

Sandip Roy

The Smells of Home

When she was seven years old Savitri's aunt visited from England. She brought her boxes of delicious chocolates filled with strawberries and hazelnuts and lots of pretty dresses. But what Savitri loved best was to bury her head in her aunt's suitcase and breathe in the fragrance of her clothes and cosmetics.

"Lavender, lilac, rosemary," she would whisper to herself making a daisy chain of flowers she had never seen.

It was a scorchingly hot summer even by Delhi standards. In the afternoons her aunt would draw the blinds and take a nap. Savitri would tiptoe into the dark room and carefully open the suitcase. Then she would bury her head in the soft cottons and smooth silks and breathe deeply and surreptitiously. It was like a little corner of England trapped in there. She would feel herself falling through it and leaving the hot parched Delhi streets and the cruel blue Indian skies far behind. It smelled cool and fresh—so unlike the ripe kitchen smells that clung to her mother's sari—turmeric and sweat and stale talcum powder.

"Foxglove, primrose, daffodil."

She was now walking down a little cobbled street past houses like the picture on her tin of chocolates. She was going home to have scones and strawberries and cream. Her house had a pointed tiled roof and a chimney. And ivy on the walls or was it honeysuckle?

"Honeysuckle, bluebells, forget-me-not."

Crouched near the suitcase, like a little mouse, Savitri wished she could pack herself in with the soft nighties and synthetic saris. She imagined waking up and finding she was in England.

"Savi," her mother's shrill voice could be heard from downstairs. "Where is that girl? Savi, you haven't finished your rice. Come down or the cat will eat it up."

Savitri decided that when she grew up she would go to England.

Avinash was not quite from England. He was from New York. Well, not New York, New York but some small university town in the northern part of the state where he was just finishing his Ph.D. in Economics or something like that. It all sounded very difficult to Savitri. She liked to read Wordsworth and Keats. Not even Byron—there was something too hot and sunny about Byron, something sinewy and dangerous seemed to lurk beneath his poetry. For her Keats and Wordsworth had a watercolor feel about them which she found very soothing. Their colors were more muted. Savitri had never liked bright harsh colors—pinks and oranges and yellows.

"Look at that girl," her mother would say. "Only seventeen and dresses like a widow."

Avinash seemed the perfect match for her. Serious, academic and sober—he didn't wear hot pinks and sunny yellows either.

"My son," said his mother to Savitri's mother over a cup of tea, "has always been the top boy in his class. A model student his principal called him. Never one to

wander the streets like these other roadside Romeos. That was why I never had the slightest fear of sending him to America. You know Mrs. Dutt, it's all about upbringing and family. If you bring him up right, then why should you fear?"

Savitri's mother nodded wisely.

"Everyone told me," continued his mother, "See one day he'll call and announce he wants to marry some American girl. But I said 'I trust my Avi. He would not break his mother's heart.' Arre, he is my only son. He knows his duty. Ever since his poor father died I have brought him up myself. It was not easy on a school-teacher's salary. But I had faith and see him now. Do you know he has had papers published in important journals. Why, my friend Sulata said to me, 'Look Bani, mark my words if your Avi does not get the Nobel Prize one day.'"

In the pause that ensued as all assembled digested this piece of information, Savitri's aunt jumped in.

"So how old is Avinash exactly?"

"Well," said his mother defensively, "he's thirty-three. But what's age in a man? My husband was eleven years older than me. I don't believe in all this same-age marriages that go on these days. You need some difference in age to maintain a balance in the household. And tell me, how can you respect your husband if you are the same age as him?"

"I've been telling him for so long now—get married, get married. But he keeps saying, 'First I must finish my Master's.' Then it was, 'Oh I must complete my Ph.D. and get a job, Ma. How will I have a family on a student's income?' So responsible, no? The day he got his professorship I said 'Enough Avi. Now I have to see you settled down with a good girl. Then only can I shut my eyes in peace.' He said 'But I don't have tenure yet' and I said '*Bas*. I will not listen anymore to your excuses.' We are not running after looks in my family," she said glancing at Savitri who was a little plain. "Good family and education is what we value. Avi's father was a renowned professor you know—he wrote three books. And I hear your Savitri has an M.A. in English Literature."

Avinash took Savitri out for dinner once. He was a thin quiet man with thinning hair and owlish glasses. He smelt faintly of lemony aftershave. They did not have much in common. She knew nothing about Economics, he had long forgotten his Wordsworth. They concentrated instead on the food and discussed the merits of the Tandoori chicken. When they exhausted that topic, they ate in silence listening to the ebb and flow of conversation at the tables around them.

"What was he like?" asked her mother.

"All right, I suppose," she answered. Though she had not found much in common with him she had not found anything objectionable either. At least he did not wear those loud colorful shirts with big flowers that she had seen American tourists wear.

Only once she said, almost wistfully, "You know I really wanted to go to England."

Her father laughed and said, "Savi, Wordsworth's England is long dead. In your grandfather's time people would go to England for then England still had power and glory. Now it is truly a nation of shopkeepers. And most of the shopkeepers are Indian anyway. You are lucky, you are going to the richest country in the world."

"And such a brilliant husband," added her mother.

"And so courteous and well-mannered," added her aunt. "I hope my daughter is as lucky as you."

"Heather, daisy, larkspur," Savitri said under her breath, playing with the words as if they were prayer beads.

Savitri was amazed at how easily she left India behind. As the airplane left Delhi airport she looked out of the window at the lights of Delhi growing smaller and smaller. She had a sense of her past, her ties, her home all falling away behind her like an unraveling sari. "Perhaps," she thought sipping her Coca-Cola, "I was not meant to be Indian at all." She glanced over at Avinash, seated next to her, absorbed in the latest issue of *Time*. He glanced up at her and finding himself caught in her gaze looked away guiltily. Then he said quietly "How do you imagine America?"

"America—I don't know," she said wonderingly. "Big buildings, fast cars, movies."

"Washing machines," she added as an afterthought. "Lawnmowers, microwaves."

"You never thought of America as freedom?"

"Freedom?" she said perplexed. "No not really." Then she smiled slightly and said, "Maybe it was for you when you went there as a student. But I am going there as your wife."

"That's true," he replied.

"Are you afraid that now I am going with you, you will lose your freedom?" she asked half-teasingly.

"Who is really free anyway?" he answered without looking at her and returned to the magazine. She opened her mouth to speak but he seemed to have drawn curtains around himself.

Savitri hated America from the moment she stepped off that plane. The accents jarred her—they had none of the clean crispness of the BBC World Service programs she so loved and listened to on her father's prized short-wave radio. The freeways with their whizzing cars and many lanes terrified her. She could not imagine ever being able to drive on them. Yet Avinash had told her that if you didn't know how to drive here you were a prisoner. She was confused by all the machines she needed to handle and all the buttons she had to press whether to get money from the bank or to buy a roll of stamps. But most of all she missed having people to talk to.

Avinash spent long hours at school sometimes coming home after she had gone to bed. She would lie in the dark hearing the purr of the microwave as he warmed his dinner. Her mother always waited for her father to come home before she had dinner. But Savitri invariably got a headache if she let herself go hungry too long. She would leave his dinner on the table in front of the jar of Priya mango pickles. She would lie in bed and try and figure out what he was eating.

"He must be finished with the dal, he is probably on the chicken now." She would hear him open the refrigerator as he got some Coke. They needed to get more Coke and detergent and something else. She knitted her brows and tried to remember what. Soon she knew she would hear the tap running as he rinsed the dishes and then the clank of the dishes being loaded into the dishwasher. That was when she closed her eyes and turned on her side, away from his side of the bed. It

was her way of punishing him for being late again. But he did not seem to mind. She would feel the bed as he climbed onto it. Then the sharp minty smell of toothpaste. In a little while she would hear his gentle easy breathing and she would lie awake angry, making grocery lists in her head.

Everyday she would run downstairs at two o'clock and check the mail. She had even come to know the postman. He always said, "Hi, how's it going?" But no one ever wrote to her. All she got were catalogs from department stores. She would spend the afternoon reading about furniture sales and installment plans to buy home entertainment systems. Apart from that all they seemed to get were bills and coupons from pizza-joints. She had written two letters home but had not gotten anything from India. Mail from India could take twenty days Avinash told her. Once she found a personal letter from India. In her excitement at seeing an Indian stamp she tore it open before she realized the letter was for Avinash. Though she did not read it he was very annoyed.

"I am your wife. We share the same bank account," she said.

"You don't understand," he replied, "letters are different. It could be, could be anything."

Savitri remembered the day she got her first letter. It had been raining all day—a fine dispiriting drizzle. She had wanted to walk down to the library but was stuck indoors since Avinash for some reason had left the umbrella in his office. Frustrated she had spent the whole day rearranging her spices. She had poured them into individual little spice-jars and then labeled the jars in her best handwriting. For a while she debated whether to write the Hindi names or the English ones—*haldi*, *jeera*, and *dhania* or *turmeric*, *cumin*, *coriander*? She finally decided on "Turmeric," "Cumin," "Coriander." But she did not know the word for *methi* so she left it blank. She smelt her hands—and suddenly remembered her mother cooking and then wiping her hands on her sari. Her old saris always had turmeric stains.

She wiped her hands on a paper towel and ran downstairs to get the mail. And there it was, a neat little envelope with Mrs. Mitra written on it in an almost childish uneven handwriting. She turned it over but there was no sender's name or address. The postmark was local. Puzzled she climbed up the stairs slowly trying to figure out who it was.

She put Avinash's mail on the dining table and pulled out the Kashmiri letter-cutter her friend Leena had given her and slit open the envelope. There was just one sheet in there—a yellow ruled sheet torn from a writing pad.

Dear Mrs. Mitra, (it said)

You don't know me but I have been dreading your arrival for months now. I have been your husband's lover for over two years now. I always knew I would have to keep it a secret but I didn't expect this. Avi said he is merely doing his duty and his mother would kill herself otherwise. Maybe that is so. I don't know too much about Indians. Avi never introduced me to his friends. I am no longer his lover. I couldn't bear the hypocrisy and I did not want to share. He thought we could carry on just as before except it would have to be at my place now. He can't understand why I would make such a fuss. After all, it had always been a secret from everyone else. Now we'd

just keep it a secret from you too. Avi said, "It's not as if I promised to marry you or something." That's true, so why am I writing you this? Especially since I have broken up with him? I'd like to think I want to warn you and save you. But I think it's just my own vindictiveness and selfishness. I wanted to make him understand what he is doing to you and me. I wanted to hurt Avinash and the only way I knew how was through you. Forgive me if you can.

Sincerely,
John Elwood

She tore the letter up with shaking hands. Then she sat and put the pieces back together as if she could rearrange the words to say something else. Four times she lifted the receiver to call Avinash. Four times she put it down. She sat and stared at the neatly arranged spices and tried to remember the English for methi. Maybe she should just write methi. She wondered what would happen to her now. How much did a one-way fare to India cost? She sat and watched one television program after another letting the images drip meaninglessly in front of her. When Avinash came home she was already in bed.

"It's only nine o'clock," he said, "are you all right?"

She lay curled up on her side, her fists clenched in her mouth to prevent herself from screaming. She buried her face in the pillow and tried to summon up the old familiar smells of home.

"Turmeric, coriander, cumin," she whispered fiercely as if in exorcism.

But all she could smell was the happy lemon-lime spring-fresh smell of freshly laundered sheets. She buried herself deeper trying desperately to go home.

She felt him approaching the bed.

Mustard, poppyseed, methi. She was drawing a ring of spices to protect her.

She felt his hand on her forehead—cold and clammy. She shrank away from his touch.

Turmeric, coriander, methi.

Flies buzzing round her head.

Turmeric, coriander, methi.

Falling, falling, falling. . .

Her mother in the kitchen. . .

Her father reading the newspaper. . .

Old Sushila chopping the fish. . .

Haldi, dhanian, methi

Haldi, dhanian, methi. . .

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Journal Entry

The speaker in Roy's story recalls the many fragrances she associates with home. What memories of "smells" of home can you bring to your reading of this text?

Textual Considerations

1. Characterize Savitri. How does the author use visual, auditory, and sensory imagery to reveal Savitri's emotions to the reader?
2. Avinash's mother is sure that her son "would not break his mother's heart." To what extent do the events of the story contradict or affirm her point of view? What is your response to Avinash?
3. Identify and analyze the central conflict of the story.
4. What is your response to the story's ending? Where does the author use irony to foreshadow the contents of the letter?
5. How does Savitri change during the story?

Cultural Contexts

1. Avinash associates America with personal freedom, while Savitri relates it to big buildings, fast cars, movies, and microwaves. What kind of freedom might Avinash be seeking? Does he find it? Are Savitri's expectations more attainable? Why or why not?
2. The author of the story left Calcutta, India, to settle in San Francisco. Working with your group, analyze the roles that setting plays in the text. Consider, for example, the thematic significance of India, England, and the United States. Is this primarily a story about the immigrant experience? Explain.

Toni Cade Bambara

The Lesson

Back in the days when everyone was old and stupid or young and foolish and me and Sugar were the only ones just right, this lady moved on our block with nappy hair and proper speech and no makeup. And quite naturally we laughed at her, laughed the way we did at the junk man who went about his business like he was some big-time president and his sorry-ass horse his secretary. And we kinda hated her too, hated the way we did the winos who cluttered up our parks and pissed on our handball walls and stank up our hallways and stairs so you couldn't halfway play hide-and-seek without a goddamn gas mask. Miss Moore was her name. The only woman on the block with no first name. And she was black as hell, cept for her feet, which were fish-white and spooky. And she was always planning these boring-ass things for us to do, us being my cousin, mostly, who lived on the block cause we all moved North the same time and to the same apartment then spread out gradual to breathe. And our parents would yank our heads into some kinda shape and crisp up our clothes so we'd be presentable for travel with Miss Moore, who always looked