A CERTAIN TYPE OF SOUTHERNER

How I came to feel at home in the world—and in Kentucky

BY CHANDRA RAM

GROWING UP IN LEXINGTON, KENTUCKY, Sunday mornings were for catechism and Mass. Sometimes after church, my mother would pause our wood-paneled station wagon in front of Wheeler's Pharmacy and send me in to pick up a gallon of milk. Wheeler's boasted a classic soda fountain with crinkle fries and grilled cheese sandwiches fried in butter. One afternoon, as I plunked a jug of two percent and a dollar bill on the counter, the woman at the register leaned over, glasses sliding down her nose, to take in this brown-skinned, black-haired girl in pigtails and church clothes.

"Honey...what *are* you?"

The question didn't offend me the way it would now; from a young age I had to explain myself to strangers. I told them my father was Indian and my mother was Irish. They had immigrated to America a few years before I was born. Yes, we visited our family overseas, and yes, it sure was different there. But, no, we didn't worship cows.

Her point was unmistakable: I did not belong in the place I called home. Back then, we mostly thought of race as a binary thing; being some shade between black and white meant people had questions. *Just taking an interest*, they might say. *Y'all are just so exotic!* Even benign interrogations sent the message that my family was inherently other. Not the family on an outing to the zoo, but the pandas in the enclosure.

We fumbled our way through moments like those, crafting our American lives from scratch. My father bought us tickets to cheer on the UK Wildcats and told work colleagues to call him Mike. My brothers joined Cub Scouts, painting Pinewood Derby cars and eating Happy Meals after pack meetings. I pirouetted and cartwheeled through ballet and gymnastics, got used to the agonizing pause

Illustrations by Thumy Phan

as teachers struggled to pronounce my name, and took experimental bites of my friends' pimento cheese sandwiches. We thanked the neighbor who stopped by with a chess pie, tasting it later to figure out what exactly was in it.

Food was both our path and our stumbling block. My mother shook her head at weak American coffee and the processed cheese masquerading as cheddar. But she let me eat peanut butter and jelly every day for lunch. Raised on meat and potatoes boiled to mush, she became a talented South Indian cook, making her own yogurt and frying pooris that puffed in hot oil in defiance of the soft white bread on our neighbors' tables.

Noreen Mary Teresa Ram has the spiciest palate of anyone I've ever known. I later wondered if some lack of seasoning in her childhood made her twice as hungry for flavor as an adult. Once, when we were visiting my paternal grandparents at their home in Visakhapatnam, I saw her eat a good-sized chunk of raw Thai bird chile, a move that dazzled my aunties. Who was this red-haired, blue-eyed woman who carried idli steamers in her suitcase home to America?

On Sunday afternoons in Kentucky, she fried potatoes and onions with Kashmiri chile powder. The aromas floated through the house. As the onions melted into chunks of buttery potatoes in the pan, an undercurrent of chiles tied the flavors together. I resented the smell of Indian spices that loitered for hours; they reminded me of our outsider status. During sleepovers, I made sure my friends got nowhere near our Indian spice cupboard that stank of asafoetida. But no matter how conflicted I felt about my heritage, I could always get behind a plate of potato-onion fry.

Out in the world, I craved the unexotic. I wanted a life that didn't smell like anything at all. I watched how other people spoke and moved and pretended to fit in, taking notes like an anthropologist. I aspired to be a certain type of Southerner. I cringe now when I think about how much effort I put into learning Confederate history and reading *Gone with the Wind*, blithely glossing over the racism that would have put me in servants' quarters, not in hoop skirts in the Tara dining room.

I studied my classmates' blond feathered and permed hair with envy. Even the mirror reflected my imposter syndrome. At fourteen, I saved up my allowance to buy skin bleaching cream advertised in the back of a magazine, believing that with enough effort, I could become a real American. (As soon as my skin began to tingle and flush, I lost my nerve and scraped it off my face.)

When we visited India, I clumsily draped a shawl around my shalwar kameez, stuck a bindi on my forehead, and strolled to the candy emporium with my cousins to buy bottles of Thums Up, the spicy cola we drank through flimsy paper straws that dissolved into the bottle within minutes. I smiled blankly at my cousins' reenactments of Bollywood movies I'd never seen and at anyone who spoke Telugu to me. Few did. Instead, people stared at me. Something about my person screamed foreigner.

Never quite white or brown enough, I spent years trying on both identities for size, like silk dresses that promise to transform you into someone sophisticated and worldly. We third-culture kids were raised by parents who, with the best intentions, wanted us to retain our heritage and also fit in with other Americans. My parents went along with eighth-grade dances and trendy jeans. They thought that I was okay in this middle place; they would have wept if they'd found me trying to bleach my olive skin white. They were offering me both worlds; I just couldn't see either.

When my father died in 1987, I lost my connection to one of those worlds. Standing at his funeral, half-listening to inscrutable Sanskrit prayers that were more sound than words, I said goodbye to a parent. And a cultural ambassador. I could no longer ask him why it was important to eat laddu and other sweets at the temple. Or how to pronounce a word in Telugu. I gave up on fitting in, committing myself to a sad cultural bankruptcy.

When I left home a couple of years later to live in New York, Milan, and London before landing in Chicago, my goal was to create a new life for myself. My parents had moved half a world away from their homes, and encouraged me to go anywhere and everywhere, too. When I roamed, people still asked where I was from. But their questions were friendly conversation starters, shorthand to get to know me. I began to stumble less in my answers. Walking through Istanbul, a city that spans the border between Europe and Asia, I felt at home among people who carved out their own identities within that mix. Sitting in my flat in London talking with South African, Irish, and Swedish friends who embraced a mix of cultures as a matter of course, I realized how closed-minded it was of me to assign a single identity to India, America, or myself. As I moved from place to place, I unclenched my shoulders and let go of the need to define myself so narrowly.

OCCASIONALLY, I STILL think about that day at Wheeler's. I'm reminded of it every time Vice President Kamala Harris is compelled to insert into a speech that she was born in California. She does it to tame people who question how a Black and Indian woman can also claim to be American. It reminds me that not all questions about identity are innocent.

I've learned that everyone yearns to belong. When I ask my mother about moving to America, she tells me how out of place she felt, learning to drive on the opposite side of the road. How she had to explain to people that yes, she was Irish, but, no, she had never eaten corned beef and cabbage.

My younger brother and I tease our "American" spouses when we cook saag paneer and dosa with them. We know that when they married us, they welcomed those flavors and our culture into their lives. Now, on Sundays, my nieces and nephews dial in from Nairobi, Charleston, and Atlanta for our weekly Zoom sessions, and I marvel at how assured they are in the world. They give me hope. Born in Baltimore, my nephew Kieran lived in Kathmandu, Mumbai, and Nairobi before moving to back America. He tells me he didn't feel the need to code-switch like I did as a child; he has a stronger sense of self than I did at his age. He lives in Atlanta now and knows the world is his home.

I, TOO, REALIZE the world is my home. When I walk outside the airport after landing in New Delhi, the night air carries its own masala. There's a hint of toasted cumin and cardamom, which smells like the bottled-up promises of a tourism ad spritzed into the air. That smell is tempered by the chemical tang of cleaning solution, the sweet spoilage of rotting bananas, and the acrid smoke of buffalo dung burned for fuel. This smell of so much humanity hits me in my blood, a drumbeat of familiarity that tells me this place is mine.

Driving to Lexington from Chicago, I roll down my window when we cross the Ohio River into Kentucky. The air I inhale is sweet with bluegrass and honeysuckle. Here, the sharpness of manure comes from cows and pampered race horses. When I get to my mom's house, I take my bags up to my childhood bedroom and sink into being home. I don't fret about things like I used to. I'm more at peace. My only worry is, *Will she make that potato-onion fry tomorrow?*

Chandra Ram is the editor of Plate *magazine and the author of* The Complete Indian Instant Pot Cookbook.

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