



Dinner Stories

By Sylvia Brownrigg
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DIAMOND DUST

Stories.

By Anita Desai.

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THE giving and withholding of nourishment was a central theme in Anita Desai's recent novel "Fasting, Feasting." A parable of contrasts between family life in an Indian town and an American suburb, Desai's subtle narrative explored the question of who fed whom and how lovingly and whether such feeding satisfied her characters' spiritual hunger. As the doted-upon Indian son, Arun, studying in Boston, wondered: "But what is plenty? What is not? Can one tell the difference?"

In almost every story in Desai's richly rewarding new collection, "Diamond Dust," a meal is offered or consumed at a dramatic juncture, with symbolic significance. A husband and wife anxious to please their eminent, status-enhancing houseguest lose their hold on him when the wife produces a meager dinner of yogurt, bread and sliced cucumber; an alienated young man visiting his old family home is fed a series of unwanted dishes, each urged on him by his cousin's insistent, "your favorite"; a child whose instruction by a charismatic artist has made her feel superior to her family is brought back into the fold by biting into a peanut butter sandwich. In Desai's fictional worlds, food is often the most expressive means of communication between husband and wife, parent and child. To her, you are -- culturally, familially, emotionally -- what you eat.

In some stories, Desai sustains the culinary motif throughout. In "Royalty," for example, we first meet the self-important Raja as he tells a tale about his train trip while being chauffeured from the station to Ravi and Sarla's New Delhi home. Having rejected a "two-egged mamlet" offered to me by this incredibly ragged and totally sooty little urchin," he was presented with a "basket overflowing with fruit, a positive cornucopia," by a benign stranger convinced that Raja was the reincarnation of his grandfather.

It's a wonderfully vivid anecdote, which Desai uses to illuminate the complexities of an expatriate Indian bestowing himself on friends from university days -- friends cowed somewhat by his cosmopolitan presence. As in much of Desai's work, the comedy comes from contrasting cultural habits, from the different values natives and visitors place on a city's offerings. The tense truth is that Raja's visit both disrupts his hosts' social life and delays their summer retreat to the cooler Himalayas. It is only when their cook rebelliously

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leaves and Sarla produces her inadequate meal that Raja finally moves on to greener pastures (and pantries).

"Underground" features a similar, if more melancholy, episode -- an Englishman's failure to provide decent nourishment for his visitors. The story introduces us to a married couple driving around Cornwall on a crowded weekend looking for a place to stay, but its central character is Bob McTaggart, whose White House Hotel is always empty because he cannot bring himself to take in guests. McTaggart is mourning his wife, Helen, with whom he bought the hotel before the recurrence of her cancer, and his few subsequent efforts to act as a host have yielded only distress and burned toast. Now it is all he can do to make himself sardine sandwiches and feed scraps at night to the visiting badgers, one of whom he softly addresses as "Helen."

Many of the Indian stories are set in and around Delhi, but other stories take Desai to America, Canada and Mexico. Yet another is set in an eerie dreamscape reminiscent of the nameless territory in Kazuo Ishiguro's novel "The Unconsoled" (and provokes similar surprise at an apparent realist's drift into Surrealism). Wherever she travels, Desai discovers similar patterns: children resist the noose of parental expectations; pets offer solace for loneliness (even unruly dogs like the ferocious Diamond, beloved by his hapless owner in the title story); and writers generally prove to be a vain and disappointing bunch. The elderly poet Don Beto, whom young Louis visits in "Tepoztlan Tomorrow," has become a desiccated shell of his former self: the man who inspired Louis to leave Mexico and pursue his studies in Texas no longer writes poetry, instead urging Louis to produce polemics against a golf course development.

1 | 2 | [NEXT PAGE >](#)

Sylvia Brownrigg is the author of a novel, "The Metaphysical Touch," and a forthcoming collection of stories, "Ten Women Who Shook the World."

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