

A Good Cup of Chai

by Hailey Duggirala

Making a really good cup of chai takes practice.

Ash perches on the countertop of our house-share kitchen, watching me work. It is one of those rare, quiet moments of life in a college town, when all of our roommates are out and we can play house; pretend that we are five years into some invisible, idealized future, in which my poetry and their novels can pay the bills on our own place. I toast cardamom pods, star anise, and cinnamon on the stove and imagine my father moving around the kitchen.

My imprecision drives Ash crazy. *Write down the recipe*, they scold me, every single time. Every time, I just smile. Making a really good cup of chai takes knowing what to write down and what to memorize.

In my mind, my father is pulling jaggery off of the high shelf above the stove in my childhood home. Across the country and years away, I follow his steps, grabbing brown sugar from the shared pantry. I always forget to buy jaggery, but the dark brown sugar works nearly as well, especially if you let it bubble in the pot with the spices before you add the water. Making a good chai means knowing when to bend the rules and when to honor them. Being a good daughter means learning that, too, but it's a skill I am still honing.

I scoop the tea out of the bag. It's a loose-leaf from the tea shop in town, and my father would never be caught dead buying it, but I do. He calls me a "yuppy," and he's half-right. I still keep an emergency store of Lipton black tea bags in the cupboard, but I'd never tell. On days when home seems especially far away, I pull them out—half-sentiment and half-summoning. I think that if you waved a Lipton tea bag in the air and whistled Tracy Chapman loud enough, my dad would appear in your doorway like a poorly-groomed vampire.

I pull out my favorite cup, with the wide pink handle, and fill it with water from the tap. I pour it over the tea, stirring to help the sugar dissolve. I grab the half-peeled ginger nub from the fruit basket on the counter, and the lemon zester resting haphazardly beside it. I grate just enough ginger that it fills the room with scent, directly into the pot. I think of my mom—this was her addition—and the way that my dad rolls his eyes at us when we do “extra” things to chai. I imagine them both in the kitchen with us, so tiny that we would all barely fit. I think of the nights I spent with my father in the kitchen of my childhood home, watching him cook from my favorite kitchen table chair while he made tea after work. Sometimes we spent the whole time laughing, making playful jabs at each other. Other nights were spent in tense silence, both of us still fuming over a now long-forgotten disagreement. He would often choose that moment to scold me, stapling me to the chair with a disapproving look and stirring the boiling water with perhaps more force than strictly necessary.

He always saved me a cup, anyway.

Making a good cup of chai takes patience, and so does being a good father. When people ask me about him, I tell them that my dad makes good chai, and hope that they understand what that means.

My father was difficult, sometimes, in the way that fathers are. I was constantly on trial, constantly atoning for the sins of childhood and the petulance of adolescence. My father’s own petulance somehow withstood his upbringing, and we were always competing to be the most bull-headed in the house. I’m still not quite sure who is winning on any given day, even from thousands of miles away.

His silence, when it came, was a stony entombment. Being out of favor with my father was the most painful thing I ever experienced. It was like looking into a mirror that refuses to make eye contact. Like I couldn’t even recognize my own reflection.

The growing pains of our relationship are passed, for now; either I am grown or we both are or neither of us ever will be. Now, the pain of my father is in missing him; I am a long-distance daughter. Phone calls and text messages and his valiant attempts to use GIFS make up the Lego house of our time together these days.

It doesn't feel fair; my father didn't even become my father until I was eleven, and the ache of years that we could've spent together—the family that I got to have, but for far less than I wanted it—is sharp and unwelcome.

While I ruminate, the tea blissfully boils down, strong and ready for milk. I pull the half-gallon out of the mini-fridge, too small for a whole gallon, and add another cup full from the pink-handled mug. I watch the milk darken into a rich brown.

I let the tea simmer for a while before straining it into mugs over the sink. I watch the small freckles of spices, far too small for the strainer to catch, swirl at the top before disappearing, sinking inevitably to the bottom of the mug to be rediscovered later.

I take the first sip, nervous.

No matter how many cups of chai I make, I always suspect that I will do it wrong; I will make it too sweet, or I will forget the cardamom to cinnamon ratio, and I will be further from home than I've ever been. When the tea hits my tongue, almost too-hot to bear but perfectly-sweet, I heave an internal sigh of relief.

I'm learning.



Hailey Duggirala is a poet, fiction writer, and essayist based in Syracuse, New York. Her writing is interested in transmuting ordinary experiences onto strange contexts, and in the spaces between truth and perception. You can find her work in Syracuse University's *OutCrowd Mag*, jotted on napkins, and waiting tirelessly in her email drafts.