Wrath of the Pink Chicken

by Minhal Khan

It was a warm summer day when my father and I decided to have the worst lunch of our lives. The dish in question had no official name and belonged to no specific cuisine, nor was it the product of some hare-brained foray into culinary experimentation. It was simply borne of one chicken—may it rest in peace—and an ominous box of spices we found in my brothers' cupboard back in our home country, India. Bearing that in mind, I have no choice to but to call what we ate: "Pink Chicken."

It's hard to recall what spices they were or the cuisine they were meant for specifically, but considering its dusty and visibly shriveled appearance, the box might as well have had "Toss this in the trash ASAP!" written on it. Common wisdom holds that it is unwise to cook with ancient spices found in musty cupboards, but the prospect of trying something exotic was, in the eyes of my father and I, too good to resist.

My father had the honor of creating the dreaded 'Pink Chicken' that day. Based on what has been said so far, you could be forgiven for assuming he messed things up, that he undercooked or overcooked the meal, or that he inflicted all kinds of horrors upon the chicken in a manner typical of an inexperienced cook, but I can assure you that that absolutely was not the case. My father was by no means a bad cook; on the contrary, he was – and is – quite the adept chef, to the point where some of his recipes have been the object of envy of relatives and friends alike. No, the fault lies entirely with the accursed box of spices and whatever hellish dimension spawned them.

Generally, when looking at a freshly cooked meal, one's first thought should not be, "Is it supposed to look like that?" Yet there it was in all its rose-tinted glory. It tasted exactly like how something called 'Pink Chicken' would taste: sour, alien, spicy, and perhaps worst of all, a flavor that could only be described as *musty.* The pink skin gave way to reveal reddish flesh beneath, yet strangely it was not raw. The aroma it gave off was off-putting, to say the least. It was not rotten, per se, but it felt like the dish was part of a three-course meal in a restaurant situated in the uncanny valley. Such was the nature of this abomination. It was the antithesis of cooking. It was Satan's answer to pad thai, sushi, cheese and wine, gyros and paella. It was pink chicken, and its very existence made a compelling argument for vegetarianism.

It is strange how often we take things like body language for granted. Actions such as eye twitches, grimaces and crossed arms can betray our innermost thoughts and feelings. In the case of my father and I, the polite yet uneasy coughs coupled with the constant reaches for glasses of water betrayed our inner shouts of protest at what we were eating. My father has a reputation for being a quiet and hardened man; as a child who grew up in poverty and saw some of the worst life had to offer, it's hard to imagine him growing up to be anything else. But as we ate that horrid meal, in a rare moment, my father's usual stoic demeanor began to crack as he recoiled in disgust. Evidently, the wrath of the 'Pink chicken' was too much even for him to bear. As we made eye contact, I could tell there was one singular thought running through our minds, one engram imprinted on our brains being broadcast like an SOS message: *"*This sucks." Quietly, we disposed of the foul remains like criminals in a mobster flick. We had takeaway later.

In her poem, "My Father and The Fig Tree," Naomi Shihab Nye touches upon themes of food and the role it plays in familial bonds. I can see many parallels between not just her story and mine, but also our relationships with our parents as well. For instance, the line "…emblems,

assurances of a world that was always his own" (Nye, lines 35-36) implies that while she doesn't necessarily understand the significance of the culture she comes from—at least not to the extent that her father does—she still loves him dearly. As someone who was raised outside of their native country, I identify heavily with this; my dad, for example, is an ardent fan of the old Bollywood films of his day as well as the vulgar style of comedy that our hometown is known for, whereas I, on the other hand, am not. And while our interests have little to no common overlap, we still share a close bond due in part to events like the aforementioned culinary train wreck. Nye's poem as a whole plays into the notion that if nothing else, good, wholesome food can be a key component in bonding moments such as the one between her and her father. But I think the debacle of the Pink Chicken invites a reevaluation of this idea.

My biggest takeaway from that fateful day was not that food plays a crucial role in the development of relationships. That much is evidenced by events like weekend family lunches and romantic dinners, to say nothing of the multitude of food festivals across the world. Instead, what was most surprising to me was how *bad* food contributes just as much to a relationship. Case in point: although more than ten years have passed since the "Pink Chicken Incident," my father and I can still recall in vivid detail the day we inadvertently spat on the name of poultry by sacrificing a poor chicken in the name of trying something new. Nowadays, like a reflex, the word 'pink' can conjure up detailed recollections of off-putting tastes and displeasing aromas and have my father and I alternate between gagging and breathless laughter. With moments like these in mind, it could be argued that cooking and eating bad food together can be more memorable and—though it may not seem like it—enjoyable as opposed to good food, but I digress. All I know for certain is that I haven't looked at chicken the same way since.