the Indian culture.

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Hindi derives from Sanskrit, the Latin of the East. It is not similar to English, yet the words sound familiar to me. I have never been able to speak the language, but I know what a *hulla* is because I was brought up to associate an object with a word, like all children. Although my word was different, others still knew what I meant. And although the stress throughout my childhood caused me to feel insecure about my food at lunch, I ended up being the one who was sharing her food with the rest of the table. My *Ba* and I do not talk on a regular Basis, and before our chat I thought it was because she couldn't understand me at all. Now, though, I realize that words don't always have to be in the same language in order for others to understand. There are other ways to connect with people.

Life is like a show and tell of communication, with words we can tell, but it is the experience that shows others what we mean with our words. Yes, there are language b barriers, yes, those barriers can divide cultures and peoples, but we do not have to let them get in the way of our thriving communities, for we can make every effort to mingle with others. These barriers are also penetrable, keeping cultures distinct while also assimilating us all. It is through these barriers that I try to learn more about my dad's culture, because I feel the Indian traditions are part of my own identity. Through these barriers, I not only lean more about the words that define a universal language, I also learn more about myself.

Process Notes:

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I didn't write this essay for one assignment. It all began with the first assignment of the semester, a paragraph about my name. My professor wanted us to focus on language and communication in my FWS section. On the first day, just typing my name, "Naomi," on a Word document prompted me to discuss the origin of my slightly complex family background. Another assignment was writing a descriptive paragraph or two on anything we wanted, so I chose one of my favorite things—food. More specifically, I wrote about Indian food. When we received the assignment for the first paper, I had no idea what to write about; the topic was so wide—a personal narrative about language. But with some quick brainstorming, I soon realized that all the mini paper assignments leading up to this one had been exercises for us, in order to prepare us to create a personal narrative that not only displayed good writing skills but also was distinctive and individual.

Although I still had no idea where I wanted to take my paper, I sat down one day, and wrote the first anecdote, from start to finish, in a Word document. Then I added it to a separate assignment, the one about food. By then, it was time for peer editing and all the comments I received were the same: add more. So I went to the Chocolate Bar, opened a new, blank Word document, and began typing.

But my paper still had no direction; I just liked these particular stories, though they all had in common the theme of language. Through weekly meetings with my

professor, peer editing, and even some editing on my own time, I finally found a focus. I wanted to show how there definitely is a language barrier across cultures, but it does not have to inhibit people from experiencing that culture. I spent many hours editing and revising this paper. I wrote and rewrote different parts of it, slaving over the right word for this and the right way to say that. The assignment became more than an assignment because I was able to morph the topic into something I wanted to express to others. It was something I was interested in. I even worked on it long after it was due, perfecting it for my final. While writing it, I felt as though it would never be perfect, that something would always be missing, until one day the perfect words just came to me and I knew this essay would become one of my favorites. The personal topic inspired me to achieve my ultimate best, and to put all my effort into one assignment. And the best part was that I actually had fun writing it.