

Brown Magic Woman

*Draupadi**

“These stories are *in* you,” my mom says. “Describing the story is not the same as what happens when the stories go into your body.” In explaining to me the ways our myths make sense to her, my mom teaches me about *karam*, the record of our actions and deeds on earth, both of the past and now.

Over the years, I have grown into the habit of recording as much as I can of what my mother thinks and believes. I want to know what she says about life and what she has experienced. I want to know what she has learned from ancestors I have never met but who now have thrived and transformed vividly in my imagination. Perhaps this started when she was first diagnosed with cancer when I was very young. Years after her recovery I realized how important recording the past, present, and what we carry into the future has been for us. Everything has become about recording. A recent example: my discovery of our names scripted on labels over the saris and jewelry in my mother’s closet. How do you conceive of what to leave behind and for whom? I wonder why she kept those labels even after her recovery.

Back then, I wanted to write down everything that happened: what she knew of me, her, the world, and the pasts that created her. I still do this. I still have these impulses. I *used* to feel electrified, though, with small shocks of shame. My recording, writing, and reading of her felt too much like eulogies for a mother who was still alive. But, today, this pushing of my mother and now others in my family, to excavate, discuss, and translate their lives to me has awakened providence-like moments of clarity -- moments I wouldn’t have in a classroom.

How can stories be *in* us? My family stories, like those of many others, are riddled with secrets and scandal. They leave you speechless, tied to invisible contracts that demand exclusivity. Our stories erupt and move from generation to generation uncontrollably.

I remember one summer my aunt approached my sister, my cousin and me to discretely order us to help her. ‘We need to save your uncle,’ she said. We all had an idea of what she was referring to. It was a not-so-secretive secret that my uncle had been cheating on my aunt, again. The Indian woman in her refused to believe that there wasn’t something larger at play in his actions. Perhaps she believed, and still believes, these were just American poisons that seep easily into the minds and hearts of starry-eyed immigrants. My aunt resorted to her own methods of

* Draupadi is a pseudonym. The author can be reached at jnp@yorku.ca

preventing such lures. For her, it was about cleansing him of, in her words, ‘the white woman’s black magic.’

Take a piece of paper, write messages or mantras and do *puja* (prayer). Light *dhoopbatti* (or incense) while reciting what is written or even what comes to heart and mind. In our case, the go-to *jaap* or mantra is Hanuman Chalisa. Hanuman Chalisa protects us, gives us a hope for security when we are in fear. Collect those ashes day after day. Do not throw away the ash. Let it accumulate. Then, every few days, roll some of the ash into the paper offering, and put it underneath the bed; take some of the ash and pour it in the food; and, finally, carry the rest of the ash and disperse it all around the spaces that you live in and make yours. He and his world must all ingest these blessed remains.

My aunt’s knees were in pain at that time, so the duties of dispersing the ashes were bestowed upon us. Many days of that summer were spent spreading ashes of protection, fighting a supposed ‘white woman’s black magic’ with a brown woman’s purifying black magic in the grasses of my family’s home in the United States. I didn’t object to the task because, ultimately, doing it was not about fixing my uncle. We, and even my aunt, were not pushed to be outraged, which frustrates me as I realize how much I grew up with Tasers attached to feelings made illicit. But, what *could* be done is to seek solace in the hope that our brown black magic might work. I recall asking my grandmother why we had to do all this. (Apparently, everyone but my uncle was in on the plan to save him). My grandmother told me that faith comes from minds, hearts and bodies working in unison.

Can we have this kind of faith in bodies that we think we know? Is that enough? When I was younger, my dad told me one night, while everyone else in the room was sleeping, that he believed his eldest brother, my uncle, Dronacharya, left his spirit in my brother after he had been killed. He lives there, my dad said to me.

I imagined my brother’s other self. How must Dronacharya feel living a different life through my brother’s eyes? As a father-like figure for my own dad, what was it like for my uncle to now live as his younger brother’s son?

I learned about my uncle’s death in bits and pieces. Piecing together a history of someone I have never met (but might be living inside my brother!) was a difficult, distancing task. What right did I have in such an excavation? What was at stake for me? Distrustful was Dronacharya, even of his own people, when he was in the army many years ago. There are many stories around this and each one dances. Once we say he died, we have to talk about the fact that he was killed, which no one wants to touch. Some say he was a secret supplier of information to Pakistan. Others say he was not trusted because he was Hindu in a Sikh dominated sector. My dad says it was a roadside accident. Yet, there is also the story that it was because Dronacharya knew something about the Indian government’s hand in atrocities being committed at the border, and he needed to be silenced. I don’t know which is true. I was not alive for this.

What I do know is that his body was found three days later. There was ‘no knowledge’ of what had happened. And, last but not least, his case was not ‘desirable’ or ‘clear enough’ to go to trial.

What I also know is that, like with my aunt's feeding of faith through ashes, ingestion of stories and prayer make me a believer in the histories and pasts of my family – even if I was not yet born and not yet there. I become a believer when my cousin, Dronacharya's son, persistently messages photos of his father to ensure his lasting presence in the life of our family. When I realize the possibility that my brother could very well be my reincarnated uncle, I catch myself crying in belief.

There is a part of me that genuinely believes in the ways magic and faith function in my family. Sometimes I invent stories of what could have been and ingest those as well. I make bonds with my deceased uncle, thinking we might share experiences of disjointedness, because I know how much “it is psychotic not to know where you are in a national space.”¹

What these stories are supposed to mean and say about us becomes grayed as I try and articulate them, as I conceive of what to do with them. These stories that are ‘in’ us, as my mother teaches, are like deer, who search for the scent of musk, even though that is the very scent that already resides within them. Perhaps it is as Audre Lorde acclaims of poetry, that “It is within this light that we form those ideas by which we pursue *our* magic and make it realized.”²

¹ Bhanu Kapil Rider, *Schizophrene*, (Callicoon, NY: Nightboat Books, 2011), p. 41.

² Audre Lorde, ‘Poetry is not a Luxury,’ in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1985), p. 36; her emphasis.