

## A Pinch of Saffron

by Reshma Kalimi

A ribbon-like stream of smoke, carrying the light scent of jasmine began swirling through Sunita's kitchen, mixing with the thick spices, heavy in the air. Sunita's hands trembled as she replaced the matchbox under the altar, the incense strategically positioned between a small bronze statue of Ganesha and a portrait of her husband, Raju. In the picture, Raju's smile looked just as it had two weeks ago, from behind the Chicago Tribune as he sat at the worn wooden table with his evening cup of chai. Closing her eyes, Sunita could still hear his soft chuckle as it caught in his throat; she felt his hands pull the end of her sari, playfully teasing as he asked her about her day. Through the window, Sunita felt bright lights upon her tears, blinking to see headlights out in the driveway: Renu.

Renu had always been the stronger one, loud and assertive. As a baby, Sunita had sometimes stared at her sleeping daughter, wondering how a child so small could make such a serious face. It was her daughter's coldness that had always surprised her: in school, Renu made no attempts to befriend the other girls, she excelled in math, ran track, applied early to Princeton. Her determination and unflinching work ethic in business school led to a prized job in LA, a beach-front condo, a movie-star's wardrobe. Renu was independent, ambitious and unstoppable. Still, Sunita worried about her daughter being alone. Never once had Renu brought a boy home, never once was a man's name uttered in interest. The icy chill of the night air hit Sunita, sending goose bumps down her arms as she turned to open the door; now, she was a single as her daughter.

Stepping into the house - it was her mother's house now - Renu sensed an aching emptiness. Her father's slippers were still by the door, cuffed slightly at the edges, socks folded into the toes. It had been thirteen days since her mother called her, urgency and desperation in her voice. "Renu, your Papa..." was all that Sunita had said, all that she could say, all that she needed to. Renu's assistant had booked her the next flight out of LAX.

Her sister Aparna lived a different life: a life with a banker husband, soccer games, Kumon and piano lessons; a life so packed with the routine and activities of childrearing that there was no time to look after their mother. Aparna, Josh and the twins had come in for cremation, taking up two bedrooms on the second floor. The day after the ritual, they took the kids to the Natural History Museum. "To get some air, run around a bit." Renu wondered who needed it more, her sister or the kids. The next morning, they packed up their van, leaving behind sticky drawers, sheets and towels to be washed.

It was Renu who booked the rites, Renu who greeted the visitors, Renu who gave the speeches. She had sat down for the first time in a week on the flight back to LA, closing her eyes, exhausted, hoping for a couple hours of undisturbed sleep. Instead, her father's memories had haunted her, sending her mind back to the exact place she had been.

Renu was eleven, sitting at a round, linoleum-topped table with her father as he helped her with chemistry homework. Sunita had spread a thick layer of newspapers across Homefood's front counter and stood pitting mangoes, peels in one corner, even pieces into the large metal bowl. Renu watched her father gazing intently at his wife as she bit into a ripe core, her soft lips coated with the sticky syrup, drops of orange dribbling down her chin. Even then, she knew it was a look of pure love, of deep, undiluted adoration. As he drew an covalent bond between the polar molecules, Raju whispered to his daughter, "If anything ever happens to me, take care of your Ma ok? You're my fierce little warrior."

The instant the plane's wheels hit the runway, Renu had pulled out her Blackberry, and hit three on the speed dial. "Ma," she said, "I'm coming home."

It had been years since the girls moved out. Seeing her daughter in the doorway, Sunita realized that for the first

time, she was the one who needed taking care of. It was that moment in every parent's life, when they are overcome by the recognition that the roles have been reversed. She buried her face deep into the collar of Renu's blouse, inhaling the expensive perfume, smearing the silky fabric with her tears. Renu's strong hand pressed gently against her back, guiding her upstairs. As the lights in the room dimmed, Sunita felt her daughter's fingers in her hair, softly weaving through the strands, comforting, just as she had years ago. Lying on her parents' bed, Renu whispered in the dark, "Shhhhh, it's ok. I'm here now."

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At five am the next morning, the alarm of Renu's Blackberry beeped. She reached to grab it out of her large black Prada handbag, knocking over a couple of stuffed animals that lined the ledge next to her childhood bed. She knew she wouldn't be able to fall back asleep, she never could. Peeling off the turquoise cotton sheets, Renu stepped into a pair of athletic shorts, pulling her short black hair into a knot at the nape of her neck. By the front door, she slipped on a new pair of running shoes, opening the coat closet to grab one of her father's Northwestern sweatshirts and a ring of keys from the hook on the wall. It had been years since she had run like this: outside, in the quiet of the morning, away from crowded gyms and CNN briefings. Renu buried her face into the neck of the large jacket allowing the scent of her father to envelop her.

She made her way down a familiar path, cutting through the Brown's backyard, across Elm Street, to the small string of restaurants. She passed an Italian deli and a bagel shop with green neon lights, until she came upon the single door with no sign. Reaching into the worn pocket of the jacket, she pulled out the key, slipped it into the lock and opened up the door to Homefood.

The restaurant was just as it had always been: bright and plain. A thick sheet of dust covered the surfaces of the modest tables and chairs, a sure sign that Sunita had not been in for a while. As Renu's eyes scanned the room, she saw, for the first time in her life, not her mother's safe abode, but the potential for something much more.

Through an executive's critical eye she identified that the wall needed repainting, the plastic tables would all have to go, the lighting must be changed and there had never been menus. Swiftly, she pulled the sweatshirt off over her head, tossing it over a chair and began pushing the tables into corners of the large room. Grabbing a piece of chalk she dropped to the ground, carefully stenciling out a floor plan: a seating booth, eight tables instead of six, parallel booths along the walls, barstools next to the front counter. Horizontal rays of sunlight slanted in through the blinds, as Renu stood up to look her design; palms and knees covered in chalk, she dusted off her shorts, smiled and turned to run back home.

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Pouring herself a glass of orange juice, Renu turned to her mother and asked, "Have you ever thought about getting some help at the restaurant? You're not getting younger and it would be good for you to have some company."

Sunita had never considered the possibility of hiring another employee. There was no need for waiters; she just placed the piping hot plates of food on the counter for customers to pick up. Dishes could be put into the large washing machine and the food was always cooked by her, so why would she need anyone else? Still, she thought that it might be nice to have someone around, especially since Raju was gone now. When the restaurant was full of diners, it was always cheery and loud but the afternoons preparing or late evenings cleaning tended to get lonely. Yes, she decided quietly, it would be nice to hire a worker, perhaps a young college student. She would speak to Shobhaji about putting up signs in the student union the next day.

Not noticing her mother's nod of approval, Renu continued, "And maybe, we could redecorate a little. Get some new tables and chairs, plates and silverware. We've had the same ones since I was five – it's time for a change don't you think?"

Sunita thought of the cracked, faded plastic tables. Just last month, Manojji had broken a chair by sitting on it. And the plates, which had once been a bright white, were

now dyed yellow with the stain of turmeric. It would be fun maybe, to go shopping with Renu and buy some new things. She always liked browsing through the fine cutlery at Macy's, eyeing the delicate floral lattices or the bold earthenware patterns.

Smiling at her daughter she replied, "OK. That would be nice, beta."

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Sunita stood outside Homefood; it had been fourteen days since she had seen her beloved restaurant, since the afternoon she received a phone call from Northwestern Memorial Hospital about Raju's heart attack. Taking in a deep breath of the cold Illinois air, she pulled open the glass door. Inside, Renu stood amidst sheets of paper, scissors in hand. One by one, she had ripped off of the walls the drawings, assignments and report cards that she remained artifacts of her and Aparna's youth. Renu knew that a fresh coat of paint would immediately change the restaurant's atmosphere and after all, a café was no place for nostalgic childhood paraphernalia. Yet, when Sunita saw the bare walls, scarred with ugly bruises of her daughters' lost childhoods, she was reduced to tears.

"Renu" she whispered, "What have you done?"

"Ma," Renu consoled, "The drawings are all here. We can put them into a scrapbook if you'd like. But you can't have them hanging on your walls anymore."

Sunita was puzzled about why she had reacted so strongly. She knew Renu was right, Renu was always right, smart, practical Renu. Still, seeing those bare patches of wall had triggered something inside of her, something she had felt more and more since Raju's death. It was as if everyday object were suddenly the safe keepers of her most precious memories and the idea of removing or even changing them haunted her as much as losing the memories themselves. Sensing her mother's distress Renu gently took her arm and began leading her out of the restaurant.

"Come on Ma." she said, "Let's get you out of here."

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The sour icy liquid of the frozen lemonade chilled Sunita's teeth through the tall straw as she looked the plates Renu had organized.

"See how the larger colored plate beneath the smaller one provides an appealing background and the illusion of a larger portion? You would only serve on the smaller dishes but the customers would still feel like they are getting more food. "

Turning to a rack of glasses, Renu continued, "Ma what kind of drink makes Homefood the most money?"

Never having considered this before, Sunita thought for a moment before replying, "Mango lassi, I guess. It costs \$4 and all I need to make it is yoghurt, mango and cardamom."

"Great. So include lassi into every lunch or dinner order you take. Make it a staple that you serve with all meals, like you give your customers naan with their dishes. This way, it would be like every customer ordered lassi. Look at these gorgeous cocktail glasses, they would be great for lassi. Which ones do you like? The taller the glass, the more the customer thinks he's getting."

Peering at the glasses on the rack, Sunita stopped to check the price tag on the bottom of one. Twenty years ago, she had bought all of her dishes for the price of a single glass. Nevertheless, she thought that the setting looked lovely and selling more lassi would certainly help business. She had never spent much money on the restaurant, never been an impulsive shopper.

"Let's take them," she said excitedly, beaming at her daughter.

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Walking across the sticky floor of Patel Brothers, Renu's heels clicked smartly on the tile. This was the store where her mother had always shopped for Homefood, spending hours picking out the freshest of vegetables, the most pungent of spices and never returning home without cool boxes of mango juice for her and Aparna.

"Do you have everything, Ma?" Renu asked from the counter, as her mother reviewed the list in her hand.

"I think so beta, just ask Pramodji if the mithai is fresh. Recognizing to the familiar face at the counter, Renu relayed her mother's question.

"We got a batch of rasmalai just an hour ago," he replied warmly. Then with sad eyes, he continued, "Raju's favorite."

Outside the shop, mother and daughter sat on the curb, crunching the toasted almonds that decorated the sweet between their teeth. "Do you know what your father liked best about rasmalai? The keshar."

Tracing her tongue lightly over the saffron that latticed each milky white puff, Renu turned to her mother and asked, "What if we changed Homefood's name to Saffron?"

Sunita took her daughter's soft, taunt hand in her own wrinkled one and squeezed tightly.

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"Ma, come take a look at these."

Sunita made her way over to the table, pushing back stands of hair that had come undone from her tight bun, the rice flour on her fingers coating their blackness, aging her instantly.

Sunita could see her daughter's reflection in the glossy cardstock: the silhouette of Renu's starched suit, the meticulous finish of her makeup, the nose that looked so much like Raju's.

Renu clicked a manicured nail against the table, pointing at the three pages of menu, "Well, what do you think?"

Sunita shifted her weight off of her arthritic hip, moving in for a closer look. She was careful not to touch, just as she had been with Raju's physics papers. The idea of a menu was completely foreign to her; Homefood had always had a chalkboard behind the counter upon which she wrote the days dishes, in her best cursive. Sunita glanced at the specials of the day, then back at the forty items Renu had listed.

Sensing her mother's uncertainty, Renu spoke up, "They're the same dishes Ma, I just renamed them and filled in the details, it adds to their appeal. Read it, you'll see. It's the same food you've always cooked for us."

Sunita's eyes scanned the menu. Surprised, she asked her daughter, "Where are the prices?"

Pointing, Renu explained, "Look right here Ma. They're under the description of the dishes. That way, decisions in ordering will be made based on how appealing the item sounds and not based on its price. See how I removed the dollar signs and only left numbers, this serves the same purpose."

Puzzled, Sunita continued to stare at the menu, her eyes focusing in on a dish for lamb crême sauce. "Fifty-three dollars!" she exclaimed. "Renu, this was the price of an entire meal for a family at Homefood. How can I charge this for a single dish? Besides, lamb curry is not my specialty."

Nodding, Renu replied, "Ma, don't worry. Almost no one will order this dish, but having it on the menu will allow customers to justify ordering the next most expensive item. Overall, you'll see that people order higher priced dishes more consistently."

Finally, Sunita's eyes began searching the menu for Gaon-Ke-Aloo, the potatoes she had learned to cook in her small village outside of New Delhi, the only curry she had served each day at Homefood, her signature dish. On the second page, third from the bottom, she saw something similar.

*Saffron Potatoes*

*Roasted Potatoes, laced with Saffron and Spiced with Turmeric and Fresh Dill, Served in a Tangy Tomato Purée 14*

Shaking her head, Sunita turned to her daughter. "I don't put keshar in Gaon-Ke-Aloo, only Anjali Khanna does that. She's bent on showing off just because her husband is a doctor and her daughter was married to Ravi Kapoor, that neurosurgeon from Stanford last year."

Renu smiled, half patronizing her mother's confusion, half remembering the politics and drama that was rampant in her mother's close-knit community of Indian women – DWC, Desi Women's Coalition - her father had used to call it.

"I know you don't put saffron in your potatoes, Ma. But just put in a pinch, ok? With the yellow of the turmeric, no one will ever know how much is in there. I get paid to do this every day in LA, trust me, it works. Saffron is a hot word for food in general, and coupled with it being the new name of your restaurant, it's bound to be a clincher."

Renu saw the lines of worry across her mother's forehead deepen, the circles beneath her eyes looked darker than she had remembered, still, her mother was as beautiful as she had always been, eyes lined with kohl, cheeks perpetually flushed from the heat of the stove and a small red bindi marking her now wrinkled forehead.

Sunita closed her eyes, her hands gripping the back of the plastic chair in front of her, a sharp pain shooting from her hip to her lower back. Renu had convinced her to redecorate, advertise, hire help in the restaurant, but now, to deceive those whom she was serving food, how could Renu not understand? She would not let her do this, Homefood had been an honest business, and Saffron would be too.

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Renu walked briskly out of Saffron, approvingly eyeing the bold, colorful sign above the door. The restaurant had looked almost perfect: the freshly painted pale yellow walls were offset by clean white tablecloths. Each table was laid with dainty designer plates and a large bottle of Perrier, only the new furniture was left to arrive. Nina, the young History major Sunita had hired to help her, was mixing together canned mango pulp with chilled whole milk before pouring the thick lassi into tall serving glasses. Renu knew her work was done – Saffron had become the kind of restaurant she would lunch at with girlfriends in LA. Her mother's homey kitchen was her latest marketing success. Now it was time to pack her bags, turn on her Blackberry, slip into her Manolo Blahniks and head back to work.

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Rain poured upon the windshield of Sunita's 1993 Honda Accord. A gloomy Bach sonata from NPR's Classical Connection played in background through her dusty speakers. Through the glass, Sunita stared at the brightly lit golden letters that spelled Saffron. Somehow, over the past weeks, her humble restaurant had become strange to her, evolving into the kind of place that made her conscious of her unmanicured nails or graying hair. In an hour, she would drive Renu to the airport and her little girl would be gone again. She would sleep alone in the house, come alone to the restaurant. It would be, she thought, a stranger's life.

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Three sharp knocks at the door signaled the arrival of the delivery crew. Hands covered in chapatti dough, she called out to Nina to open the door. From behind the tall kitchen wall, Sunita watched two tall men carry in box after box, placing them gently on the floor. She heard the ripping of the cardboard and the clanking of metal rings, as loose pieces came together into eight sturdy tables and thirty two lithe chairs.

"Would you like us to take these old ones away for you, ma'am?" the blonde one asked.

"No," responded Sunita, sharply, stepping out from the kitchen to face him. "Come back for them in the morning."

After the floors had been swept, Sunita let Nina off for the night and stood alone, in her small restaurant, surrounded by a strange assortment of furniture. The lights were off, and through the window, the last rays of sunset cast yellow-orange hues across her face. Like a small child in a playground, Sunita wandered through the maze, lightly brushing her fingers across the smooth wood of the new tables and the coarse plastic of the old chairs. She sat in each one, remembering the customers that had come and gone over the years, the afternoons her daughters' had spent at these tables, writing essays and piecing together science projects. In the morning, half of these would be gone and the now crowded room

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would be suddenly new. But for now, she was content to reminisce.

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Sunita could hear the shrieks of school children as they ran through sprinklers in the neighbor's backyard. Standing by her bedroom mirror, she dressed, ran a comb through her hair and brushed on a thin layer of face powder. Smiling at her reflection, Sunita wondered what Raju would have thought of the way she looked with short hair and no bun. In the days after Renu had left, she had felt an acute sense of unease as she cooked and served meals. Yet, before long, she and Nina had gotten to know their new customers, who though younger and trendier, quickly came to love Sunita's warm spirit. One morning, Karen, the hairdresser who always ordered Aloo Gobi surprised Sunita at home and before the afternoon was over, brought her back with a freshly cut head of hair and five new bags of clothes. Conversations with Patrick over cups of spiced chai had led her to joining a book club at the local library. Though she came home to an empty house each night, business was better than ever, Renu's business school ideas had done their work. Cheerfully, Sunita grabbed the sac of fresh vegetables off of the counter, and headed out the door.

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Sunita bit her lower lip apprehensively, carrying out a steaming bowl of dal and a patterned dish of rice. Placing his order before him, Sunita faced Manojji, her oldest customer, with a nervous smile.

"I'll just bring you some yoghurt and pickle," she said quickly, hurrying back into the kitchen.

Manoj and Raju had gone to college together, roommates at IIT, they couldn't bear to be apart and had accepted joint admissions to Northwestern's PhD program. While she had Raju had settled down, raised a family, Manoj remained single, visiting them often, becoming an uncle to Aparna and Renu. Three times a week, he ate in Sunita's restaurant, a simple meal of rice and lentils, curried relish and yoghurt.

Sunita worried what Manojji would think, of the new decorations and dishes, menu and clientele.

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As she asked him about his dinner, Manoj smiled. Behind all of Renu's fancy changes, he saw the same Sunita, loving and tender and she looked happy, she thought, for the first time since Raju had ...

"The food," he said softly, "has never been better."

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The final dishes had been dried and placed carefully on the shelves lining the kitchen. The customers had stayed longer today, ordering cups of chai and hot pooris, talking amongst themselves, complementing Sunita on the food, her hair, the new furniture. After they had left, Nina had helped her clean up and now, Sunita was alone, with her thoughts of Raju.

Striking a match, Sunita carefully brought her saffron-stained fingers towards the small altar in her second kitchen, next to an identical statue of Ganesha, she smiled at the photograph of her husband. The smoke from the incense slowly drifted toward her face, the jasmine mixing with the smell of spices in the air.

# Afterword

## Featured Principles

Sunita and Renu, the two main characters of this story are rational foils of each other. Business-educated and marketing-savvy Renu presents techniques of manipulating common consumer irrationality. At large, this piece illustrates three specific topics relevant to behavioral economics: emotional relativity, the role of expectations and our inability as humans to correctly estimate our future distress. Sunita's attachment to her daughter's drawings on the walls as well as her old furniture depicts emotional subjectivity. Similarly, the role of expectations underlies all of the superficial changes Renu suggests. Taller glasses and smaller plates both create the illusion of a larger quantity of food; prices listed without dollar signs and below item descriptions as well as the presence of a single expensive dish often lead to the ordering of more expensive dishes. The notion of including lassi as an "opt out" rather than "opt in" drink too manipulates ordering.

Finally, as individuals as irrational creatures, we are not capable of correctly perceiving the pain we will experience. Sunita faces the loss of her husband and the strangeness of her revolutionized restaurant. Though the pain is intense, it is short lived and though she continues to remember both, she learns to adapt and find contentment quite quickly. Throughout this story, I have attempted to demonstrate the internal, moral and personal conflict faced by Sunita as she allows her daughter to foster the manipulation of the irrationality of her customers. The superficial changes of her restaurant permeate other aspects of Sunita's life as well – her appearance, hobbies, new friends - yet she remains, as recognized by Manoj, the same warm and giving person that ran Homefood.

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## About the Author

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