

THERE are several ways to eat a mango. You can meticulously pare the golden skin away in one long curl and then cut the fruit into careful squares that may be speared on the edge of a fork and consumed with delicate sophistication. Or you can cut the two cheeks away from the seed and scoop out the succulent fruit with a spoon. You can also squash the whole fruit in your hands until it is all pulpy and juicy under its skin and then bite a small hole and suck out the juice. Or you can rip off the thickish, slightly bitter skin with your teeth and eat the fruit as the sweet, yellow juice makes a sticky path from the corners of your mouth to dribble off your chin. Then you suck the last juices from the seed until it looks shrivelled and hairy, like a monkey's paw. This is the way I like best.

There was a mango tree at the back of my grandparents' house in Bangalore where I went to spend summers with my cousins. It was a large spreading one with a dark, sinewy trunk and branches that begged to be climbed. The first branch was too high to climb on my own, so *thatha* gave me a leg up. I would clamber into a secret land where the branches led off into leafy nooks and corners and the sun made lace patterns of light in the dark green curtain. I would pluck some of the semi-ripe mangoes that dangled plumply by their stems and sit down in the accommodating crook of my favourite branch to eat them. At this point, my little cousins had lost sight of me. "Meenu, throw us some too!" they would shout, like baby birds. I would take my own time, relishing the temporary power I had over them while I bit into tasty fruit. The first bite into the first mango of the season was almost intoxicating. The thrill of climbing the tree for them only adding to their flavour. Finally, I would hear *thatha* shout, "Oh monkey on the tree,

throw us some fruit so that we may enjoy it too." I would giggle because I would imagine I was a monkey swishing my imaginary tail and scratching my sides. Still giggling, I would throw down some mangoes.

While the season lasted, there were several varieties of mangoes in the market. Alphonso, a variety from Bombay was usually the best and once each summer we were indulged. My grandfather bought Alphonso by

On Eating Mango

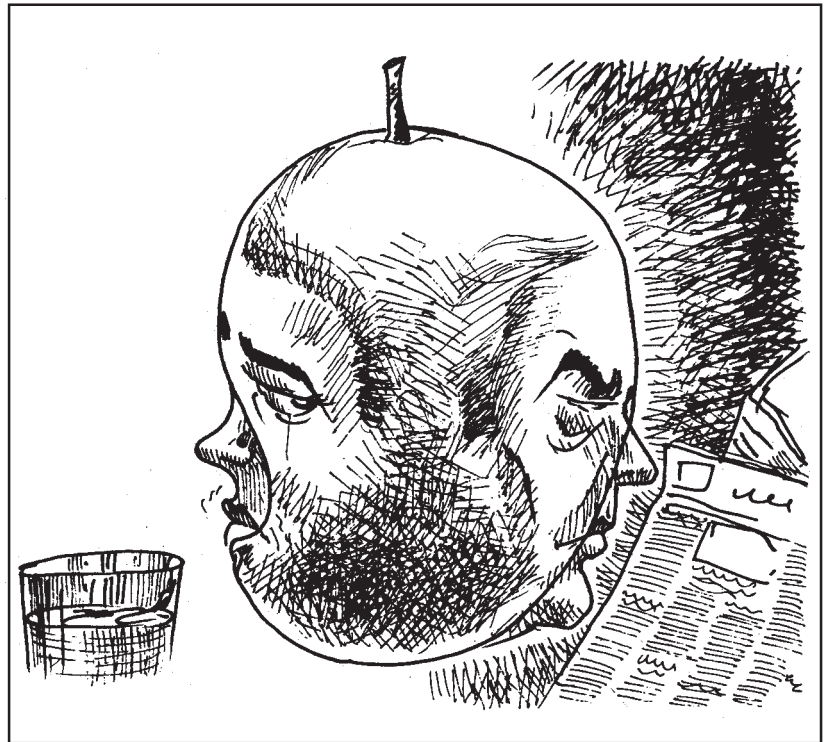
Uttara Bharath



the basket only, not half dozens or dozens like we buy today because the price is so high and the vendors so rude. He would come home bearing a large cane basket and a triumphant smile, enjoy the screams and shrieks of delight from my cousins and me. As we eagerly crowded around the basket, my grandmother's voice of warning would sound from the kitchen. "Eat as many as you want but drink a glass of milk afterwards." I hated milk, but it was a small price to pay. The enormous basket would sit in the middle of the floor displaying its precious content that looked like golden eggs — smooth, round and enticing. *Thatha* would compete with us for the best mangoes. Touching, sniffing and tossing to determine which fruits would taste the best. Mango juice dribbled everywhere as several voracious cousins and a competitive grandfather attacked the basket with great gusto. There are several ways to eat a mango....

In the summer of my thirteenth year, *thatha* fell ill and so we couldn't go to Bangalore that year. Madras was hot, sticky and oppressive. My sister and I hung around the house, getting on everybody's nerves and each other's. My friends were all mostly on vacation and I finished reading most of the books in the local library. The only respite was the beach where the breeze and the sound of the surf were soothing. A vendor with a cart sold sliced, raw mango, sprinkled with salt and chilli powder. It made my mouth water even as my tongue curled around the sweet-sour-hot-salty wedges but I was craving the mango from my *thatha's* tree and I was craving Alphonso. There weren't many fruit that season because the mango crop had failed.

Thatha got better but the next few mango seasons of my life were consumed by the teenage joys of movies, clothes, romance novels and long telephone calls. My



grandparents' house in Bangalore seemed a boring option. It seemed more sophisticated to sit in the cool recesses of restaurants with friends and eat diced mango with a fork from a dish, paying a week's pocket money for the grown up experience. There are several ways to eat a mango....

It was some years later that I met Alphonso again. I was in a juice shop with a boy named Arun, tucked away in a booth at the back, holding hands secretly under the table when the waiter came to take our order. "Their specialty is mango milkshake," said Arun with an air of worldly wisdom that made me adore him even more. "It is made with Alphonso mangoes."

We had met at a violin concert. Neither one of us cared for classical violin but our parents had dragged us to it, as I discovered. We discussed Marx over a cold drink during intermission and forgot all about the second-half of the concert as we delved into Nietzsche.

I had a moustache from my milkshake and in a daring move, while

the waiter wasn't looking, Arun leaned over the table and kissed it off. All of a sudden, Alphonso was a different fruit. Ripe, orange, sweet and very sexy. "Marry me," said Arun, more a statement than a question. There are several ways to eat a mango....

Arun liked mangoes in milkshakes or icecream. He didn't like the fruit in its natural state. While I was still on the high of being married, I lovingly laboured over milkshakes, ice creams and mango *rabdi*. I convinced myself that I too liked this way of eating mangoes. When I came home tired after a hard day at work, and Arun asked me to make him a mango milkshake, I would. At first, he used to come into the kitchen and tell me about his day at work while I cut the mangoes for the blender, but lately he read the mail until it was ready and then take his glass to the porch and read the newspaper. He barely noticed that I was sitting across from him, sipping from my own glass. I wiped off the milkshake moustache with the back of my hand. Don't get me wrong.

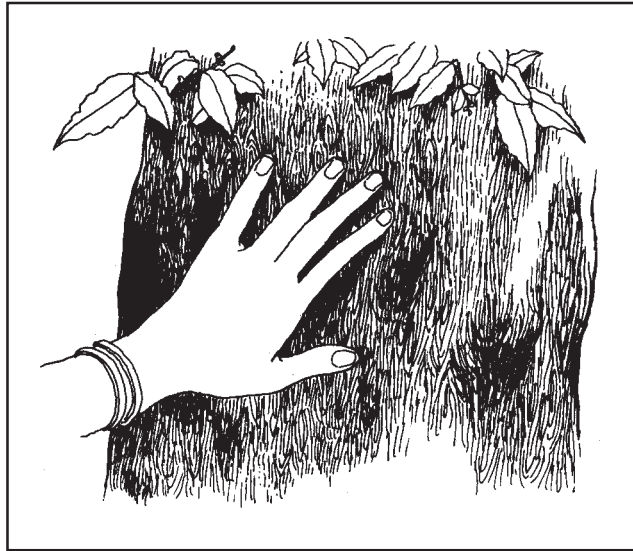
He really was a caring husband. At moments he could be very loving. After all there are several ways to eat a mango....

I was pregnant with Mayura when my grandmother sent me bottles of *Avakkai* made with lots of mustard the way I liked, through my mother. "The mangoes are from the tree in the Bangalore house," my mother informed me. Since *thatha* died, there really wasn't anyone to eat the mangoes.

I thought about me, sitting at home all bloated and pregnant while some one else got my raise at work. I thought about Arun going to his annual office bash without me because I was too tired to move. He didn't seem as disappointed as he should have been that I didn't go. Lately it seemed simpler for him to ignore my discomfort than to hold my hand and commiserate. Marx was growing significantly less important in his life as banking reaped a good salary. I, on the other hand, was beginning to think about equality more than ever before. I never did get the MBA I wanted because Arun had said, as sweet as mango juice, "You wouldn't go so far away from me, would you?" Of course, I wouldn't I loved him, didn't I? We had less and less to say to each other. Is that how married people became after the thrill of milkshake moustaches wore off?

I bit into the sour piece of mustard drenched mango and thought about pretending to be a monkey on a mango tree, throwing down mangoes to my squealing, bird cousins. I started to cry. There are several ways to eat a mango....

The children had their summer holidays. They deserved a vacation trip somewhere and, frankly, so did I.



"It's been years since I've been to Bangalore," I said and Arun nodded absently. Anywhere was fine with him. As long as I made all the arrangements, and took care of the kids.

Arun spent the train ride talking to a man in the next compartment about the new budget Mayura was in a fretful mood because of the heat and Jayanth had a fever. My nerves were worn so thin that each occasional word about the budget that I heard drifting from the neighbouring compartment made me think about jumping off the train. I told myself that it was the heat that was driving me crazy.

Bangalore was thankfully several degrees cooler. It seemed strange and sad to arrive at the Cantonment Station and not have my grandparents waiting there for me. *Patti's* voice saying: "Look at this child, she is thinner than last year. What do they feed you, grass?" *Thatha* would pull my braid and tease, "She's practising to be a beanstalk so that I don't have to give her a leg up into the mango tree." Now there were only jostling porters and a volley of Kannada I could barely recall. Arun cursed everyone in sight, complained about the terrible state of the Indian railways and gave the coolie a lecture

on integrity. We finally got into a taxi and made our way towards *Jaya's* house.

I leaned back against the thick chain of the swing and sighed. *Jaya* sat across from me and we enjoyed the peace and the aromatic, filter coffee. "Bangalore has changed so much since I knew it," I said, "so many new buildings and...."

"Remember *thatha's* mango baskets?" she said, emerging from her

own thoughts, "I don't think I have ever tasted mangoes that good, since." I smiled in agreement. There was a distant, protesting howl from a child who felt he had been wronged. We both listened with maternal concern for a full second before deciding to let the cousins sort it out for themselves.

Jaya's husband had lost his job due to company cut backs and she couldn't take one either. The B.Sc. she laid aside years ago for marital bliss was rusty with disuse and her self-confidence carefully moth-balled away among distant memories and aspirations. I had protested that it may be a burden for us to stay with them at such a time, but *Jaya* wouldn't hear of it. The dark, half-moons under her eyes and her gaunt appearance indicated the toll this was taking on her, but the hostess in her was relentless and she seemed genuinely happy to see me.

"Those were perfect summers, weren't they?" she said dreamily. "I wish I could have climbed the tree though. I wasn't as tall as you."

"Have you been back to the house since *thatha* and *patti* died?" I asked.

"No, I thought about it a few times but I couldn't bear the thought of some other people living there."

A grunt reminded me that Arun was lying sprawled on the sofa, in the throes of his afternoon siesta. His paunch undulated to the rhythm of his breathing. As he scratched himself in his sleep, I could barely remember the Alphonso milkshake.

The house looked the same from the front. Jaya and I rang the door bell. A harried looking woman in her mid-thirties opened the door. She looked at us enquiringly and I explained that our grandparents had lived there some years before and that we wanted to just look around.

"Well, go ahead," she snapped, "it isn't much. My family married me off to him thinking that he was going to be getting a bungalow, servants and a car and all these things but he never got anything. This house is too big for me to manage by myself but what can one do? No reliable hired help is available these days. My husband refuses to pay for a cook because he thinks they are too expensive. Our last servant ran away with two gold bangles I had kept on my dressing table...."

Her tirade followed us around the house which was looking very different. Architecturally, it was the same but its personality was different. I expected to see *thatha* walk into the room and look for his favourite chair where he sat and read the newspaper everyday but in place of the chair there was an offensive, red rexine couch that was like a slap on the face. I felt a lump well up in my throat and dared not look at Jaya for the fear that I would lose my composure. We had left the children under the care of a much protesting Arun to come here. Now I was beginning to wonder if this whole trip was a mistake.

Then I walked out to the garden at the back, and there it was. Like an old friend. A solid presence in the world of lost dreams and failed expectations. The mango tree. I ran my hand along its solid trunk and was filled with a strange calmness. Without another thought, I started climbing it. "Meenu...,"



protested Jaya, but I did not need a leg up anymore. I clambered up on my own into the leafy recesses and called out to Jaya. Suddenly, I was a gangly girl in my faded cotton skirt and two pigtailed looking at a little girl with outstretched arms crying, "me, me, me". I reached down and gave Jaya a hand up and soon we were both in the magical world of my youth. "I've always wondered what it was like up here," said Jaya as she reached for two mangoes that dangled in her reach and handed one to me.

The harried woman had come into the garden, looking for us and could be heard muttering, "Where did they go? I thought they were here a minute ago." I suppressed a giggle and bit into the thickish, slightly bitter skin of my mango. The sweet yellow juices made a sticky path from the corners of my mouth to my chin. Then I sucked the juices from the seed until it looked like a shrivelled, hairy, monkey's paw. This is the way I like best. Jaya gave me a happy, mango-stained smile. Our children, her husband, Arun and the harried woman were all banished to another world. I swished my tail and scratched my sides. There are several ways to eat a mango.... □

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