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*A short story on a  
dinner gone wrong.*

*Katori speaks on how  
caste and patriarchy  
operate everyday affairs  
in Muslim Indian  
households.*

There is a feast.

Ten people sit in the dining area, which takes up half of the drawing room in which all the children are being made to sit so that they don't create a ruckus loud enough to disturb the adults. Hastily sprayed air freshener mixes with the intoxicating perfumes of the various *itra* that follow the men as they take their seats at the dining table. On it, served in LaOpala plates taken out once a year from the crockery cupboard in Amma's room, is *gurda-kaleji* and *biryani* made from the mutton cut hours ago, the white of the starched kurtas the men wear not betraying the bloodshed they were witness to. Let us not wonder who these men are, because there are men like this everywhere. They are already too important in every household, so let them not be important for this story.

No, let us look at other people in the house instead. There is Amma, the executive chef for the day like all other days, labouring in the kitchen to get the flavour of the biryani just right. The space is sweltering and Amma is soaked through her kurta—neither fancy nor starched because despite it being *Bakreid*, she hasn't had the time to dress up for the occasion. She reasons it's for the better anyway, she'll feel fresher once she's done with her work and can change into the one with *zardozi* detail she bought for the occasion. (She's never done with her work, but it is Eid so let us let her have that thought.) Once the biryani is done, she hands it to Sunny who is running to put food and fresh *rotis* on the table. It is Eid but Sunny is dressed in his usual clothes: pants and a shirt. If one were to look closely one may see the pants lack their creases today, and that the shirt is one Sunny has never donned while washing bathrooms for the household every day. But who is one to notice such things? Sunny runs back to the kitchen to take more rotis, reminding Bhabhi that Bhai asked for some chillis to be cut and served in a bowl five minutes ago.

Our spectator, meanwhile, is sitting in a corner assessing this rush back and forth. He has been banished to a sofa along with Ibrahim and Amna because they were the loudest, and Manno Aapa has given them enough glares to prevent the three from moving an inch until their food is served. He is bored of Eid now that the goats are gone, but he can't play hide and seek until the adults leave, and Manno Aapa's eyes are constantly on them as she serves Abba another helping of biryani. She has screamed "Ayaan!" twice already—once when he tried to throw a booger at Amna, and once when he did manage to throw one at Ibrahim, so he knows she is watching. On a normal day, Ayaan would roll his tongue at Aapa and run away but he knows his father is sitting at the table too and any mistake now could mean a good beating at home. So he stays put and swings his legs while waiting for his biryani—the only respite from the hell he is being put through. Aapa notices him again and her frustration increases—Ayaan thinks it might be because he is swinging his feet, and Ammi says swinging your feet is *manhoos*, but he just cannot care anymore. However, instead of giving him a talking-to like he expects, Aapa instead asks him to come over to her. When he follows her to the passage that leads to the kitchen, Sunny following behind, she says he has to help out with the service and gives him a plate to take back to the dining table, to his father.

Our spectator is happy with his new job—it is more exciting than waiting for biryani. He is taking plates full of rotis to the tables, pouring water for Bade Abba and bringing a bowl for Chachu to throw picked bones in. He scrunches his nose when he has to go too close to anyone: he is not a fan of the itra, but Aapa has asked him of all the children for help today, so he does his job dutifully. The meal is nearing a close, and soon it will be the children's turn to eat. Our important men are dusting off crumbs as they finish the last of the *kaleji*, complimenting a cook who isn't there to hear it. Aapa is done serving the important men and goes to enjoy some bites of *kebab* with Chachi to the kitchen. They will, after all, have to wait for their own feast for a while. Sunny is hovering nearby, waiting for his next task. Only the *sewai* is left to be served, and this last course is where chaos begins.

Chaos doesn't explode into being with a Big Bang—our spectator and important men and Manno Aapa do not hear any loud crash, but unfurls like the heat in the kitchen, rising and rising until everyone is soaked. It begins with Amma asking Sunny to sit down and eat and Abba asking the important men to move to the drawing room sofas, the children scurrying away to the dining table for their turn. Ayaan is hungry for his biryani now, but is

yet to take his seat next to Ibrahim as he wants to help Aapa serve the sewai. He walks behind her, holding a tray that has the LaOpala bowls placed on them. Aapa scoops two large spoonfuls of sewai into each and gives it to Ayaan to pass to each man, making sure enough *meva* has been sprinkled on top. After all, important men deserve important food for their important bellies. All this is good; this is a feast, and it would have remained good if our spectator, who was getting more and more excited for his plate of biryani would have gotten his plate of biryani soon. But no, something has to go wrong and it does. They are a bowl short. Bade Abba is still waiting for his share of the delectable, syrupy sewai he was eyeing as Aapa scrambles for a bowl near the tray. Finding none, she sends Ayaan on a mission to fetch another. He passes Sunny on his way, who is sitting on the floor of the passage with his share of *rumali roti* and *kaleji*, the packet of raw mutton Amma has prepared for him to take home kept safely at his side. Reaching the kitchen, Ayaan barely gets a word out before Amma hands him a bowl full of sewai to serve. Ayaan runs with the small bowl in his tiny hands, impatient enough to ignore Aapa altogether and hand it straight to Bade Abba, who is still waiting for his sewai.

The space is sweltering.

Lying flat on Bade Abba's palm is a small steel bowl, a *katori* if you must. Cracked on the side, the bottom bearing a yellow tint from overuse. The sewai it holds may be just as sweet, but the room has gone quiet as if it bears raw meat. Aapa is stuttering as she tries to both apologise and pull Ayaan aside, but it is Sunny who takes the *katori* away from Bade Abba's palms, uttering apologies as he scurries away with Ayaan and Aapa in tow. It isn't clean enough to belong with the important men, you see. And there is a feast.