

Veggie Tales



It's mid-August and I'm sitting on a grassy patch of campus. Settled onto a soft blanket, I look at my options. A carton full of raspberries. Some cheese and Ritz crackers. A bag full of potato chips. Devika is making herself a cracker-and-cheese sandwich. Ridwana is sipping on an iced latte. Just as I bite into a berry, my eyes open. I'm in my bed. Well, not my bed, but my sister's old bed in her old room that was hers before she stole my room when I went to college. I stare straight at the light purple wall. Sun streams through the open window. I cover my eyes with my arm. It was my second nap of a day well into four months of quarantine.

At this point, I was doing anything to pass time. I hear laughter outside. Huffing, I crawl up to close my window and peer down to see my mom and grandma tending to

their quarantine hobby: the garden. I slam my window shut and pull the covers above my head.

Before the pandemic, like many other college students, I had been living in an apartment with six friends. Independent or young or free or whatever. I came back home to a house full of five adults and one middle schooler. And I love my family, I do. But being in a house where it was lights out at 10 p.m., where breakfast was a requirement and where comments of "You have changed so much since college" were a daily occurrence? Well, I was pushed back in time.

Growing up with two working parents, my Ammamma (grandma) raised me from 9-5 p.m. every day until my mom and dad came home. Though she grew up in India, Ammamma had a knack for taking any foreign concept and making it immediately relevant to her life. (Once when I was watching "Keeping up with the Kardashians," she decided that she and her three sisters were practically the same family. She was Kim.) From birth to around eighth grade, Ammamma was a constant presence and caretaker in my life. As I grew older, my grandma began spending less and less time with us. Though we didn't drift apart, coming back from college to live at home while she was there was somewhat stifling.

Over time, it began to drive me a bit crazy. Out of love, Ammamma would fix my hair every time I was eating lunch. I would push her hands away. Out of kindness, she would make my favorite foods. I never felt like eating them. Out of hope, she would ask me and my sister to sing songs that she taught us years ago. I would say I forgot them. In the midst of my frustration with "feeling robbed" of a college life, I ignored it all.

Yet, despite being stuck at home, her knowledge was limitless and her energy boundless.

On the other hand, Ammamma was doing fine, maybe even the happiest I had ever seen her. How was she at such ease despite being locked at home all day?

The answer came in the midst of another "trying to nap" episode. Again, I heard Ammamma and my mom talk while gardening.

In fast Telugu, Ammamma said, "It's nice with everyone home. Now you all know what it feels like."

That's when I realized. Leaving India for months on end to help raise her grandkids in the U.S., Ammamma had already "quarantined" for a huge chunk of her life. She didn't have a driver's license, didn't really speak English and relied on my parents to go outside (depending on family outings). Yet, despite being stuck at home, her knowledge was limitless and her energy boundless.

Each day when I came back from school, there would be warm snacks waiting on the table. Each time a new baby was born in the family, she made it a point to knit sweaters to give them. When she couldn't read the knitting magazines, she would ask my mom to translate the instructions for her. When she wasn't doing all of that, she was the most charming storyteller, narrating my mom's childhood pranks, her favorite street foods in India and, of course, the latest American news. (Ammamma probably knows more about the Obamas than I do.) If she was in a really wild mood, eyes sparkling, she'd come over and bump my shoulder: "Let's get some curly fries and jalapeno poppers from Jack in the Box," she said in a whisper, so my mom wouldn't hear.

Lying in bed that night, I decided that instead of being frustrated by things I couldn't control, like a

pandemic, I would focus on what was right in front of me: Ammamma. How did she keep growing? How was she never worried about missing out? Well, it was with loads of projects.

One day, I was sitting at the dining table, frustrated at some coding homework. Suddenly, my laptop slammed shut. Ammamma now took the place of the screen.

"You're such a nerd. Come help me make pizza." Her bright blue sari only accentuated her sass.

"No, I have finals. I literally can't."

"It'll take your mind off things. Come

on. Let's see how things turn out."

So I did.

She had watched countless YouTube videos about how to make the pizza and homemade tomato sauce. The toppings, which she already recruited my mom to find, were laid out on the counter.

I will spend one hour helping her, I thought.

Twenty minutes in, I was annoyed that the dough wasn't rising as it should. Next, the oven wasn't preheating properly. Nothing was going according to my plan. Ammamma's reaction to it all: a shrug.





"It'll work out, don't worry. In the meantime, does this sauce have enough salt?"

Two hours later, my family was happily munching on Ammamma's first-ever attempt at pizza. She stood smirking in the corner. When I looked over, she winked.

On another particularly frustrating day, my mom and I just argued about me going back to college during the pandemic. I spent the day moping in my room, annoyed at the fact that COVID-19 happened, that other people I knew were going back to school, that it was cloudy outside, that the next door neighbor decided today was the day that he would play the piano (very loudly) for hours on end. Ammamma's project was to plant some zucchini and eggplant seeds in the garden. I pouted upstairs alone in my room. I heard laughter outside my window and felt my eyes tear up. The bond between my mom and grandma was so strong and close. The laughter stops and I hear Ammamma's voice.

"Mallikaaaa, dhaa (come)."

"I'm good."

"Dhaaaaaa. Now!" Ammamma says, still playful.

I slug outside and stop in surprise. Last time I came out here, there were a few plants and maybe a couple of weeds. Now, there were four beds worth of vegetables, greens and herbs. Every pot was overflowing with leaves. My mom is watering plants on the opposite end of the garden. I walk over to Ammamma.

"What happened? What's wrong?" she asks.

I shrug and look down at the plants. I'm not really sure how to put my feelings into words.

She crouches back down to tending the plants.

New zucchinis and eggplants were popping up everyday while the world was stagnant.

"The best way to water zucchinis is to touch the soil and make sure it's not too damp. If you press on it and liquid pools to the surface, you have over-watered. So skip watering for the next day."

We move from the zucchinis to the eggplants.

"Eggplants are delicate. Make sure to very gently tug on them once they are ripe. Here, try with this one." I pull on the shiny deep purple vegetable and it easily falls into my hand. I reach my hand to grab another eggplant.

"Not that one yet, it still needs a few more days." I look up to see my mom standing there. She smiles as she crouches next to me to examine the other eggplants.

"See, even though everything seems to be wrong right now, these vegetables still grow!" Ammamma exclaims as she drags me and my mom over to the radishes.

Yes, my mom and I won't always agree. Yes, I may have missed out on college due to a pandemic, but throughout it all, those vegetables kept growing. New zucchinis and eggplants were popping up everyday while the world was stagnant.

And my grandma helped me realize that. How to make the most out of a situation that was out of my control. How to let go of this notion that I needed to be in control of my life. She navigates this world, accepting its ambiguity and chaos.

A year later, at least for the United States, we are coming into a new normalcy. My grandma is visiting my uncles in different states. I went back to school for the spring semester. Yet still, when I visit home and look out that bedroom window, I see my mom tending to the tomatoes, the zucchinis and the eggplants. A new addition is the mint leaves overflowing from the corners of the beds. Now, rather than Ammamma, my dad is out there with her. And, despite the changes in circumstances from last and this summer, the plants came back, still growing — regardless of a situation that was out of control. Just as Ammamma said.



life is getting boring

by Tilly Bean Aldhous