VINTAGE DESAI

Fasting, Feasting

VINTAGE

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SHORTLISTED FOR THE 1999 BOOKER PRIZE

Uma, the plain, spinster daughter of a close-knit Indian family, is trapped at home, smothered by her overbearing parents and their traditions, unlike her ambitious younger sister Aruna, who brings off a ‘good’ marriage, and brother Arun, the disappointing son and heir who is studying in America.

Across the world in Massachusetts, life with the Patton family is bewildering for Arun in the alien culture of freedom, freezers and paradoxically self-denying self-indulgence.

About the Author

Born and educated in India, **Anita Desai** is the author of many novels and short stories, and has been shortlisted for the Booker Prize three times for her novels *Clear Light of Day, In Custody* and *Fasting, Feasting*. She is the Emerita John E. Burchard Professor of Humanities at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and a fellow of both the American Academy of Arts and the Royal Society of Literature.

ALSO BY ANITA DESAI

Cry, the Peacock
Voices in the City
Bye-Bye, Blackbird
Where Shall We Go This Summer?
Games at Twilight
Fire on the Mountain
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Village by the Sea
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The Complete Stories

To Those Whose Stories I’ve Told

ANITA DESAI

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Part One

One

ON THE VERANDA overlooking the garden, the drive and the gate, they sit together on the creaking sofa-swing, suspended from its iron frame, dangling their legs so that the slippers on their feet hang loose. Before them, a low round table is covered with a faded cloth, embroidered in the centre with flowers. Behind them, a pedestal fan blows warm air at the backs of their heads and necks.

The cane mats, which hang from the arches of the veranda to keep out the sun and dust, are rolled up now. Pigeons sit upon the rolls, conversing tenderly, picking at ticks, fluttering. Pigeon droppings splatter the stone tiles below and feathers float torpidly through the air.

The parents sit, rhythmically swinging, back and forth. They could be asleep, dozing – their eyes are hooded – but sometimes they speak.

‘We are having fritters for tea today. Will that be enough? Or do you want sweets as well?’

‘Yes, yes, yes – there must be sweets – must be sweets, too. Tell cook. Tell cook at once.’

‘Uma! Uma!’

‘Uma must tell cook –’

‘È, Uma!’

Uma comes to the door where she stands fretting. ‘Why are you shouting?’

‘Go and tell cook –’

‘But you told me to do up the parcel so it’s ready when Justice Dutt’s son comes to take it. I’m tying it up now.’

‘Yes, yes, yes, make up the parcel – must be ready, must be ready when Justice Dutt’s son comes. What are we sending Arun? What are we sending him?’

‘Tea. Shawl –’

‘Shawl? Shawl?’

‘Yes, the shawl Mama bought –’

‘Mama bought? Mama bought?’

Uma twists her shoulders in impatience. ‘That brown shawl Mama bought in Kashmir Emporium for Arun, Papa.’

‘Brown shawl from Kashmir Emporium?’

‘Yes, Papa, yes. In case Arun is cold in America. Let me go and finish packing it now or it won’t be ready when Justice Dutt’s son comes for it. Then we’ll have to send it by post.’

‘Post? Post? No, no, no. Very costly, too costly. No point in that if Justice Dutt’s son is going to America. Get the parcel ready for him to take. Get it ready, Uma.’

‘First go and tell cook, Uma. Tell cook fritters will not be enough. Papa wants sweets.’

‘Sweets also?’

‘Yes, must be sweets. Then come back and take dictation. Take down a letter for Arun. Justice Dun’s son can take it with him. When is he leaving for America?’

‘Now you want me to write a letter? When I am busy packing a parcel for Arun?’

‘Oh, oh, oh, parcel for Arun. Yes, yes, make up the parcel. Must be ready. Ready for Justice Dutt’s son.’

Uma flounces off, her grey hair frazzled, her myopic eyes glaring behind her spectacles, muttering under her breath. The parents, momentarily agitated upon their swing by the sudden invasion of ideas – sweets, parcel, letter, sweets – settle back to their slow, rhythmic swinging. They look out upon the shimmering heat of the afternoon as if the tray with tea, with sweets, with fritters, will materialise and come

swimming out of it – to their rescue. With increasing impatience, they swing and swing.

MAMANDPAPA. MAMAPAPA. PAPAMAMA. It was hard to believe they had ever had separate existences, that they had been separate entities and not MamaPapa in one breath. Yet Mama had been born to a merchant family in the city of Kanpur and lived in the bosom of her enormous family till at sixteen she married Papa. Papa, in Patna, the son of a tax inspector with one burning ambition, to give his son the best available education, had won prizes at school meanwhile, played tennis as a young man, trained for the bar and eventually built up a solid practice. This much the children learnt chiefly from old photographs, framed certificates, tarnished medals and the conversation of visiting relatives. MamaPapa themselves rarely spoke of a time when they were not one. The few anecdotes they related separately acquired great significance because of their rarity, their singularity.

Mama said, ‘In my day, girls in the family were not given sweets, nuts, good things to eat. If something special had been bought in the market, like sweets or nuts, it was given to the boys in the family. But ours was not such an orthodox home that our mother and aunts did not slip us something on the sly.’ She laughed, remembering that – sweets, sly.

Papa said, ‘We did not have electricity when we were children. If we wanted to study, we were sent out to sit under the streetlight with our books. During the examinations, there would be a circle of students sitting and reciting their lessons aloud. It would be difficult to concentrate on law because others were reciting theorems or Sanskrit slokas or dates from British history. But we did it – we passed our exams.’

Papa said, ‘The best student in my year studied day and night, day and night. We found out how he could study so much. During the exams, he cut off his eyelashes. Then, whenever his eyes shut, they would prick him and he would wake up so he could study more.’

Papa’s stories tended to be painful. Mama’s had to do with food – mostly sweets – and family. But the stories were few, and brief. That could have been tantalising – so much unsaid, left to be imagined – but the children did not give the past that much thought because MamaPapa seemed sufficient in themselves. Having fused into one, they had gained so much in substance, in stature, in authority, that they loomed large enough as it was; they did not need separate histories and backgrounds to make them even more immense.

Sometimes one caught a glimpse of what they had been like before they were joined together in their Siamese twin existence on the veranda swing. At times Uma was astonished, even embarrassed by such a glimpse – for instance, of Mama playing a game of rummy with her friends which she did surreptitiously because Papa had a highminded disapproval of all forms of gambling. When Mama went across to the neighbours’ for a morning game, she did not quite lift her sari to her knees and jump over the hedge but somehow gave the impression of doing so. Her manner – along with the curious patter that went with the game – became flirtatious, girlish. Her cheeks filled out plumply as she stuffed in the betel nuts and leaves she was offered – another indulgence frowned upon by Papa – her eyes gleamed with mischief as she tossed back her head and laughed apparently without any thought of propriety. She clasped the cards to her chest and fluttered her lashes coquettishly. If Uma hung over her shoulders to look or Aruna edged closer to see why she seemed so delighted with her hand of cards, she swatted at her daughters as if

they were a pair of troublesome flies. ‘Go. Go play with your friends.’

Then she would come back to lunch, picking her way through a gap in the hedge, her daughters trailing after her, and by the time she arrived at the veranda, her manner had become the familiar one of guarded restraint, censure and a tired decorum.

When Papa, back from his office, asked what they had done with themselves all morning, she drooped, sighing, and fanned herself, saying, ‘It was so-o hot, what can one do? Nothing.’

AS FOR PAPA, he never became less like himself, only more so. Calling for the driver to bring the car round in the morning, he got in with an air of urgency that suggested any delay could cause an explosion. If they ever had occasion to go to the office to fetch him, he would be sitting at an immense desk like the satrap of some small provinciality, mopping his neck with a large handkerchief, giving curt orders to his secretary, his typist and his clients, every gesture and grimace adding to the carapace of his authority till it encased him in its dully glinting lead.

Mama would carefully pack his tennis kit and send it across to him with the office peon who had come for it on his bicycle. Pinning the bag under a metal clamp, he would pedal away. Mama would watch him turn out of the gate, onto the road, deep in thought.

Uma wondered if she pictured Papa changing into it in his office, behind the green oilcloth screen that stood across one corner. She put her fingers to her mouth to suppress a giggle.

Then Mama would sit herself down on the veranda swing, alone, to wait for him, keeping a cursory eye on the little girls as they played in the dry patch of grass where they were laying out a garden of pebbles, leaves, twigs and

marigold petals. She intervened irritably when they quarrelled too loudly.

Afternoon dwindled to hazy evening and finally the car drove up. Papa jumped out and came up the steps to the veranda with a bound, swinging his racquet. He was dressed in the white cotton shorts Mama had sent him, their wide legs flapping about his thin shanks. The metal buckles had made rust marks at the waist. She often scolded the washerman for bringing back the shorts with rust marks from the wash. She also scolded him for breaking the large white buttons that she then had to replace, spectacles on her nose, thin-lipped with concentration. Papa also wore a short-sleeved white shirt with a green or blue trim. He gleamed with effort and achievement and perspiration. 'Beat Shankar six–five, six–two,' he reported as he strode past them on his way to his dressing room, his cotton socks collapsing, exhausted, round his ankles. They heard him throw down his racquet with a pleased groan.

None of them spoke on the veranda. Mama sat as if stunned by his success, his prowess. Then they heard a bucket clanking, water sloshing. A stream of soapy water crept out of a drain in the side of the house and pushed past dry leaves and dust to end in a pool of slime under the basil and jasmine bushes. The girls stared.

Rousing herself, Mama called, 'Uma! Uma! Tell cook to bring Papa his lemonade!'

Uma ran.

THERE WERE SOCIAL occasions of course – Papa's career required a large number of them – and some were witnessed by his children. At them, Papa was pleased to indulge himself in a little whisky and water. When he had done so, he began to make what they considered rather frightening attempts at jocularity. His jokes were always directed against others, and they were quite ferocious under cover of the geniality that seemed proper to the ambience of a dinner party or a

reception at the club. Having made some junior magistrate squirm uncomfortably with his sallies, or reminded a senior judge of an incident best forgotten and drawing only a sour twist of the lips in response, he himself would laugh heartily. The success of his joke was measured according to the amount of discomfort it caused others. It was his way of scoring, and he threw back his head and laughed in triumph, seemed physically to gain in stature (which was on the negligible side). One could be fooled into thinking Papa was in good spirits. But the family was not fooled: they knew he was actually rattled, shaken by what he saw as a possible challenge to his status. They were relieved when he returned to what was normal for him – taciturnity – with his authority unchallenged and unshaken.

One could be forgiven for thinking Papa's chosen role was scowling, Mama's scolding. Since every adult had to have a role, and these were their parents', the children did not question their choice. At least, not during their childhood.

Two

PAPA HAS SENT for the car. It takes the driver a little time to change into his uniform, more time to get it started and out of the garage (since Papa's retirement, the car and driver, too, are semi-retired, rarely called on). Papa stands on the veranda steps watching its sagging, rusting body crawl forwards with a grinding, reluctant groan. He looks on impassively. When Uma says, 'That Rover is going to stop one day and never start again – it's so *old*,' he remains impassive, as if he prefers not to hear her and has not heard her. And so the car, a relic of Papa's past, arrives in the portico. Papa gets into the front seat beside the driver and waits for Mama and Uma to climb into the back. He is taking them for an outing to the park. He has spent all Sunday pacing the veranda, now and then swinging his arms upwards, clasping his hands, or standing still and bending his knees as if in salute to the days when he played tennis, was young and vigorous. He has told the women they must get some exercise, they sit around the house too much. So they are being taken to the park.

As soon as they are at the park gates, which are very high and wide, of beautifully intricate wrought iron, now sagging, he jumps out and rushes in with great urgency. Unfortunately there are many other people in the park on a Sunday evening, sitting in groups and picnicking, or strolling around the beds of canna lilies and the waterless fountain. They are so many obstructions in his way – a child with a

balloon or a mother with an infant pulling at her dress – and he is obliged to lower his head, square his shoulders and charge past them regardless.

Mama and Uma try to follow him but easily become distracted. They stop to look at a bush clipped to look like a peacock, at a jacaranda tree in bloom – its flowers a tender smoky blue on the bare branches – or pull away from a boisterous dog who has been rolling in the mud where a hosepipe is flooding the path and now scatters muddy drops with abandon, then are brought up short by the spectacle of a shrivelled old man in a muslin dhoti so fine as to be diaphanous, who is absorbed in the yoga exercises he is performing with total concentration, as if utterly alone in that festive park. Mama pulls her sari tightly about her shoulders and says ‘Tch, tch,’ to express her distaste for such public display.

When they look up, they see Papa far ahead, striding along as if to keep an appointment. He does not stop to look at anyone, anything. Mama gives an annoyed little snort and tells Uma they will continue their walk by themselves and not try to keep up with Papa. Sedately, they circle the park, keeping to a path between the railing and the canna beds and pretending not to notice the peanut and icecream vendors thrusting their wares between the bars and calling to customers – Uma finds saliva gathering at the corners of her mouth at the smell of the spiced, roasted gram but decides to say nothing. Every now and then they catch sight of Papa: his blinding white shorts and his sombre energy make him stand out in the desultory, disorderly crowds. Then Mama’s lashes flutter lightly in recognition. Admiration, too? Pride? Uma can never tell.

Just as they come to the end of their round, at the gate where the car and the driver are waiting, Papa arrives too. Magical timing. He of course has done three rounds in the time it has taken them to do one, but he refuses to look

pleased. ‘Get in,’ he says impatiently, ‘I’ve been waiting for you. So slow. So slow. Get in. Get in. Quick, now.’

Uma, scrambling in after Mama, says, ‘Oof, Papa, why are we hurrying?’

Papa gives the driver orders all the way home. ‘Turn here. Take this turning, not that one. Faster now – stop! Don’t you see the bus in front of you? All right now, quick. Faster. Oof, so slow, so slow!’

‘Why are we hurrying?’ Uma asks again querulously.

Back home, Mama crumples into a listless heap of cotton. In a sinking voice, she breathes, ‘Did you tell cook to have lemonade ready?’

Uma goes off to see to the lemonade and MamaPapa settle down on the swing, shuffle their feet out of their shoes and let them dangle, sigh, make a few adjustments and become two parts of one entity again, side by side, presenting the same indecipherable face to the world.

WHEN VISITORS CAME and enquired after their health, one of them would reply in the first and sometimes third person singular, but the answer was made on behalf of both of them. If Papa gave his opinion of their local member of parliament or the chances of the government in the next election, Mama said nothing because he had spoken for her too. When Mama spoke of the sales at which she planned to buy towels or of the rise in the price of silver that made her wonder if it was time to sell her plate, Papa made assenting grunts because his thoughts were one with hers. Their opinion differed so rarely that if Mama refused to let Aruna wear a pearl necklace to the matinée at the Regal cinema or Papa decided Uma could not take music lessons after school, there was no point in appealing to the other parent for a different verdict: none was expected, or given.

Of course there were arguments between them, and debate. In fact, these occurred every day, at the same hour – when ordering meals for the day. This could never be done without heated discussion: that would have gone against custom. It was actually wonderful to see what fertile ground the dining table was for discussion and debate. But it was also impossible not to see that the verdict would be the same as at the outset – if Mama had suggested plain rice and mutton curry to begin with, then it would be that and no other, no matter what fancies had been entertained along the way: pilaos, kebabs, koftas… That was just part of the procedure.

The girls had learnt not to expect divergences and disagreements, and these occurred so rarely that they might not have recognised them when they did – if they had not been so acutely tuned to the temperature and the atmosphere of the house, so trained to catch the faintest inkling of any jarring, any dissonance.

And there had been, in that family, once, a major disagreement, one on the scale of a physical disaster, that left the family in a state of shock, as after a fire or flood. Mama, not Papa, administered that shock.

With Uma a grown woman – by some standards, at least – and Aruna newly discovering what it was to have periods, Mama it was who found herself pregnant.

It had taken the girls a long time to find out what was happening, what was the cause of so much whispering, furtive discussion, visits by the doctor and to the doctor. Older relatives were sent for, consultations were carried on. Mama’s eyes were swollen with crying as she lay across her bed and wept. Papa scowled his concern and embarrassment. Like a blister with blood, the air was thick with secrets. The girls felt their ears creep as they strained to hear what was being said. It was incomprehensible, in some way risqué, even lewd, but they failed to understand the language although they caught the tone, and even the