

2017 Young Writers Award Entry

Writers aged 18-25

**Mango Chutney**

Hasina hoped that she would not die in this foreign country.

Her heart thundered in her chest as she was led on to the lift. She held her handbag close to her body. Her daughter, Meera, had said to make sure she always had her passport with her at all times. Meera had been very helpful, had told her exactly how this would work. They would be the last ones to disembark the plane so the attendants could help them get onto the disabled lift and be lowered on to the tarmac, where Meera and her family would be waiting. Yet no matter how many times Meera had gone over it, Hasina could not suppress the waves of anxiety shooting through her chest. Her husband, Abdul, shuffled along in front of her and grabbed her wrist as soon as he could. “God save us,” he muttered in Bengali. She could have sworn she could hear the screws protesting under their feet beneath them as they settled on the lift. She wanted to get back on the plane and ask the captain to turn it back around.

A smart flight attendant dressed in a pencil skirt and a crisp white blouse smiled at them and stepped on to the lift. “Down... don’t worry... safe,” was all that Hasina could understand, despite the effort the woman was clearly taking to enunciate her words. These Australians spoke so fast that their words felt like bullets rushing past her. She was sure sometimes they were pulling words out of thin air.

The woman spoke more rapidly into a walkie-talkie type contraption. Hasina peered out the clear walls of the lift out at the tarmac beyond and the hulking planes that rested upon it. A man in a bright yellow jacket pulled a lever and suddenly the lift was descending, making soft whirring noises the whole time. Hasina squeezed her eyes shut and clung to the handrail behind her. By the time they reached the tarmac, Hasina’s knuckles were white and her teeth were chattering.

The flight attendant gently took Hasina by the elbow. Another attendant rushed over with a wheelchair and helped Hasina's husband into the chair. Abdul smiled and nodded his thanks. As the flight attendant wheeled him through the airport, Abdul looked up at her with a raised eyebrow as if to say, "This customer service is alright!"

Despite the tiredness coursing through her body, Hasina could not help but feel a jolt of excitement at the sight of her family waiting beyond the customs gates. They were on their tip-toes, peering over the heads of everyone in the crowd. As soon as they saw Hasina and Abdul approaching they shrieked and waved their hands wildly. Hasina pulled the drape of her sari around her head, suddenly shy.

As soon as they were beyond the gates, her family rushed forwards. "Amma!" exclaimed Meera, clinging onto Hasina and sobbing softly into her shoulder. "How are you? Are you well? You're so thin!" Meera gushed.

Hasina tried to swallow the lump in her throat. She didn't want to make a scene. But here was her daughter, bright-eyed and dressed in jeans like a modern woman, flush with life and good health. It had been five years since they'd seen each other. Hasina felt self-conscious, hyperaware of the streaks of grey in her hair and the way her mouth puckered like a dried fruit without all the teeth to support her lips.

"It's good to see you, *mamoni*," was all Hasina could manage before her voice cracked. Seeing the grandchildren made her heart break even more with equal parts happiness and sadness. When she had last seen them her grandson, Rashed, had been a short, skinny thing constantly running around in shorts. He stooped down now to envelop her in his long arms. There was hair growing on his upper lip now and when he spoke it was a deep, rumbling sound like his father's.

The most changed, however, was her granddaughter, Laila. She had been 16 when they had last met. Laila had always been beautiful, with waves of thick black hair and oddly-light brown eyes that seemed almost golden in the sun. She was a grown woman now. She walked elegantly and with a slight degree of pride. All hints of that nervous and self-conscious teenager had disappeared with time. Laila grinned and put an arm around Hasina's shoulder

as they started walking towards the car. “I’m so glad you’re here, *Nanu!* I’ve heard Bangladesh has been crazy lately. Don’t worry, you’re going to love it here, you can even go out for those long walks that you love! Welcome home!”

Laila’s grandmother was impossible.

It had been two weeks since they had arrived in Australia. The first week Laila tried to be understanding as her grandmother complained that it was too humid, that the water tasted strange, that the rice had a strange texture. Laila was willing to chalk that all up to the big move they had made. After all, it could not have been easy for her grandparents to agree to leave everything in Bangladesh behind and move here.

If she were honest though, even now Laila could not fathom why her grandparents would choose to spend the rest of their days in the dusty solitude of their flat in Bangladesh, rather than be with their family in a wide, sunny Queenslander. 5 years ago she had visited Bangladesh. Her memories of the trip consisted of not being allowed out on the streets without her parents and having to boil her water before drinking it. She understood that there had been a time when her grandparent’s flat had been full of life. It had been her mother’s family home for almost forty years. Births and wedding celebrations and countless jovial dinners and tea parties had taken place there. But now, all the children had left to move abroad and it was just her grandparents left. The final warning sign had been when Laila’s grandmother had broken her hip a few months ago and had had no one around to help her recover. Laila’s mother had demanded that they come live with her in Queensland, and she would not take no for an answer.

During her grandparents’ second week in Australia, everyone’s patience was wearing thin. Each night Laila’s mother would make a fresh vegetable curry with almost no salt and extra chilli, just the way her grandparents liked it. Yet at each dinner her grandmother would begrudgingly take the tiniest of bites. She would then scrunch up her mouth and spent the remainder of her dinner pushing plain white rice around her plate. “The potatoes are too hard in this country,” she would say. Or, “The skin of the eggplants tastes bitter...” or “the pumpkins are so much sweeter in Bangladesh.” Finally one night she sighed and said, “Oh, how I miss the mango *achar* back home.”

One day after classes Laila brought back a jar of the most expensive mango chutney she could find from their local Indian grocery store. Her grandmother took a little onto a spoon and looked down at it as if it were a slimy concoction from outer space. After the first taste she protested, "My dear, no factory product could compare to the handmade *achars* we made back in Bangladesh. Only the finest raw mangoes will do."

So the next day Laila stopped at the fruit shop before going home. She inhaled the sticky, sweet scent of the mangoes before she even reached the aisle. Before her lay a tray of plump, red-orange mangoes, little beads of juice escaping through the skin stretched over the golden flesh beneath. She grabbed a couple of those, before reaching for the rich green raw mangoes pressed up against the back wall. Her mouth watered as she inhaled the tangier, somehow more tantalising scent of the raw mangoes. How could her grandmother complain now?

Hasina spent the better part of the afternoon raiding the cupboards for empty class containers to put the *achar* in once it was ready. She was excited for Laila to come home. The girl did not take much interest in hearing about how exactly to cook biryani so the meat was tender but the potatoes were soft, or just the right amount of turmeric to add to a good chicken curry. But Laila had grinned at her the previous night and had promised to return with only the best Queensland mangoes.

And Laila had not been bluffing. Hasina opened the door for her as Laila walked in with bag after bag of ingredients. Large, golden mangoes to have for dessert that night. The sleek, green raw mangoes Hasina had asked for to make into an *achar*. Both raw and dried chillies to crush into the *achar* mix. Cloves of garlic. A fresh bag of mustard powder.

They sat cross-legged in the afternoon sun, surrounded by ingredients. First she showed Laila how to crush dried chillies with a mortar and pestle, the seeds and crispy skin giving way with a somewhat satisfying *crunch*. In Bangladesh, however, they would grow their own chillies in the garden. When the red chillies were soft and overly ripe, she would pull them

gently off the branches and lay them out side by side in the sun, drying only the finest ones for use in the finest *achars*.

Hasina wished she could show Laila how to cut the mangoes with a *boti*, the large curved blade used by wives in Bangladeshi villages to make the most efficient and precise cuts in fruits, vegetables, and meats. Nobody sold *botis* here, apparently.

She asked Laila to pass her the mangoes, hoping to teach her how to cut them into the right-sized slices so they would soak up enough spice. Her vision suddenly clouded with tears as she held the mango in her hand and tasted the tangy scent on her tongue. For a moment she was walking out of her old block of flats out into the garden that had flourished under her care for the past thirty-eight years. She was standing under the shade of her mango tree. She was reaching up to caress the thin branches that were strained with the task of holding up the mangoes. Those precious emeralds themselves were smooth to the touch, their skin unblemished, perfectly curved. They smelled like home.

“I’m so sorry, *Nanu*, I didn’t mean to...” Laila murmured, pulling Hasina out of the protective embrace of those old branches.

“I’m fine... I just... let’s finish making this *achar*, shall we?”

“Are you still scared of the lift, *Nanu*?” Laila teased as she pulled a shawl out of the suitcase and draped it over her grandmother’s thin shoulders. Although the Queensland summer still raged outside, the airport had decided to over-compensate with air-conditioning.

Her grandmother smirked. “I think I’m over it now.”

Laila watched as her grandmother smoothed out her hair and twisted it efficiently into a knot at the nape of her neck. Laila breathed in the smell of the coconut oil laced through her grandmother’s hair, hoping it would not be the last time. Her grandmother had left behind the

jar of coconut oil, straight from Bangladesh, in the bathroom cupboard. “Use it on your hair at least three times a week,” she had instructed, “and your hair will never fall out.”

“Why do you look so sad, *shona*?”

Laila blinked away the tears that had welled up without warning. The lump in her throat was growing with each passing moment. “I’m not sad,” she tried to smile. She wanted to say many things, but what use was there in asking her grandparents to stay for another month, and then another, and then another? What use was there in trying to convince them to stay, when their mind had been in Bangladesh the whole time they were in Australia? She was sad, selfishly, for herself. Beyond that though, she was glad that her grandmother would be able to return to their ancestral family home. Laila had no doubts that it would not be long before her grandmother was squatting in their garden picking up weeds or reaching up the branches of the mango tree to protect from greedy bugs.

Laila had almost forgotten – she reached into her bag and pulled out the container filled to the brim with golden, glistening mango chutney.

“I know it doesn’t taste like the one from home. I know we never ended up finding that spice you needed. But please take this with you, for me.”

Her grandmother took the container in both hands and held it to her chest like it was made of the most fragile glass. “There is no other *achar* that tastes just like this one.”

Laila sat with her head resting on her grandmother’s shoulder until the final boarding call. As everyone began sobbing and making last minute promises to each other, Laila silently adjusted her grandmother’s sari. She checked her grandmother had her handkerchief and mints within easy reach. She checked the big, brass house keys to the old house were sitting safely inside the secret pocket.

“Until next time,” her grandmother whispered.

“Get home safe, *Nanu*.”