



MY FAVORITE PART OF THE STORY

by Jaya Wagle

ON a warm August morning, Maggie and Bill, our neighbors down the street, come to pay us a visit. We'd had a housewarming party the night before and empty beer and wine bottles stand next to the kitchen sink full of dirty dishes. These are just the few my husband and I have managed to gather up from around the house. I spot two Coors Light bottles on the floor by the couch and two red wine goblets on the side table. My neighbors take in the disarray of the house and in my confusion I ask them if they would like some beer or a glass of wine. It is 10:30 a.m. and my husband can't believe I offered my Christian neighbors alcohol on a Sunday morning.

“I have been a teetotaler for the last seventeen years,” Bill replies politely.

There is no reason I should know this. Nevertheless, I want to run off into the woods behind my house, except I’m five months pregnant with swollen legs. I offer my apologies and bring out two glasses of water instead.

As it turns out, our neighbors are on a proselytizing mission and we are the pagan targets. “We are here to invite you to our church. It’s right around the neighborhood.” Bill waves his hands in the general direction of the church. He is in his late sixties with a diamond stud in his left ear. He wears a grey tank top and loose cargo shorts, perfectly acceptable attire for a hot Texas morning. But he is out to save my soul and I am a little offended he hasn’t dressed up for it. I no longer feel bad about offering him the beer.

“We are a very open, non-denominational congregation,” Maggie, his wife, chimes in. She is a thin woman with wrinkly folds of skin peeking out from under her loose fitting sleeveless shirt, and a head of curly blond hair that I suspect is a wig. An inordinate amount of silver jewelry dangles around her neck and on her wrists.

She looks around our sparsely furnished house and says, “You should visit one of these days and see how I have decorated mine. You may get some ideas.” I can sense my husband groaning silently at the prospect.

Maggie tells us they go garage sailing on weekends and buy old furniture for cheap. Bill sands it down and she paints and distresses it to look old. I nod, pretending to comprehend the pointless endeavor. The two of them stay around for a while and talk about their pastor and an Indian woman from their congregation. They are not sure how to pronounce her name but she is Indian and is “saved.” We nod politely and tell them we will think about it.

My husband and I are Hindus, which is not a religion but a way of life for millions of Indians. To be a Hindu is to follow the *Sanatan Dharma*, the eternal law which charges human beings to lead their life with honesty, purity and self-restraint. The path to salvation, for a Hindu, is through *karma*. In India, various sects and factions of Hindus worship sixty-four million gods and they all are incarnations of *Satyanarayan* (*Satya* = truth, *Narayan* = lord) or *Ishwara*, thus opening up sixty-four million avenues to achieve salvation. It’s hard for us to put our faith in a lone savior.



In a corner of her kitchen, my mother keeps a small shrine with a photo of our family deity *Mangeshi*, an incarnation of *Shiva*, prominently displayed. He has long black dreadlocks tied in a topknot on his head. The topknot serves a dual purpose: it keeps his locks from tangling and also keeps the mighty river Ganges in check, stopping her from destroying earth with her turbulent waters. Assorted gods flank him. There is *Lakshmi*, goddess of wealth, sitting on her huge lotus, dressed in silks and decked with jewelry, gold coins spilling from one hand, the other hand holding a smaller, true-to-size lotus raised in blessing. A small silver statue of baby *Krishna* crawls next to a photo of *Sarasvati*, the goddess of knowledge and wisdom, who holds a sitar in one hand and a book in the other. She sits on a rock, a silver stream of water flowing behind her. In front of her frame is a brass statue of a pot-bellied elephant headed *Ganesh*, the destroyer of all obstacles, the good omen of all auspicious beginnings.

For as long as I can remember, Ma has stood in front of the shrine and chanted mantras, lit incense and oil lamps, and asked for the well-being and safety of her family. At the end of her twenty-minute ritual, she distributes the *prasad* to everyone in the house.

When we were little, my sister and I would wait patiently for her to finish her prayers so we could eat the prasad, an offering of jaggery and peanuts. Before distributing the prasad, my mother would ask the gods for the well-being and prosperity of her family. As we grew older, she asked them to give her teenage daughters the wisdom to handle the pressures of college life and stupid friends. Occasionally, she prayed for my younger brother to be less impulsive and more focused on his school. Now, she prays for the well-being of her daughters' families, her grandkids, and her sons-in-law.

In my suburban Dallas home, thousands of miles from India, I have many of the same gods ensconced in the bread drawer of my kitchen hutch. They sit in the dark, neglected and gathering dust. My husband and I are not big on everyday rituals and I worry my child will not know the anticipation of waiting for the prasad after the *Puja*.



I am ten years old. I sit on the floor by Ma and watch her perform the Satyanarayan Puja. Behind her are her sisters and their husbands. They all

sit, cross-legged, and listen intently. My cousins run around, playing. An aunt occasionally gets up to discipline them. She tells them to go downstairs and play. “Watch the street,” she cautions as they all run downstairs in an impromptu race to the bottom.

Satyanarayan is a benevolent incarnation of *Vishnu*, and his Puja involves reading of the *katha*, or tale of the origins of the Puja, and the four didactic tales that I know by heart. I know all the characters, the settings, scenes, summary and exposition, but I delight in hearing them every time. I inhale the sandalwood-infused air as Ma reads the story of Satyavati and her daughter Kalavati. These women are distraught. They haven’t heard from their husbands in a long time. This is because their husbands are seafaring merchants imprisoned in a distant kingdom, wrongly accused of stealing the queen’s jewels.

Penniless and hungry, Satyavati goes out to beg for food and alms. At one house she finds the Satyanarayan Puja in progress. She sits on the threshold and listens, finding comfort in the words. The owner of the house gives her the prasad at the completion of Puja and tells her about the ritual. Inspired, she comes home and tells her daughter about it. The two eat the prasad and decide to do the Puja the very next day. As they perform the Puja, Satyanarayan appears to the King in a dream and tells

him the sea-merchants are innocent and need to be released immediately. Not wanting to disobey a God's edict, the King does as he is told and sends the two off with a lot of wealth. They sail home safely, and on reaching the shores send word to their wives. While they wait, Satyanarayan appears in the guise of a mendicant and asks the two what they have in their boat.

“Straw,” they say.

“So it is,” says the mendicant and vanishes.

This is my favorite part of the story. I sit up straight, trying to imagine the gold turning to straw in the boat and the disappointment on the lying merchants' faces. They realize the error of their ways even as Satyavati and Kalavati come running to greet their husbands. The four of them perform another Satyanarayan Puja, eat the prasada and ask for God's forgiveness. The straw turns to gold and the four of them live happily ever after, performing the Puja every year.

Ma finishes the Puja and performs the final *Aarti* before distributing the prasada from a big brass pot filled with cardamom-infused *sheera*. I savor the sugary, *ghee-laden* carbohydrate in my mouth and swallow. The sheera slides smoothly down my throat.

Afterwards, Ma and her sisters cook up a big meal in our tiny kitchen while my father and uncles sit on the balcony discussing politics. My cousins and I are sent back and forth into the kitchen to fetch water and snacks until lunch is ready. We revel in our duties, feeling important and useful.

Get-togethers in my family always involve food and not enough chairs around the dining table. Instead, old bed sheets are folded lengthwise and laid down for everyone to sit. In our long hallway, we can accommodate about a dozen adults. They all sit cross-legged on the floor, knees touching, shiny steel plates and bowls in front of them.

My parents, who are fasting, serve everyone, bending at the waist. They cajole my aunt, who is always watching her weight, to help herself to one more serving. Some of my cousins sit with their parents, eating off their plates, pointing to a tempting morsel they prefer over what is being offered. My sister and I wait with my parents, filling up empty water glasses and fetching salt and pickles. It makes us feel responsible, waiting for everyone to eat before we break the fast with our parents.



Thirty years later, I miss those moments spent with my extended family, though my husband and I don't feel as much alienation as we know some recent immigrants feel. Maybe we have been here too long, or maybe we are lucky to have friends we can count on as family. The key to living as an expat is to surround yourself with lots of friends and meet with them often. In the course of time, some friends become as close as family and hopefully fill the void.

Ten years ago, we bought our first house and since then, once a year, my husband and I do the Satyanarayan Puja at our home and invite our close friends for lunch. I am not as apt as Ma at performing the Puja. It has been twenty years since I sat by her and listened to the stories and chants. So, I call the local Hindu temple and book a priest to come to our house. "It will be one hundred and twenty dollars for the Puja, plus whatever you may want to give the priest, as well as gas money," the guy on the other end says. I set the date and hang up.

I call Ma to tell her I am doing the Puja. She is shocked when I tell her how much the temple is charging me for the priest. She tells me I should learn the Puja next time I visit India. I ignore her suggestion and ask,

“What shall I cook for eight adults?” I want something simple and quick that doesn’t require too much prep.

She thinks for a moment and asks, “What about the kids? Will they eat the spicy food or do you have to cook separate for them?” I tell her we will order a cheese pizza for the kids. I picture her on the other end of the line, shaking her head in disapproval. “They won’t eat the Puja food?” she asks.

I reluctantly remind her about my son’s picky habits and she tells me I too was a picky child who only ate potatoes, *daal* and *chapattis* for meals. “He is a carbon copy of you,” she tells me.

I protest and tell her about one particularly hot summer afternoon, sitting on the cool kitchen floor with my sister and cousin, all of us chewing and sucking on fibrous, juicy, sugarcane bits my aunt had divided equally in three steel bowls. I remember my grandma giving us tomato slices sprinkled with salt and sugar in winter. After dinner, my sister and I picked juicy yellow mangoes out from a bucket of ice water, ripping them open with our teeth to eat the succulent flesh, licking the sweet juices dribbling down our elbows.

Ma tells me pointedly that in my suburban home in Texas, my son does not have the pleasure of his cousins’ company, the pampering of his

aunts and grandparents or the taste buds for mangoes and peeled sugarcane bits. His companions during lunch and dinner are endless reruns of *Arthur* and *Magic School Bus* on Netflix and his meals consist of a constant rotation of the few foods he likes best: *dosa, daal, and khichari*.

I concur and tell her I am working on it. I don't want to argue over cross-continental phone lines. I need the menu for the Puja. She rattles off a few things and I write them down. I ask for recipes and she gives me vague measurements. "Take two handfuls of lentils and one handful of rice, add a pinch of turmeric and some mustard seeds," she says.

"You mean a two to one ratio?"

"Maybe," she says. "Just use your judgment and add more or less as you see fit." I sigh and ask about my father. He is out for a walk with his friends. Ma wants me to hang up. Her maid just came in and she needs to supervise.

I look around my messy home and turn my back to it. I start calling my friends and invite them to the Puja. It is official. I have a week to clean the house and prepare for the Puja. For a brief minute, I consider inviting Maggie and Bill to the Puja, and then let go of the thought.



In my hometown of Indore—which sounds suspiciously like ‘indoor’—all of my extended family live within thirty minutes driving distance of each other. Ma and her sisters used to meet almost every day, usually at my grandparents’ house, which was located in the center of the city. They would pop in on their way home from work or to drop us kids off on their way to the shops.

My Aaji was always boiling water on the gas stove to make chai for her daughters and her sons-in-law. In her three-room house, I played with my cousins, did my homework and sat by her in the gathering dusk in front of a small alcove in the kitchen. Her gods lived there in a wooden *mandap*, made of a square platform with four pillars supporting a domed roof. A little drawer in the platform held incense sticks, cotton wicks and matchsticks. She chanted her evening prayers and told me tales from Indian epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. Then, she would instruct me to recite my evening prayers and follow them with math tables while she cooked the evening meal.

I sat on the wooden stool, my feet dangling a few feet off the ground, counting by twos and threes aloud in Hindi as I watched her chop cabbage into fine threads and put the pressure cooker on for lentils and rice. It was a small kitchen, dark and windowless. A backdoor, propped open with a smooth stone, was the only source of light till she switched on the tube light. I'd be counting by nines when the pressure-cooker whistle blew.

By then, Aaji was rolling out thin chapattis, three for Baba, two for her, and a small first one for the cow. I listened to the rhythmic music of the glass bangles on her wrists as she rolled a small ball of wheat dough into a perfect round, expertly flipped the chapatti on the griddle and puffed it on the open gas flame.

“Why do you always make the first one for the cow?” I asked, watching the chapatti inflate like a balloon. She didn't own a cow. No one in my family did.

“It is a tradition from our rural past,” she said. “We show our appreciation for the cow when we give her the first morsel from our meal.”

“But why?” I was avoiding reciting the twelves but also curious.

“We owe so much to the cow.” She was chopping tomatoes for her signature sweet and sour daal.

I loved her daal. More than my mother's. I watched her throw mustard seeds that popped and spluttered in the hot oil. Next she added turmeric, green chilies and tomatoes in quick succession.

“Like what?” I was fascinated by the alchemy happening before my eyes.

“The cow gives us milk to feed babies, we make *ghee* with the butter churned from the milk, she tills our fields and her dung is used as fertilizer. Even in death, she gives us leather to make footwear out of. And she asks so little in return.” Aaji stirred the boiling daal and gave me a small bowl of steaming rice, drowned in the freshly made daal, a small dollop of ghee melting slowly on top—an island of white sand surrounded by yellow sea.

“Wait for it to cool a bit before you eat it,” she said every time I tried to rush it. I counted by twelves and blew the steam after each count. At a hundred and twenty, I decided I'd waited long enough and dug in.



On the day of the Puja I get up, against my nature, before the sun. The preparation of the Puja mandates a clean body so my husband and I take a

shower, even before our morning chai. We will fast until the Puja is done and the priest has left.

In my big, bright kitchen with its shiny, four burner GE stove and stainless steel microwave, I chop, knead, stir-fry and pressure cook for the lunch that will follow the Puja. I conjure up an image of Ma and her sisters, gossiping while they prepare the Puja meal in my mother's kitchen. I wish my sister were here with me as I stir-fry thick orange slices of pumpkin in ghee, cumin and red chili powder, and garnish liberally with crunchy, roasted, crushed peanuts and sesame seeds. I chop pale green cabbage for fritters and soak the chickpea flour batter with turmeric and asafetida, turning it a deep yellow. I cook lentils and rice in the pressure cooker and cut half a pound of bright red Campari tomatoes for the daal. Next I make the sheera for the prasad, roasting the wheat flour and adding equal amounts of ghee, milk and sugar to it. Infused with cardamom and sprinkled with cashews and raisins, it is an offering fit for the Gods, and not so much fit for my hips. By 10:00 a.m. my house smells of sweet, aromatic spices, and my stomach growls.

While I am busy in the kitchen, my husband takes care of our son—feeds him breakfast, coaxes him to take a shower and wear an embroidered silk *kurta* over his skinny jeans. Dressed in finery, he gets caught up in the

excitement of the preparations and offers to help with setting up the coffee table that has been pushed against a wall. The priest will set up his ritualistic accouterments on it.

The priest arrives on time, sniffs the cardamom-spice-incense infused air appreciatively, and tells me he wants to start the Puja as soon as he can; he has two other homes to go to after mine.

I fill my brass lamps with oil and the silver ones with ghee, and float cotton wicks in them. The priest knows his trade well. He spreads a red piece of cloth on the table, takes a handful of rice from a Tupperware container and pours it freehand in the shape of Ganesh's face, the tusks and the trunk exaggerated with white rice kernels. He takes whole beetle nuts and uses two for the elephant's eyes, and the rest to set up the *Navagraha*, the nine celestial planets. Dressed in deep purple and gold jewels, the photo of Satyanarayan is majestic in its gilt frame. It leans against a water-filled brass pot decorated with swastikas on four sides. A glass vase holds chrysanthemum flowers that the priest plucks out to offer the Gods.

The priest lights incense sticks and a few cubes of camphor in a small brass spoon. My house smells like a Hindu temple and I breathe in deeply,

the earthy sandalwood mingling with heady camphor vapors. My friends arrive in time for the start of the hour-long Puja.

We all sit on the floor listening to the chanting of mantras and the stories they know as well as me.

From time to time, the men get up to attend to their cell phones and to check on the kids watching TV in my son's playroom. I want my son to sit with me and listen to the Puja, just like I did, but he is not interested. He doesn't understand Hindi and he is anticipating the thrill of unsupervised TV. By the time Puja ends, he has watched an hour of forbidden *SpongeBob SquarePants*. He pouts and stomps when I ask him to accompany us for the concluding aarti. Only under the threat of a month-long TV ban does he comply.

The aarti involves revolving a small oil lamp set in a brass plate in front of the Lord's image as the priest chants the appropriate incantations. It is a communal ritual, with everyone taking turns with the lamp. My son gets caught up in the ceremony and waits his turn. The fire fascinates him, inviting and forbidding at once.

After the priest leaves, we all plan to sit down for lunch in the formal dining room. I have set up the table the night before. My friends and I are

heating up the food I prepared in the morning, deep frying the cabbage fritters and cutting up cucumbers. The wooden dining table, the ceramic plates and the placemats feel foreign after the ancient ceremony.

The kids are sitting at the breakfast table, waiting for their cheese pizza; they insist they will not eat the Puja meal, so familiar to us and so alien to them. I wistfully remember my parents' hall, my extended family on the floor, knees touching knees, us kids squeezed between adults, eating off our parent's plates.

I tell my husband to move the couch and the recliner in the living room against the walls and fetch some bed sheets from the linen closet. We bring out the food and set it up in the center of the room. Everything, from the spinach to the pumpkin is heaped in porcelain serving bowls. Our friends want us to eat with them instead of waiting until they are finished. So we all sit, a dozen or so of us, knees touching, passing white ceramic plates and bowls to each other. The kids are curious and want to join the adults. They squeeze in between our knees and we let them eat off of our plates. The pizza remains on the table, cold and forgotten.

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Jaya Wagle's fiction and non-fiction work has been published or is forthcoming in Hobart Pulp, Little Fiction | Big Truths, THAT Literary Magazine, North Texas Review and Lamar University Press. An avid Bikram yogini, she lives in the suburbs of DFW with her husband and ten year old son. Her intermittent tweets can be followed on [@desisoccermom](#).

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