

Daal and Duty

By

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Characters:

Arya: Indian-American woman, 30's. Born in India but raised in the States for most of her life. A painter. A feminist. It's hard for her to sit on the truth. She loves Amith but has a hard time with his parents.

Amith: Indian-American male, 30's. Born and raised in India. Came to the States when he was in his twenties for school. He's trying hard to get a job at a good law firm but can't seem to break in quite yet. He loves Arya fiercely but struggles with feeling like he is living a double-life between her and his parents. Slight Indian dialect

Jai: Indian male, 70's. Born and raised in India. Still lives there and comes to the States once every few years to visit his son. Really believes in what tradition means to him and will do whatever it takes to keep his wife, Surya, happy. He believes sacrifice is a big part of being a responsible person in the world. Indian dialect.

Surya: Indian woman, 60's. Born and raised in India. Still lives there and comes to the States once every few years to visit her son. Status is very important to her and so is having a daughter-in-law she can brag about to her friends. A bit melodramatic but would never admit it. Indian dialect.

It looks like there was a Holi celebration but from the looks of her apron and the mess of the kitchen we know otherwise. We see an Indian American woman, 30's focused on a book in a small kitchen connected to a very modest living area. We take in the small New York City condo with a Bohemian, shabby-chic, Indo-Western vibe. It's still figuring out what it wants to be...and so is the couple who lives there. She looks up from the cookbook she's reading very confused. She takes a deep breath and starts combing through the other books until-

Arya:

Amith, there are literally 24 different recipes I'm looking at to make the "simple daal," you said your Mom loves. I don't know what to do.

Amith:

(from off stage)

Honey, whatever you make she will love it. *They will love it.* It's not a big deal.

Arya:

...

Amith:

It's. Not. Promise, babe.

Arya:

Okay. Well, if it's not a big deal why are we taking time off work to prep the apartment and stock the fridge, and hide my vibrators at Janine's along with any printed financial records, and coo-

Amith enters in an outfit that looks like he's ready to go to a big Indian wedding. While Arya is surprised he also looks really good in a kurta and she takes that in.

Arya:

Ooooh-kay.

Amith:

I just wanted them to feel good when I pick them up from the airport.

Arya:

Well. Then you better make the daal because you know how long it takes me to put on a sari...even with the help of the GOOGLE aunty.

They laugh. They want to embrace but there is no way to get close without staining Amith's kurta.

Amith:

It's going to be okay. I know my parents are old school-

Arya:

...

Amith:

But, they are my parents. And, India is different-

Arya:

My parents are from there too. So-

Amith:

But, my parents are just more traditional-

Arya:

It's cuz' you're a boy. And-

Amith:

First of all, I'm not a boy.

Silence. They both laugh. It wants to get sexy. But, the cream kurta and the tumeric won't let it go that way.

Arya:

It's only a week. I can be the good daughter-in-law for a week.

Amith:

And, take some pressure off yourself. You have nothing to prove. We are already married.

Arya:

I just wish you hadn't told her I cook you Indian food all the time. Now, I have to-

Amith:

You don't have to do anything. And, once I get a job at a good firm we won't need their help anymore. Maybe we can help them. And, I think that will take some pressure off us too.

Arya:

I'm grateful for the help. You know that, right? We could never afford New York without it. I just- I just don't want to owe anyone anything. My Dad always said don't get in trouble with the law and don't get into debt. That's the only way to keep yourself safe in this country.

Amith:

It's my parents. They are not the US government. And, they love us.

A few days later.

Amith and Arya are dressed in traditional Indian clothes and seated at their dining table. Arya's sari is a bit disheveled with uneven pleats. There are huge suitcases lined along the living room wall and an air mattress not too far from the dinner table. Jai, an Indian man in his 70's and his wife Surya, an Indian woman in her late 60's sit in their finest attire and are not amused with the cuisine or the conversation. Arya, a bit stifled in her movement serves everyone food in silence. Everyone is looking at each other and then avoiding looking at each other...

Amith:

So, Dad...I have some big news-

Jai and Surya exchange looks and immediately lighten up. Surya gently grabs Arya's wrist and helps her sit down,

Surya:

(in a mix of Hindi and English)

Please. Please. Just sit. I don't want you to over extend yourself. I knew something was going on. I told Jai. I knew it!

Arya:

Aunty?

Surya:

I thought. Something is odd. Look at this place. We send so much money and this place is-well, you know. YOU live here. The food is so sour and the daal-huuff!! Well, and your sari. Of course! You are so uncomfortable. You must be nauseous. I had so much nausea when I was pregnant with Sonali that I could barely function. I cooked so fast that I don't know what I must have been feeding Jai. How did he even eat it?! (Laughs) I mean, Jai.

Jai:

It's true. I couldn't eat any of it. But I did. Because I knew. And, with all their hormones you just can't say anything to them. You know, son. I see you. The way you let her say anything. I was worried you had become too liberal being here. But, now I know. You're just trying to keep a peaceful household.

Amith and Arya are stunned silent. They don't know what to say.

Surya:

How far along are you, honey?

Arya:

...

Mom. Dad...

Amith:

Jai:
(Laughs)

And, just think. We were going to sue you.

Surya:
(Laughing)

I know.

Arya:
What?

Amith:
What?

Surya:
For mental distress. Like that couple in India. You know. They sued their son for not giving them a grandchild.

Arya:
What? That's ridiculous.

Jai:
I know. Six years of marriage and no grandchild. It's like. What is wrong with this woman?! These people! No sense of duty-

Surya:
They paid for him to go to pilot school and everything. Chee!

Arya gets up and walks into the kitchen. They all stare at her as she stands against the wall breathing.

Surya:
Oh my goodness. Please sit down. We don't want you to have stress.

Surya gets up to help her but before she can get past the table-

Arya:
I'm not pregnant.

Silence.

Arya:
I'm. Not. Pregnant.

Jai:
What? What is she saying, Amith?

Amith just shrinks in his chair. Arya clocks this.

Arya:

AMITH.

Amith goes over to Arya. He holds her hand.

Amith:

WE. ARE. NOT. PREGNANT.

Surya:

Why not? Is something wrong with her?...With you?...Tell us. I know someone.

Amith:

Who, Amma? The guy who gave Pallavi aunty two bananas and some milk and she was magically fertile? Everyone knows she got a sperm donor. Uncle had an issue.

Surya looks at Jai in disbelief at the way her son is acting.

Jai:

How do you know that?

Surya:

How do you know that?

Amith:

Everyone knows that. And everyone just talks about it like it's a secret that you can't say in front of more than three people. Just like everything else in our town is talked about.

Silence.

Surya:

Well you should know what everyone is talking about openly in our town. The fact that our son met some "artist," in the US with no dowry and her parents are some community stage actors. And, *WE* have been paying the bills for five years and we have nothing to show for it. Where is our grandchild? Where is our money? You should be taking care of us -and we are still taking care of you?

Surya picks up her food and goes to dump it in the trash. But as she opens the trash she gasps like she is in a bad Indian soap opera. But it's real. She starts to rummage through the garbage. Arya tries to stop her. She won't have it. She puts her hand up in the air. Like. She. Can't. Anymore.

Surya:

You stop. I don't have to be delicate with you anymore, you blasphemous girl. What is this?

Everyone stares at the takeout containers in Surya's hands. But Surya eyes something more precious. She pulls off a receipt from the brown paper bag.

Surya:

AHAAAAA! You didn't even cook. Amith. She has been deceiving you all along. She doesn't cook. She just spends our money trying to fool you into loving her. She doesn't even know how to make daal.

Amith:

I know she doesn't know how to make daal. Mom, we don't make Indian food at home. It's too much work.

Surya and Jai are beside themselves. It's like they have walked into an episode of The Twilight Zone. Jai clutches his chest and Surya stands by him.

Surya:

Look what you are doing to your father.

Arya:

Okay, look. Everyone breathe. Let's just take it easy.

Everyone tries to calm down.

Arya:

Yes, aunty and uncle. We lied to you. I don't make Indian food. I don't know how to wrap a sari. And, we should not have lied to you. But I do love your son and we are very happy together. And, we really appreciate all the help you have given us. It's allowed me to continue to paint and it looks like I might get a gallery exhibition soon. And, Amith was just about to tell you his real "good news." He has interviews at two big firms coming up.

Surya:

Is this true, Amith?

Amith:

Yes, Amma. It is. And they are really, really good firms.

Jai:

That is very good news, son.

Everyone relaxes a bit....

Surya:

And, *then* you two can have kids.

Amith:

Mom. Since we are being honest. We don't *want* kids right now. The world has so many problems. And, kids are such a responsibility. We think we may adopt in the future.

Surya:

ADOPT?!!!! I can't take this anymore. You're right, Jai. These kids are too selfish. We have wasted our lives so that in our old age you would give us grandkids. And this is how you repay us. If we wait TEN years for you to adopt who knows if we will even be here. You need to give this to us. It's your duty.

Arya:

Aunty?! Do you hear yourself? I know you don't honestly believe it's any woman's duty to have to bear children when they are not ready.

Surya:

You have to live in society! I'm not talking about what people talk about in public. I'm talking about what people believe in private. In real life. And people believe it is a child's duty to give parents grandchildren and take care of their elders. Just like it's our duty to take care of you. And we have upheld our end of the bargain. We are suing you.

Silence.

Amith:

Mom. You're not going to sue us. You're just upset.

Surya:

And, I'm going to go to that judge that did this Jonny Depp, Amber Heard case. And, I will air it on TV. And you will see how many people actually agree with us.

Arya:

Aunty, you're upset. But, that's not right. And I don't think that case would go through in the US.

Surya:

What's not right? *YOU'RE* not right. And, if they won't let us then I will take you to trial on the Facebook!

Amith:

Mom, what are you talking about? Dad?

Jai:

Listen to your mother. I'm not getting in the middle.

Surya:

I will try you in the court of *public opinion*. On the Facebook. On the Twitter. You will be CANCELLED! Jai, get our things.

A few months later.

Boxes everywhere. Bare walls. Amith sits at the table a newspaper in one hand and his head buried in the other. Arya comes home in sunglasses and scarf delicately wrapped over her head. She starts to get settled and sees Amith.

Arya:

What now?

Amith:

The fucking Wall Street Journal did a feature about Mom and Dad. It's called *Daal and Duty: A tale of an elderly Indian woman who did her duty and was left empty handed and hearted.*

Arya:

The Wall Street Journal wrote that?! I guess everyone is trying to pay their bills.

Amith:

We could make a statement. Tell our side of the story. Maybe people will like us again and... give us work...

Arya:

I told you. No. Why should publicly sharing my trauma and deep personal beliefs be the only avenue for me to be accepted by society?

Amith:

What's wrong with just saying the truth?

Arya:

No one wins. You know that, right? Everyone just chooses what pull quotes they want to post on their page and both parties look like fools. No one cares about the actual lives, the full story or the humanity of the people involved anymore. They just want likes for their page or for people to jump in on a new "cancel campaign."

Look at Amber Heard. I actually feel really bad for her. For both of them. I don't know what details are truthful or not. That was for the court to decide. Did all the people who wrote about it actually watch every minute of that trial with the good of humanity on their mind? Did they even see two people? Did people even care that it was a case about physical and emotional abuse or did they just care because it was two celebrities on trial that they could get their tweets up with? I mean, what does it say about this country that one of the most watched trials was that?

Amith:

I know. But, it's hurting us. Not saying *anything* is hurting us. As long as this drama continues I can't get work. People don't take me seriously.

Arya:

Me too. And they aren't even *my* parents... I mean it's like people keep forgetting this is *our real life*. It's my fucking uterus and people are blind to that because they think I conned you into marriage with "restaurant-bought daal." And, the patriarchy says *YOU* are a victim because "I won't give Amith and his family kids." Fuck them. And by the way, I can make daal.

Amith:

What? You can make daal?

Arya:

Yeah. I can make my mother's recipe.

Amith:

How come you've never made it for me?

Arya:

Because when my mother taught me how to make it... she told me I would need to know how to make daal to get a husband.

Amith:

...

Arya:

And everyone only likes the taste of the daal they grew up with anyways.

Amith:

I love you. And, you don't ever have to make me daal, okay.

Arya:

I know. That's why I married you.

Amith:

I'm going to make *you* daal, okay?

Arya:

...

Amith:

I like to cook but I was told...man- this stuff runs deep.

Arya:

Deep.

They share a long look of knowing and releasing.

Arya:

You know what? Posting “Amith’s recipe for daal,” might be the one and only public response we need to give.

Amith:

Oh Bhagvan. My mom would flip-

A shared knowingness. A beat. A smile.

END OF PLAY