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Personal Narrative

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At the Dining Table

“Iram, do you know what he did earlier today...?” I laugh with my sister at my brother while he pretends to be affronted as I recount an embarrassing event. Reveling in our humor, my father joins in and soon all of us are guffawing, clutching our stomachs, and only stopping when one of us starts choking or at my mother’s call to get back to our food. She pretends to be displeased with our eating manners, but inside she smiles to see us all, and can’t resist joining in once in a while herself.

Generally, family dinner in my house was a rare event.

We all had meals in different forms, sitting in front of the TV or the computer for my brother, grabbing a roll to take away for my sister as she rushed for college, setting up my father’s plate at the dining table as he read the newspaper before leaving for work, or as in my mother’s case, eating right at the kitchen counter because she was running late for work. Family meals were rare events, for time was a big constraint for us all. Both my parents had different timings at office, and all of our schools and college (in case of my sister) started and ended at different times, so having breakfast together wasn’t an option. At the end of the day, we would all trudge in at different hours, in the evening or sometimes even at night. Following the rising trend of junk food consumption, most of the times me and my brother and sister would have filled our stomachs by the time dinner rolled around and would thus pass, or eat at different times as convenient to each. And thus it would repeat each day.

More often than not, the only times we would all sit down for dinner would be when my mother cooked Chicken Biryani. Biryani is a Mughal cuisine of India, a mixed rice dish, prepared with rice and chicken (or other meat) cooked with spices. I don't know why it made us all sit down together. It was certainly not the best of my mother's dishes, nor the favorite of any except my younger brother. And yet there was something about that dish that would make us all leave our tasks for the time being and dine together. On such occasions, we would forgo the constraint of the dining table, but dine in the traditional Indian way, sitting around in a circle on a mat on the floor.

For those thirty some minutes, a spell would be cast upon us, a web of intimacy, a bubble that separated us from the outside world and its demands. With the steaming hot plates of Biryani in front of us, we would banter back and forth, recounting our day activities, notifying each other about any important information or just talking nonsense. The content of the exchange that ensued was irrelevant, it was the tone of the flowing conversation that mattered, the laughter and the smiles. We would shed our public facades, there were no pretensions, no need to keep up a dignified face. In the security of that circle, we could be ourselves. All the social demand and expectations would fade away. But then as the plates started clearing up, so too the magic would start to ebb. As the dishes were cleared away, the spell would break and one by one we would all drift to different rooms to resume our work, and I would be left looking forward to the next time my mother cooked Biryani.

In his autobiography *Aria*, Richard Rodriguez describes his childhood and how he gained a public identity, but in doing so, lost the intimacy in his private life. Growing up as a Spanish-speaking boy in an English-speaking society, he felt like he was different than the other children. When his mom called him in his family language he felt assured of who he was: his family

identity. Rodriguez found intimacy in his family language and the fear of losing it delayed his learning of the society's language. Under pressure from his teachers and his parents, he learnt English and began to feel more comfortable talking to people, but his private life at home was engulfed in silence. He was no longer able to speak in Spanish, his guilt would choke down the words, but his parents still mainly spoke Spanish, and the gap between him and his parent grew. Rodriguez states, "I no longer knew what words to use in addressing my parents" (Rodriguez, 336). Rodriguez says that from that moment, intimacy in his house was expressed by sound, rather than words. "Intimacy thus continued at home; Intimacy was not stilled by English" (Rodriguez, 343). In his need to speak the language of the society, he gave up the intimacy that his family language provided.

Rodriguez's narrative resonates my own narrative's theme of family and home, the intimacy and security that is associated with them, and the closeness that exists at the dining table. Growing up in a family where everyone was caught in the matrix of time, I had few opportunities to see my whole family sitting down together and enjoying each other's company. In his essay *Aria*, Rodriguez talks about the growing separation in his family due to the language divide and it resonates with my own experience, only in my case the divide was due to the demand of time. Both our narratives explore the theme of security and the feeling of belongingness that we associate with family and home. Rodriguez also recounts his family dinners and the fun and laughter that were associated with them. Growing up, with the uncertainties and challenges that life provides, the only time we can forget about our anxiety and troubles are at family dinners, where we can just bask in the teasing banter.

Rodriguez recounts how he felt safe inside the house, as if a barrier existed between him and the rest of the world. Dinner always had a special meaning for him, for that was the time he

would connect with his family and make fun of his worldly problems. They would change the English words to Spanish and thus add an element of familiarity to the foreign language. There was no need to put up a façade, there was no trying to fit in. Due to the time constraints on my family, we didn't have dinner together every day, and thus the few dinners that we had together were cherished moments. In those moments, I felt reassured of my position in this world, my sense of belonging somewhere, of being special to someone. I clung on to that intimacy, because that was the foundation on which I based my individual identity, for as Rodriguez puts it, it gave me a feeling of being: "individualized by family inmates" (Rodriguez, 335).

Intimacy isn't found in grand gestures, but in the small moments of life, the ones that are so commonplace that we forget their importance. I certainly don't remember every meal I've had with my family, but I do remember their warmth and their sense of belonging, giving me strength and confidence. The voices singing and sighing, rising, straining, then surging, teeming with pleasure that burst syllables into fragments of laughter. Although I long left the warm embrace of my family and ventured out to forge my own path, the child inside me still looks forward to the family dinner.