

Porata! Oh, Dear Porata!

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Since I left my home country many years ago among many things what I miss the most is the handmade porata (fried flat bread). I can't vouch for others but the mornings when I woke up to see mom preparing poratas my day turned brighter. Porata with oil soaked shredded fried potatoes – I can still taste the deliciousness of that combination.

As I travelled away from home to pursue higher education in America my finances had often dwindled to the point when even buying the cheapest bread became a challenge, not to even mention about the delicacies. However, during those tough years I found a roommate who brought back some life into my dinner table. A small, middle aged Indian man Murthi was pursuing his PhD and followed a strict vegetarian diet. Soon I found out he wasn't only pretty good in mathematics but was also blessed with the heavenly skill of making delicious poratas. Oh, do I still remember those days! Who would have thought that I would travel half the world and still would be able to enjoy the oil soaked poratas with finger licking potato fries – I can feel my saliva collecting inside my mouth as I speak. Anyway, that love affair between me and the total deliciousness didn't continue very long. Soon I was awakened in a rude realization when my clothing won't fit me anymore. Disappointed and disheartened I had to put a halt in the porata ways, indefinitely.

My university life is a matter of long past. Now, a husband and father of two, I and my family have lately moved out of a high-rise Toronto apartment to a specious house in the suburb. Anybody who has lived here for even a short period of time must know how expensive it might get to have a regular

housekeeper. As a result, most wives end up doing chores like cooking, washing, cleaning beside other housekeeping routines unless their husbands chip in. Suffering from chronic laziness, my performance had been so poor over the years that my wife Shili had quit asking me for any help long time ago. I do have to live with a stable degree of verbal abuse, mostly the same set of speeches that evolved around my worthlessness. But since when words hurt anybody?

However, things aren't always as simple. All the stuff that you might have heard about marriage, being give and take, is true. I not helping in household affairs do no good when I beg for handmade poratas to my better half – better because she knows some things that I do not, like the secret art of making beautiful poratas. One might dare to question how difficult can it be to make some dough, separate it in little balls, roll them into flat bread and fry it in deep or little oil until lightly brown. The truth is, unless you know what you are doing you'll hit the wall right from the dough, trust me on this. I have tried several times and failed miserably. They never come up right. The other choice is to buy the packaged ones from stores. They are usually very high on oil and deemed unhealthy. All the fuss about healthy living that has started to pick up in the recent years have made into our home too.

People who live in Toronto especially in the Scarborough area knows that there are many women living in the high-rise apartment buildings sell handmade poratas, dal puris (flat bread with spicy lintel mix inside) and samosas. The stuff must be refrigerated and fried in oil before serving. From our home it is a relatively long drive to pick up but we still ordered sometime, for the sake of health and palate. Most of these women live in the vicinity of the intersection of Danforth Avenue and Victoria Park Avenue - the depot for Bangladeshis. There is a reason why only the apartment dwellers are into this business. Most if not all apartment complexes in Toronto include the electricity cost within the monthly rent, as a flat rate. So, no matter how much

you cook on the electric oven of yours the bill is never going to go up. In comparison the private houses have separate electric meters and the charges are based on usage. So when a renter buys a house and moves out of an apartment the usage pattern for all utilities changes instantly. The money one may make selling poratas won't be enough to pay for the extra electric bills.

It is the beginning of winter when my sister who lived in America expressed her willingness to come visit us. Their visit to our house is always a big event especially for the kids. They have one four-year-old son. Him and our two get along relatively well and are usually engaged into spirited plays with frequent arguments and even fights, though nothing too serious to disturb our peace. From our experiences we have noticed if they are given enough time they can usually find remedies for their own problems. Of course, there is no guarantee that a few blows won't be thrown around in the process. Hence it is also a good idea to keep an eye on the progress.

Both my sister and her husband love the handmade poratas of Toronto. They have particularly asked to have them stored in plentiful well before they arrive. Porata with spicy beef curry reminds them (and us as well) of old days in Dhaka. Middle aged people must be nostalgic. On a holiday when we gorge on Khichuri (a preparation with rice and lintel) a lot of memories from old days peek through my mind as well. My better half is still little away from being in her middle ages but even she has lot of memories related to porata and sugar (there may not be too many folks from Bangladesh who haven't eaten a porata wrapped in sugar in their childhood).

Let's reign in the talk. In the event of their visit we ordered 50 poratas, some dal puris and samosas to an unfamiliar elderly woman in Toronto. My wife had tried several others who she knows but failed to get a commitment. Finally finding this lady she breathed in relief. While they are not difficult to make at home the process is time consuming, messy and requires a component of skill, hence most have them made. The women

who are into this business do it for some extra income. The elderly woman's name is Aleya, I learn later. There may be something before and after but that's the only name she gives to everybody. We have never met her personally. This is the first time we ordered to her. We'll meet during pick up.

I work north of Toronto, away from all the crowd and rush of the downtown, and find it driving there is the best way to commute. Parking is available for a reasonable fee, unlike the downtown area where the parking sometimes is hard to find and often costs too much. That and of course the time to commute are two primary reason why many choose to use public transportation – subway being the popular choice with bus service as the less attractive one. I know many who frequently take naps in public transportation and they feel quite happy about the whole experience. Driving of course give no opportunity for dozing off, not without disastrous consequences, but the go-stop routine during the rush hours do provide some sort of swinging motion which is not very uncomfortable either. I have been truly enjoying the driving to work in the recent months.

On a day when I am already quite stressed pushing ridiculously heavy traffic on my way back from work Shili calls. I know right away she needs something. She never calls for nothing. The mystery reveals itself soon. She asks me to go all the way to Scarborough and pick up our order of goodies from a building on Crescent road near the intersection of Danforth Ave and Victoria Park Ave. That's where Aleya lives. On expressway 401 traffic was moving, slowly but steadily. Once I exit to the local roads things come almost to a halt. At least that's how it feels. Cursing I snap on the radio and turn the volume high, which do very little to take away my frustration. I curse Shili some, who on earth would send her husband into this mess knowingly. Somebody honks me, unduly, forcing me into a reaction where I lean on my horn for at least 10 seconds. That's what you get for honking people for nothing. Idiot!

Not sure how long have passed as I stop looking at the car clock or my watch but finally things starts to look little better. I can see the tall apartment buildings on Crescent road. This is when I realize I have completely forgotten the details like building and apartment numbers of Aleya that Shili provided me. Lately I forget a lot, things of all nature. The kids teasingly call me old and forgetful. Ironically, they are no better at it either. Often, I find them teary eyed unable to find important stuff like library books, school agenda etc. with their mother eventually coming to their rescue.

I call home. It is my daughter Far who receive the phone. Since she turned four she doesn't allow anybody else to receive any call. No matter where she is and whatever she might be engaged in, she rushes and captures the phone. It is never easy to recover it from her. She isn't much into conversation. The worst part is that she gets hold of the receiver and continue with her business - whatever she has been doing before the interruption. After screaming 'Hello' three four times when I receive no response I give up and call Shili on her cell phone instead who took her sweet time before receiving. I learn my daughter is willing to talk to me but she needs to finish the feeding routine of her baby doll first. Mad in frustration I am about to say something rude but then have to reign in. She is the only one in the family who seems to genuinely care about me, unlike her mother and brother, being sarcastic.

I get the building number from Shili. She does not know the apartment number or the buzzer number. She has only spoken to Aleya only once. Aleya could not give her all the details. Shili tells me to call Aleya up and get the details. She is busy and do not have time to make the call. She disconnects. What I feel can easily be described as overwhelming rage. I need to know the buzzer number – without it getting inside the building could be quite difficult. Usually it is possible to tag along others but then there are those moments where some people would give you that suspicious look, rightfully so – *who the hell*

are you? Where are you planning to go? I hate that.

I call Aleya, after fourth ring I get the answering machine and leave a message. *I have come to pick up the poratas but I can't get in. I do not have your buzzer or the apartment number. Please call at my cell phone as soon as you get this message.* Fifteen minutes passes and when nobody calls me back, quite annoyed I call Aleya again. Four rings and pops up the answering machine. Unsure about what to do – leave another message or just disconnect – a broken female voice interrupts my thought. “I am Aleya. Who are you? Hello?”

I give her my name and explain my intention. I ask for her apartment number and buzzer number.

A few moments silence. “Son, I have no clue what is the buzzer number. It is never required. So many people are coming and going all the time, just follow them.”

I let go a sigh. “What is your apartment number?”

Some more silence. “Can't remember son. Two thousand something. I came here only four months ago. How can anybody remember all these things in such a short time?”

I shrug. I have to wonder how this woman continues to do this business when she doesn't even know this very basic information. I ask her if she can come down to the lobby and hand me over the goodies.

“I can't do that. “She hesitantly responds. “I do not have any keys for the apartment. My daughter and son-in-law went to work. They won't be back in another hour or so.”

I feel a slight headache progressing inside my head. How did I get myself into this? I wasted minimum one hour pushing through the traffic to get here, going back without the poratas is not an option. I try to think. Is there any other useful information I can fetch from Aleya?

“Which floor do you live in?” I finally ask.

“Didn't I say two-thousand-something? “She snapped. “Two thousand means twentieth floor – how can you not know this?”

I try to be patient. Somebody who doesn't know her apartment number is in no way to lecture. When is she going to learn that?

"Which way should I go once I am on 20th floor?" I ask.

"Turn right. I'll open the door and look for you. You'll know me right away. All my hair is gray. Come up, son. I am going to get your package ready."

She disconnects. I notice many returning office workers are entering the building in hoards. Several seniors have gathered in the lobby for an afternoon gossip. It is almost end of fall, there is clear chill in the air. Light jacket isn't doing it anymore. I follow couple of gentlemen and slip through the door with as much normalcy as I can possibly master. None of the gentlemen even look back to see me. Everyday thousands of people enter and exit these buildings. Who has time to check on others? At least that's what I believed. I am up for a rude awakening when one of the oldest ladies among the group of seniors takes a few quick and unsteady steps ahead propping against her stick and blocks my way. Damn! What is she up to?

"Where do you think you are going?" The Caucasian old lady demanded, with an extra bit of roughness in her trembling voice.

I was visibly shaken. This isn't something I was expecting. Why does she care where I am going? Who gave her the right to question me?

"Umm, up." I have to look for words.

The old lady checks me out with her sharp eyes. "I know everybody who lives in this building. Everybody – man, woman, kids. You are an outsider. Did you think just because I grew old you can fool me? I can pick you up in the air and slam on the ground just like that..." She gestured threateningly.

Now, this is the right time for me to start to panic. If this lady continues to make too much noise others might stop to inquire, somebody may call the security, at the end everything will flow downward. Her companions group up and walk toward

me, making me even further nervous. The old lady continues her lecture, "You can't just enter as you wish. Hold on, I am going to call the police. Does anybody have a phone?" She asks her companions.

There is a series of head shakes – 'no'. She looks at me. "Hand me over your phone".

I look around me. If things go too far I am ready to dash out. Let the porata go to hell. When the whole population of the world streaming through these buildings without any problem why do I have to get so unlucky to face this trouble? I stubbornly shake my head. No way (I am handing over my cell phone to her).

She narrows her eyes and examines me for a few long moments. "Think you are too smart? Okay, go ahead, I forgive you this time. However, if I see you again I am calling the cops. Remember that."

I let go a breath of relief and rush to catch the waiting elevator. It is jam packed. Office traffic meets with the army of kids who are travelling back and forth to the playground. Every button on the floor panel is lit - from two to all the way twenty. Patience and more patience. As the elevator continues its slow journey up stopping and unloading at every level, I try to take a short nap leaning against the wall at one corner of the elevator, unsuccessfully.

Once at 20th floor I follow Aleya's instruction and turn right. I continue to walk through the long corridor hoping to see Aleya peaking out. Nothing. I walk across the length of the corridor three times with no luck. I call her again. The door opens this time with Aleya peaking through it. She is about sixty. She looks older than her age but have an affectionate smile.

"Sorry for the trouble son. I rarely go out, do not know anything around here. Come inside. Nobody is home."

I step inside. A two-bedroom apartment neatly arranged - expensive sofas, large dining table, tasteful oil paints hanging from the wall. The kitchen however is a total mess. Aleya received some new orders, I learn. Our order is ready and set to

go.

“I get many orders son,” she smilingly says. “My porata goes all the way to America. Everybody likes my porata. It makes me so happy. Keeps me busy too. I actually have three other deliveries this afternoon. They might show up soon.”

Great! Why should I be the only one getting tormented by the crazy old lady in the lobby? I pay and is about to leave with my goodies when Aleya stops me. “Do you want to see some pictures? I have two grandchildren. So restless! Hold on for a second, I’ll go and get the albums.”

As I wait in the living room, out of word, Aleya hurries into one of the bedrooms to get the picture albums. I stand there, shocked, wondering how she can trust somebody who she has never met before. This city is filled with thugs!

I have to go through several albums. She has only one child – a daughter, who is a nurse by profession. Half the albums are filled with her childhood photos. I sit through it not knowing if it will be too rude to just walk away. At some point the torturous session ends and she goes to put the albums back. Several minutes later she returns and gives me this surprised look. “Who are you son? Are you waiting for something? Sorry, I forgot. I have become very forgetful.”

I sigh. I take a mental note to ask Shili to speak to Aleya’s daughter. She probably has no clue how bad her mother’s memory is. As I remind her about the porata she feels very embarrassed. “So sorry! I totally forgot about that. I am getting old. But my porata is very delicious. Do you want me to fry one for you? I have potato fries. The two goes together very well.”

Really! Potato fries? I am torn in between. I eat light lunches. By the time it is late afternoon my stomach usually churns in hunger. I can feel saliva rushing toward my mouth. At the end I control my urge and step out into the corridor with the load of poratas and other goodies, anxiously wondering how the traffic is going to be on my way to home. There is a short wait for the elevator, fortunately. As I walk out to the lobby I am

happy to find out that the crazy lady is still posted there. Imagining the other porata pickers going through the same peril as I did, I chuckle. At my sight her eyes narrow in a deep frown, examines my goody bag and goes up a pointed finger stabbing in the air menacingly – *if I see you again...*

Fat chance! I am going to walk out, climb into my car and drive off never to return. I give her a crooked smile and step outside pushing through the heavy door. The door shut down with a loud bang right behind me.

I have just opened the car door and dropped the load inside when the phone rings. It is Shili.

“There is a problem.” She said.

“What problem?” I show enough terseness to discourage her from any further request. I want to return home. Show any weakness and she will find ten other things for me to do.

“Aleya called. Right after you got into the elevator. She gave you the wrong bag.”

“What!” I bark.

There is a long silence at the other end. “Please go back one more time. She begged me. Would you, please?”

Annoyed I take a quick look into the lobby through the glass panels. The crazy lady is still there. There is no way I am going to face her again. She will just eat me alive this time.

“Did she give us the bigger one or the smaller one?”

“Bigger. Much bigger.”

I take a long breath. It is going to sound really mean but I have no choice. I say, “Call her back and say you could not reach me.” I disconnect.

We eat those porotas with great pleasure. Aleya didn't exaggerate, her porata is delicious. We have lot of words of praise for her. However, some of our friends may have heard some nasty things about me. Aleya's daughter is a close friend of one of our family friends. Later it comes to my knowledge that she has been told I am one of the meanest people on earth. I have taken advantage of a clueless woman's poor memory and

stole poratas. The earth would have been a much better place to live if it wasn't for people like us.

How ridiculous! Why do I have to take all the blame!