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The Jar of Pickles

Preeth Ganapathy

‘What are you doing Amma?’ asked Anjali, ambling into the kitchen. A heap of white mango seeds lay on the floor. Green, raw, sour mangoes had been diced. Amma’s wizened face broke into a familiar, toothy grin. Anjali realizing what she had been upto, said aloud, ‘Looks like your jars of pickle are going to be filled again.’

Amma, now in her seventies, was always in her elements during the time of pickle preparation. During her hey days, Amma would have jars of pickles stocked, ready to be gifted to visiting friends and relatives. Wedding celebrations in the family were considered incomplete without the taste of her famous pickles. ‘Add a dash of pickle and even the most lackluster fare gets transformed into a gourmet meal,’ she advised her daughter Anjali as she sent her away after marriage, with a big jar of mango pickles.

Amma now sprinkled salt, pickle *masala* and chilli powder over the mangoes and stirred the mixture thoroughly. She tempered the mangoes with mustard, curry leaves, cloves of garlic and some ginger - fried in sesame oil and poured in copious amounts of vinegar, in the end. The pickles were then neatly bottled in jars and the lids closed tightly. ‘There you go, 100% natural, no added preservatives, fine and safe for a full year,’ said Amma with a note of satisfaction in her voice.

Amma, after the passing of her husband, stayed with her daughter Anjali and her son-in-law Anand in their farmhouse. Anjali, like her mother was an enterprising woman. With maid Sushila to take care of house hold activities, Anjali had a lot of time on her hands and had cultivated a keen interest in gardening. Her garden with its roses, bougainvillea, euphorbia, dianthus, dahlia, impatiens among other flowers, was a haven to members of varied avian species. She also had a plot of potager garden behind the house with beans, tomatoes, peas, lime, pumpkin, cucumber, and zucchini being grown organically. All cooking was done with the organic produce from the backyard.

The annual city food festival was to be held in four months time. Entries for setting up food stalls had been sought. There were many awards of recognition to be won too. Anjali and a

couple of friends decided that they would put up a stall of their own. Big data and Internet of Things may be the order of future, but when it came to food, they felt that organic, healthy eating was the way to go. So, healthy eating would naturally be the USP of their stall. After careful deliberation, they had zeroed in on the list of items that would be on offer - vegetable *chat*, iced bitter gourd juice, spinach sandwiches, sprouts cutlet, *methi roti* and *ragi roti*. All of them decided that they would each take up responsibility for one item on the menu with Anjali picking iced bitter gourd juice as her choice.

Anjali diligently got down to the business of growing bitter gourd. She meticulously sowed bitter gourd seeds on moist soil mixed with composted manure, waited patiently until they germinated fifteen days later and ensured that the soil was well drained after each watering schedule. The vines started growing green and luxuriant on the trellis which she had built. She kept a vigilant watch over the trellised vines for any possible attack of downy mildew or mosaic virus. In time, yellow flowers on the vines metamorphosed into small, light green fruits that brought joy to her heart, like the first drops of rain water slaking thirst.

Anjali now called out to her maid. ‘Sushila, harvest the green bitter gourd fruits, once every two days from now on. Collect them in the blue basket and refrigerate them. Leave out the over ripe yellow and orange ones on the creeper for the next crop,’ she said.

A week before the food festival, Sushila announced, ‘Madam, looks like this is all the harvest we have this time round. We’ll get the next batch after about three months.’ Anjali took the blue basket of bitter gourd out of the refrigerator and placed it on the dining table for a final count. She found that around four scores of fruits had been collected, enough for fresh, natural bitter gourd juice for the food festival, she thought happily. Just then, one of her friends called her over to her place to take stock of the progress they had made and discuss last minute nitty gritty details of setting up the stall.

The Sun was a fiery ball of fire, when she came back home, hours later. ‘Welcome back Anjali!’, Amma greeted her pleasantly.

‘What’s the matter Amma, you seem to be very happy,’ Anjali said. It was very hot inside the house too.

‘Yes, I have a surprise for you,’ said Amma and led her to the dining room.

Amma had set the table for lunch. She had placed two Corelle dinner plates on white embroidered table mats. In the centre was a delectable spread of vegetable pulao, raitha and chutney in fine bone china bowls. At the far end of the table, stood a row of pickle jars lined up neatly, like disciplined soldiers in a file.

‘Why have you taken out all the mango pickle jars from the closet? One would have sufficed,’ Anjali said laughing.

Amma walked over to where the pickles stood and said with flourish, ‘Jars of fresh bitter gourd pickle.’

Anjali checked the blue basket lying beside the sink. It was empty.

‘You can’t have a taste just yet. Allow it to sit for three days before you open the lid,’ Amma said, wagging a finger at Anjali, as if she were a little child.

The heat suddenly increased to the point of oppression. Anjali felt anger rise up inside her, like a vicious snake waiting to strike.

‘Weren’t the mango pickles enough? I am sick and tired of your pickles! When are we going to hear the end of the pickle story,’ she exploded.

‘What’s the matter dear?’ asked Amma flustered, now on the verge of tears.

‘I had grown the bitter gourd fruits for the food festival. And now, I have nothing to show for it.’ Anjali could see her efforts being washed down the drain.

She stormed out of the room in a huff and did not wait to hear a downcast Amma whisper a soft sorry.

The day of the food festival finally dawned. The Sun shone benignly and the wind smiled as it blew lightly. A number of stalls had been lined up and some of them belonged to reputed names in the food industry. Anjali and her friends were happy that their stall with its sparkling white overalls, clean white table linen and a light shade of blue overhanging, looked inviting. The only disappointment was the bitter gourd pickle. Anjali felt that she had lost face with her friends as she could not stick to her words. If only the bitter gourd juice bottles had materialized.

She was left with the Hobson's choice of bringing the bitter gourd pickle to the venue. She had it teamed up with curd rice.

As time went by, people started checking out what was on offer at Anjali's stall. Although, a few of them were wary initially, word spread quickly and people thronged to their stall. Within half an hour, there was a long serpentine queue. All the items on the menu did well, but the bitter gourd pickle with curd rice was particularly in high demand. So much so that, people started buying entire jars to take home. By mid afternoon they had sold out everything that was on offer. But, people came back asking if there were more jars of pickle on sale.

As the festival drew to an end, it was time for the awards of recognition to be given away. Anjali knew that the pickles stood no chance. On the other hand, her juice bottles could have probably won her an award. But Anjali was pleasantly surprised when her name was called out under the category of 'Popular Choice Award.' The jar of pickles had emerged winner. As Anjali walked up to collect the award, her excitement was replaced by a sharp pang of contrition. She realized that the real winner here was her mother. The bitter unreasonableness with which she had slighted her mother weighed down heavily on her conscience. The least Anjali owed her was an apology.

Biographical Note:

Preeth Ganapathy is a gold medalist software engineer turned civil servant. She is a career bureaucrat who hails from Coorg and is currently posted in Bangalore. Writing has been her passion since childhood. Her work has been published in the Spark Magazine, Muse India, Indus Woman Writing and The Literary Yard. She lives with her husband and baby.