



# GRAVY

SUMMER 2021

39

## ARE THEY PICKING AT US?

In eastern  
North Carolina,  
barbecue is the  
tie that binds.

*by*

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# IDON'T REMEMBER

*who made the cut to the goat's neck on that July day in 1988. I remember my dad, my uncle, and two friends holding Earl down on a blue tarp, firmly, gently, praying for forgiveness and gratitude and, through the Lord's words, trying to calm him. Earl bleated and pleaded. A swift single swish of the knife, and blood came pouring out. They held him tight and kept reading prayers while he gave his life.*

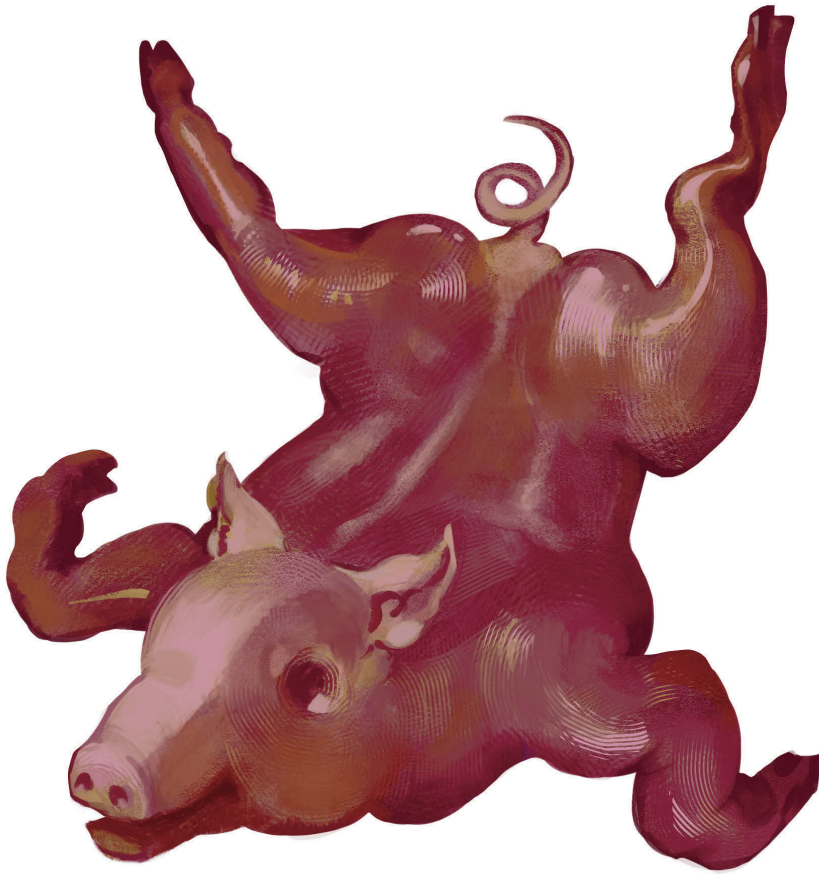
Earl softly cried. Pappa cried. I wiped my tears and snot into my bare forearm. I looked down and saw the blood pool near his hooves, then around my sneakers. Earl let go quickly. I felt gutted. I moved toward the open end of the garage and sat down. As Early lay dying, his frantic hooves and our struggling feet had wrinkled the tarp, and crystal-red blood flowed in rivulets around the crinkly vinyl peaks. It seeped down, through the valleys, past my shoes, off the tarp, from the top right corner of the garage where he was sacrificed, beside the brick steps that led to the kitchen, down the driveway, spreading like capillaries in the rough concrete.

I was eight years old when we held our first *qurbani* at home. The word means sacrifice. In this case, *qurbani* refers to the sacrifice of an animal to feed the poor, part of Eid Al-Adha, a Muslim holiday that marks the end of the pilgrimage season in Mecca (*Hajj*). The day is also called *Bakra* Eid, translated as “Sheep’s (or Goat’s) Eid.” A bit of a misnomer I

think, as they’re not running around enjoying the holiday as much as we’re enjoying them. It’s based on the story of when God asked Abraham to kill his son to prove his faith. Right when he was going to cut his son’s neck off, his son turns into a sheep. Or a sheep appeared, and he decided not to sacrifice his son. I wasn’t the sharpest kid in Muslim Sunday school. My stance for attending every mosque or church event was heavily influenced by the food offered. I joined a gospel choir once as much for the post-practice suppers as the music.

Our *qurbani* on that summer day in 1988 smelled like wet fur, dirt, hot iron, fear, and adrenaline followed by the aroma of grilled goat chops, kebabs, and goat pulao. After we sacrificed Earl, everyone felt guilty, grateful, and hungry. We cooked the chops low and slow over charcoal, like our families did back home in Lucknow, India, where my father is from.

The city is world-renowned for its many types of charcoal cooking—not just low & slow over charcoal, but dishes



where charcoal is briefly added inside the pot to infuse the dish with a smoky flavor, or where the pot is buried in a pit of coals and the pot lid is sealed shut with dough to make sure the steam doesn't escape. Even our goat pulao, a rice dish similar to pilaf or purloo, is smoked.

My family carried that low & slow creed from northern India to eastern North Carolina, where the smoky aromas might have been slightly different, but still of the same origin—charcoal. We lived on the edge of Greenville, a university town of 45,000 people at the time. Just a few miles to our south was the small town of Ayden, home to the famous Skylight Inn and Bum's Restaurant. We lived roughly the same distance from B's

Barbecue, Parker's Barbecue, and the smoker of Brother Amin, a founding member of Greenville's Muslim community. He hauled his oil drum contraption to our mosque's picnics, where he barbecued chicken that rivaled B's. I hoped somehow that the smoke rising from his grill met ours and exchanged secrets with the smoke from our neighbors. Barbecue culture was king in eastern North Carolina and it, like the smoke, permeated every family's past and present. No matter what cultural misunderstandings arose, we could agree on smoked meat. As part of a growing immigrant community, though, I often wondered: Would I be welcomed as much as our aromas were?

**BETWEEN 1980 AND 1990, GREEN-**ville's share of immigrants grew by 50 percent. To see more—still a lot less, but, more—varied faces against a sea of white in a big town was a treat. Back then, with the exception of our mosque, the only other times I'd seen a majority of brown people in one place were during summer trips to visit our extended family in India. By 1989, Greenville's Muslim community included thirty families from around the world, though mostly South Asians and local Black Muslims.

My father was a pharmacology professor in Greenville, home of the Pirates of East Carolina University. The town of world-famous B's Barbecue. The town that prided itself on tobacco, pork, soybeans, and corn. The town where a man took hostages at the local Applebee's and they made a *Rescue 911* episode out of it. The town that sent a team to the Little League World Series. And, eventually, the town where then-President Donald Trump led a 2019 rally where the crowd started chanting "send her back," targeting Ilhan Omar, a Muslim Congressional Representative.

That full-throated chant evolved from my childhood, from microaggressions to now-unbridled aggression. Like the teacher who called me "For-eign" as a play on "Farhan" in sixth grade. Back then, I'd say I was born here, but no one cared about the details. My Little League coach explained to me in the spring of 1993 that I couldn't play on the All-Star team, due to "some sensitivities" that arose after the World Trade center bombing earlier that year. My coach was profusely apologetic about it; he told me that I was smart enough to understand how the world works, and that I'd probably be a doctor someday. Financially, the joke is still on me.

Racism and xenophobia can hide under the very thin veneer of polite societal norms, like that shiny, sugary layer on a fruit tart that looks super-fake at the

supermarket bakery table. I felt grateful for the refuge the community potluck table at our mosque offered. Ours was the only table in town where you could find grilled seekh kebabs, barbecue chicken, KFC hot wings, Palestinian chicken with vermicelli rice, potato salad, okra sabzi, Southern fried okra, Lahori-style fried fish, cornmeal-fried trout, fruit chaat, and, yes, even that fruit tart. Black, brown, and white families from America, India, Pakistan, Palestine, Afghanistan, Nigeria, Jordan, Egypt, and Syria would all sit on the floor at the mosque, eating and laughing together. On holidays like Eid, we'd hold barbecues or fish fries at Jaycee Park in Greenville and sit outside on blankets and bedsheets, crowding together over steaming plates. Our meals felt like a protective cloak. No matter what the outside world told me I could or couldn't do because of what I was, with my plate full, I felt capable, supported, and limitless.

**BROTHER AMIN, A BLACK MUSLIM** community leader with local roots, knew pretty much everyone in the Greenville food chain. For this qurbani, he found us a farmer with excellent goats. The July morning we left for the goat farm, it was hot and muggy, with thick grey clouds, stragglers from the previous night's thunderstorm. My two brothers and I sat in our AMC station wagon, wondering why we were heading to a farm and when our dad would turn the air conditioning on. Eid was still a few days away. We figured we were scoping an outdoor space for our community's prayers. We rolled up to a farm a few miles north of town, where Brother Amin's blue 1950s Chevy Styleline was already parked by the pasture gate. He enthusiastically embraced us and took us to a large field dotted with two sheds.

Our dad said we were there to look for goats. Before I could process what that

meant, about a dozen goats came rushing out of a shed to greet us. They were as tall as our waists and nipped at our fingers. It reminded me of our summer visits to Lucknow, where we'd pet and feed our neighbors' goats. I remembered that I'd reach out and carefully rub my hand across the tops of their backs. Their spotted fur felt like used prayer rugs, smooth in one direction and rough in the other. I'd pat them firmly and feel their haunches, like I'd seen my friends do with their Labradors.

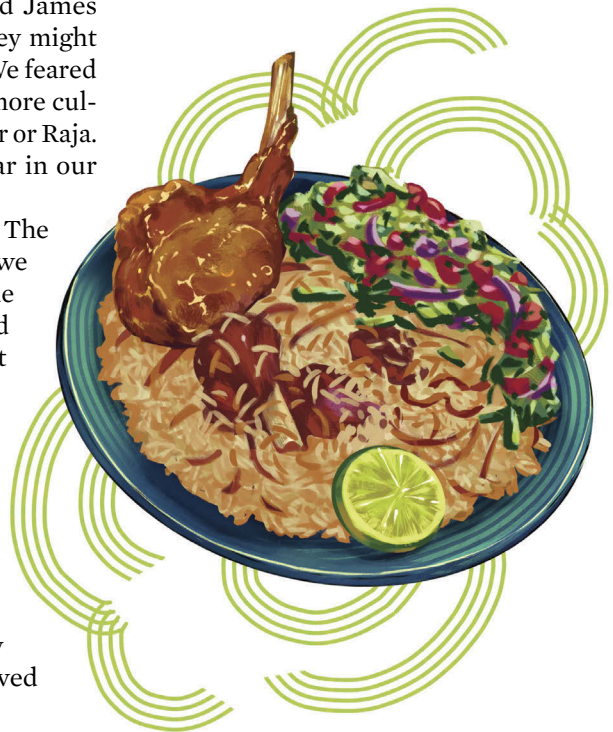
My dad said we could pick two goats to take home. For religious and cultural reasons, no Muslim families we knew kept dogs as pets. Since we weren't allowed to have dogs, we took what we could get. My brothers and I argued over potential goat names on the way home. Every animal has a name in the South, even if it's just "That Yard Cat." We gravitated to strong Southern male names, like Earl or Carl. Or any player on the Los Angeles Lakers, our favorite basketball team. We petted Earl and James Worthy and discussed how they might sleep in our shared bedroom. We feared our parents would insist on a more cultural name, something like Kabir or Raja. We kept Kareem Abdul-Jabbar in our back pocket just in case.

Our house sat on a corner lot. The driveway was big enough that we could practice our second-grade dashes from home plate to second base, or play cricket or half-court basketball. On this day, we parked on the street instead. The driveway sat empty and vast, almost foreboding. My little brother and I each grabbed a rope and gently lifted Earl and James Worthy from the trunk. We trotted them toward the house. Nihal Uncle was already there. Two goatless men arrived

with a tarp and a black bag filled with knives and rope. My dad hauled out a weathered oak stump that they'd later use as a butcher block. We took the goats into the backyard to show them our swing set. Meanwhile the uncles set up the tarp and knives in our garage. They called us over and did a short prayer. I'd like to say "then it hit us." But it didn't.

**P**IG PICKINGS ARE A RITUAL IN eastern North Carolina. They are dinner, homecoming, culinary theater, and picnic rolled into one. They're aptly named because people just reach into a whole pig, slowly barbecued over coals, and pick out the meat they want. Here, people throw pig pickings for any occasion. Our neighbors hosted them. My Little League team did, too, and so did a church choir that I left after they tried not-so-subtly to convert me to Catholicism.

The town's pork obsession fed my parents' Muslim dietary paranoia. They



assumed that pork products and derivatives could be hidden anywhere—bread, cookies, chips, water, iced tea, air. We didn't think our neighbors were out to get us; we just assumed that, given the chance, they'd liquefy a pig and drink it like Kool-Aid. "Pork is to Americans what mangoes are to Desis," my dad would say, using the colloquial term for people from South Asia. And I got that. One of the adults at the mosque once told me that the brown spots on white people's skin came from eating so much pork and pigskin. Years later I found out those spots were just called moles, and that the adult was a dermatologist.

At the pig pickings I've been to, most people show up when the pig is about an hour from being ready, when it's flipped from skin side up to meat side up. But every barbecue event starts with a slaughter, whether it's done in a field, a barn, a processing plant—or a suburban driveway. Between the late 1980s and 1990s, North Carolina's hog production quadrupled. In 1992, the Smithfield plant opened in Tar Heel, some two hours south of Greenville. It became the world's largest processor of hogs by the late 1990s. We heard countless stories of hog waste lagoons seeping into groundwater, damaging the delicate systems of both the environment and the human body. We read about poor conditions for factory workers and a system enabled by pro-pork industry policies and slack enforcement of regulations. I knew that all pigs' lives didn't end with a prayer.

In Sunday school classes at the mosque, we learned that for *halal* meat (comparable to Kosher), the end matters as much as the life. At the age of twelve, I got to know pigs in a different way. I would take trips to the local slaughterhouses with my dad's coworkers to pick up coolers of pig and cow hearts. They were performing experiments to study coronary artery diseases. I'd slip on plastic gloves

and marvel at how truly powerful these muscles felt in my hand. I felt some residual guilt. I remembered how scared Earl was. And I, too, justified the means to the end.

**I WAS RELIGIOUS ENOUGH TO CON-**vince myself that I wasn't solely responsible for Earl's death. Still, the regret hung over me like a Charlie Brown cloud. That cloud dissipated as we said final prayers and pulled out sheets of brown paper, knives, and ziplock bags. Familiar, quickened, and precise butchery followed. Nani, my maternal grandmother and family boss who lived with us, sat on the garage steps, telling Nihal Uncle how to thwack the meat against the tree stump to tenderize it first before slicing it.

Culturally, South Asians and Southern conservatives aligned on segregating sexes at social events. While the men killed and cut, the women divided and cooked. My mom and Parveen Auntie poured water with ice while we grappled with humanity and sinew. Later, they poured chai for everyone and then packed most of the meat into the garage freezer. After supper, we would divide the rest amongst the families that came over and to less-fortunate local families.

My brother and I started washing the blood down the driveway with the hose. My uncle suggested we pool it all in the tarp; otherwise, our porous driveway would turn pink. Mrs. Baverstock, our loveliest neighbor, inquired nicely about what we were doing. She was sincere and unfazed. We trusted her. One white family we didn't know slowly drove by, looked over, stopped, rolled down the window, and asked, "Hey, what are y'all up to?" I didn't know how to respond.

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question meant to express judgment, aggression, or just genuine curiosity? Maybe I was overly sensitive about how I differed from my neighbors. Since preschool, people in Greenville had pointed out my differences in skin color, religion, culture. Or maybe it was just me, feeling that I didn't belong and that questioning eyes trained on us even when they didn't. That's another way of saying that I never understood why we had to explain rinsing blood off our driveway. We all slaughtered, cooked, prayed, and gathered. In Greenville, though, like on George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, some people's activities seemed more equal than others. Eventually, I said, "Just cleaning up!" They smiled, waved, and moved on.

I felt immense pride in the details. Here we were, a bunch of kids, washing away a sea of red along with the fading whispers of Earl's life, washing away our guilt, in a zig-zag pattern as the pink water picked up a few rocks and pine needles and dirt, and a viscous brook swooshed towards the drain at the corner. Fur clumps rode the current. Dads daydreamed about goat nihari. Moms fried onions, cinnamon, cardamom, and cloves on an outdoor stove to make pulao. Coals burned for goat chops. The smoke and smells floated up to mix with the others. Like any summer

weekend in Greenville, the aromas of neighborhood barbecues and family dinners soaked into our clothing and our hearts, then out through our pores, carrying stories of their origins. Up the street, my friend Will's dad probably had a pork shoulder on the smoker. Across the street, Rocky's mom was making her weekend gravy, rich with tomatoes and garlic. The warm front of fried onion, garlic, and ginger from our own home drifted to meet them somewhere over the driveway.

Dinner was ready. Platters overflowed with kebabs and pulao. Alongside stood a steel bowl of kachumber—sliced tomatoes, onions, green chiles, and cilantro with salt. I'd pour the juice that collected at the bottom of the bowl over everything, especially the Parker's corn sticks that Nihal Uncle never failed to bring. We ate with our hands, getting sticky and smoky. Us kids sat on the floor near our parents and drank Coke with ice, stealing sips of their chai. We discussed *Ghostbusters* and giggled about when our parents would stop referring to home plate as "home base." They talked about work and the upcoming presidential election. Ours were the voices of a growing community, filled with killings and pickings and religious entanglements, mixing like rising smoke. 🍷

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