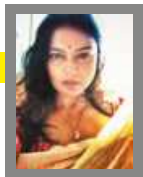


**UNDER A DIFFERENT SKY**  
BY IFFAT NAWAZ



# A completely unrelated series of hunger stories

## 1984 — Dhaka

My father used to take me, and sometimes my younger brother, to a particular shop in the Baitul Mukarram Market. It was a gadget store. They carried camera accessories and other things. Nothing that interested me at the age of five, six, seven. But still Abbu took us, unsure if it was to get us out of the house for air or he really wanted our company. I went with him like that many times to many places, a tiny body next to a grown body, holding hands, the tiny committed to whatever the grown was going to do, show, experience.

The man at the camera shop had a name which started with an M. My father called him M... bhai. I had found a new kind of face type to study in him. You know when you are young and you come upon new faces which look different from the ones you know and you observe their looks with special interests — like that. I observed him.

My father never bought us anything when we went to that shop. So, there were no material gains. We were not particularly bored or excited. It was fun to be in one of those shops in a plaza were people walk by, always peeking in out of habitual curiosity. The fact that it was adjacent to Baitul Mukarram, one of the biggest and known mosques in Dhaka gave it a religious flavour. If we went on a Friday, my Father had to look at his watch, as stores would close around jumma and while he did not pray at the mosque, others would shut their stores and join the prayers. We would then come home, moderately hungry, mostly empty-handed, though my Father seemed happy with whatever conversations he had with M... bhai, I assume about cameras, new models, old tech glitches, Fuji, Nikon, Canon. When we reached home, there was lunch, I would help my mum put the dishes



on the table. And we ate, in an ordinary way, in ordinary days of my extraordinarily complete childhood.

## 2017 — Cox's Bazar

There was a six-month window in my grown-up life when I did not cook at home even once. I had a nice flat, open with lots of air and light. A kitchen corner, with cooking essentials. But I never once made a dish.

The gas cylinder hung around, bored and full, wondering why it was never used. I would spend my days in the Rohingya refugee camps or in meetings around Cox's Bazar town; many long meetings, and thousands of pages of notes. Or, the days I went to the camps, the long Marine Drive rides with Bay of Bengal on one side. And the way the wind sings only in Cox's Bazar, the warm breeze soothing faces and

the trees calling out while I betrayed and never stopped for a moment to be with them. That was the time when I never ate at home, even if I went hungry, I felt incapable of cooking a dish for myself.

I had breakfasts at a neighbourhood restaurant; paratha, eggs and tea, this gave me 10 extra lbs. I didn't care. I had lunch with white rice, daal and some curries at work. But dinner... I don't remember dinners. I blanked out the kitchen corner, I blanked out the need for meals at home, in those six months in Cox's Bazar when a mute part of me wished to remain hungry and cold.

## 2020 — Pondicherry

When it comes to cooking, I believe in efficiency. Especially with meals for one. I never saw the point of wasting time in the kitchen and my mother's toiled face from

the ordeals of cooking from childhood made me detest it even more. At most, I made two items and in the past 20 years, had figured out 10 different menus, in rotation and repeat — simple and moderately nutritious.

Until the global lockdown of March/April/May 2020 for COVID-19. I depended on farmers who delivered vegetable and fruit baskets at home. And there was no option to choose what you wanted in your baskets. I started receiving things I never picked up in the market. Some I had eaten at other people's homes or at my mum's, the others were unknown fruits of this semi-foreign region. And because there was no question of wasting any item, I started to make a few dishes every day. Finding recipes from friends, my mother, online and intuition, I started creating colourful plates. The free banana leaves I got from the farmers added a green base to my lunch plates.

I heard somewhere that it takes 40 days to establish a permanent habit. I can safely say now, I have finally understood the self-care that comes with making oneself a wholesome, full-plate meal which includes a variety of dishes, all plant based and grown by locals. I am not one for putting up posts on social media of my meals but I think it's showing on my face... the orange of the pumpkin on my lips, the green of the chow chow on my hair, the brinjal's purple on my eyelids and the jackfruit seed's beige on my skin.

All this makes me want to extend my love, for an unhungry, fulfilled, well-taken care of life of gratitude to all beings in this universe. Reaching out with a full-plate embrace from my tomato, beetroot cheeks to your raw mango hearts.

**Photo Courtesy: Iffat Nawaz**

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**KOHINOOR CHEMICAL**