

## A Relief

There is not much variety in food that one cannot find in the streets of New York. There are Indian, Pakistani, Chinese, Mexican and many other restaurants, that offer palatable delicacies of all kinds. One other option available is to savour scrumptious food at the spate of parties and get-togethers at residences of friends and acquaintances. The traditional Indian delicacies such as *biryani*, *kebabs* and the like, could not, however, be savoured in our house. Julie did not have the inclination or the interest to learn to make such delicacies. Whenever I craved for them, we ordered at one of the restaurants.

I met Julie for the first time when she had come to my office on behalf of the Advertising Agency which was hired by our company to launch the publicity and promotion ads for us. I had not liked the slogans crafted by her team, but I had liked Julie immensely. We were married soon thereafter, and while she had a good knowledge of India, it was not within her to learn the painstaking art of making *kebabs* etc.

During my visits home to Lucknow after shifting to New York, I usually found myself gorging all the *Mughlai* delights that I missed at home in New York. During one such visit, I was floored by the *seekh kebabs* that *Ammi* would put on the table during meal times.

‘*Ammi*, when do you make these kebabs? I never see you making them and yet, here they are every day on the table... Surely, you are not ordering from a restaurant...’ I asked her in an amused sort of a way at the dinner-table, one evening. I knew *Ammi* would never let me eat anything from a restaurant or street-side stall outside, during my stay at home.

‘Oh dear, I forgot to tell you... these *kebabs* that you have been eating almost every day have been made by Kulsum, who stays in our neighbourhood... She makes the *kebabs* at home and sells them for a living. We buy from her very often’, *Ammi* explained.

I pushed the plate of *kebabs* aside. I was reluctant, despite the tempting appeal they exuded. After a couple of experiences of food poisoning during my earlier sojourns home (even when I ate delicacies at exquisite restaurants), I had become wary of eating anything that was not made at home, while in India.

‘*Ammi*, no more *kebabs* for me please...’

A month flew in a whiff, and the day of departure dawned. After bidding farewell to my neighbourhood buddies, I entered home and found *Ammi* chatting quite amiably with a lady. As the lady turned around to greet me, I was struck by the simplicity and innocence that her face radiated. I greeted her softly, and went to my room. A little later, I heard the lady saying her goodbyes, and as soon as she left, *Ammi* came in the room.

‘Who was she, *Ammi*? Have I met her before?’

‘Son, she was Kulsum... the lady from whom we used to buy the *kebabs*’. *Ammi* was supervising the contents of my bags, and talking to me simultaneously. ‘She has volumes of self-respect. Her husband taught for several years in the nearby school, but met with an accident about a year ago and passed away. She had no means of livelihood thereafter, but instead of seeking support from her relatives, she chose to do something on her own. And that is how she started making *kebabs* etc at home and selling the delicacies.’

‘Oh...’ my interest and concern were aroused.

‘It is still not easy for her to make both ends meet and raise a teenage daughter. This month Kulsum could not pay her daughter’s school fee and the authorities have cancelled the girl’s admission. I told her to take some money from me, but she refused saying that when we did not buy *kebabs* from her, how she could take the money... Poor Kulsum! She has decided to go to Benares where some relatives have promised that they will find an adequate means of livelihood for her’, and saying so, *Ammi* wiped the tears in her eyes with her *dupatta*.

I left for the airport. A dozen members of my family had come with me to the airport to bid me a tearful goodbye. I reached New York and the travails of a busy life enveloped me completely. Julie had left me, without any explanation. I had no time to even grieve or reflect over the jolt in my personal life. I could not, however, erase Kulsum and her innocent face from my mind. I felt a persistent prick in my heart almost all the time... The thought that *if I had not stopped Ammi from buying kebabs from her, Kulsum would have been able to pay the fee in her daughter's school... if only...* – disturbed me often as I lay alone in the solitude and darkness that nights brought in their wake. *She was raising her daughter with difficulty and instead of assisting her in some way; I had made things difficult for her...*

Years passed... and my business grew and flourished. My assistant—**Zahid**, was a capable and enterprising young man. He was a computer engineer and had been working in my firm as a Software Engineer for about three years, now. Our firm had reaped rich benefits, ever since **Zahid** had joined our team. He, on the other hand, often gave the credit of his success, to his wife. He had married three years ago, and soon after coming to the US, had landed in our firm.

A few days ago, **Zahid** was beaming with excitement in the office. A few nudges by the colleagues, and out came the secret of his beaming face. He had completed all the paperwork and arranged for his wife to join him in the US. All of us were happy for him.

She arrived soon thereafter and the next day, I invited the couple for dinner at my place. Of course, I had no option but to order the food from a restaurant. I was happy to meet the shy and sweet girl. She seemed quite intelligent and was very well-mannered too. I blessed the couple profusely in my heart.

The following week, **Zahid** requested me to dine at his home. I reached and found an interesting array of delicacies laid on the table. As I was helping myself, I saw a platter of *seekh kebabs* which looked quite inviting and I instinctively picked up a *kebab* and put it in my mouth. As soon as I devoured about two bites, I looked at **Zahid's** wife

and blurted out; 'Is your mother's name Kulsum, by any chance? Are you her daughter? Did you stay in Lucknow many years ago?'

It was now her turn to stare at me wide-eyed.

'Yes uncle, but how do you know? Have you met her?'

As soon as she confirmed my presumption, my hands intuitively went up, in gratitude. The mother-daughter duo whose well-being was an agonizing thought for me, for years... seemed to be doing well.

'Where is your mother, now?'

'Sir, I am working on the visa formalities and very soon, she too will be here amongst us', replied **Zahid**. His wife was still looking at me, a little bewildered, and surely wondering as to how I knew her mother. I told her about our family home in Lucknow and that she along with her mother stayed in the neighbourhood. I told her that after they shifted to Benares, I had no clue of their whereabouts.

It was now her turn to explain. 'Yes, I remember a little about our earlier house in Lucknow. After we shifted to Benares, I completed school and *Ammi* took me to a college to meet the Principal. He interviewed me and decided to admit me in the college, and offered a scholarship as well. When he found out about our economic status, he gave a job to *Ammi* in the primary section of the school which was attached with the college. '

'And, I must tell you further', intervened **Zahid** winking at his wife, 'that the Principal of the college happened to be my father. He was very proud of her academic achievements and admired her demeanour too. When she topped in the University, my father's joy knew no bounds... He felt that she would be an ideal life-partner for his son, and Sir, here she is.'

I came back home after the scrumptious meal at **Zahid's** place. It was Sunday, the next day. I slept almost instantaneously as I hit the bed. Next morning, I woke up refreshed. A sense of remorse that had pricked me for ten years from within had come to an end.

I felt a sweeping sense of relief...

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