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*“[H Mart is] a beautiful, holy place. A cafeteria full of people from all over the world who have been displaced in a foreign country, each with a different history. Where did they come from and how far did they travel? Why are they all here? To find the galangal no American supermarket stocks to make the Indonesian curry that their father loves?...Were they moved by a memory of some drunken, late-night snack under a pojangmacha tent in Incheon?...We don’t talk about it...But I know we are all here for the same reason. We’re all searching for a piece of home, or a piece of ourselves. We look for a taste of it in the food we order and the ingredients we buy...bring the haul back to our dorm rooms or suburban kitchens, and we re-create a dish that couldn’t be made without that journey, because what we’re looking for isn’t accessible at a Trader Joe’s. H Mart is where you can find your people under one odorous roof, where you can have faith that you’ll find something you can’t find anywhere else.”<sup>1</sup>*

—Michelle Zauner, *Crying in H Mart*

I’m not sure I know what belonging is. There are moments I can glimpse it—my mother tucking curly fly-aways behind my ear, wafts of samosa hovering above the chatter of Aunties huddled around the stove, the borrowed humming of a sitar in the background of my favorite television show—the actors’ skin paler than my own. The moments it strikes are unexpected, ironic for something that seems it should be permanent. Instead, it sits like a pit in my empty stomach, more of a yearning, a lack-there-of—momentarily filling only to be emptied soon after. I find myself wondering why...why finding something to belong to, why wholeness feels so elusive?

In “Crying in H Mart,” artist Michelle Zauner’s *New Yorker* narrative and ultimately homonymous memoir, she details the journey of growing up alongside her Korean mother who ultimately succumbs to cancer. She writes poignantly of their excursions to H Mart together, the Asian supermarket chain, and how in the moments following her mother’s death, H Mart became her

sanctuary—both a relic of memories and a shrine where she paid respects, anointing aisles of produce with her tears: “Instead, you’ll likely find me crying by the banchan refrigerators, remembering the taste of my mom’s soy-sauce eggs and cold radish soup...sobbing near the dry goods, asking myself, ‘Am I even Korean anymore if there’s no one left in my life to call and ask which brand of seaweed we used to buy?’”

As a child of the Indian diaspora, I find myself with similar questions. Am I truly Indian, or is the color of my skin enough? Am I truly American if American culture is not really an amalgam of different heritages? Can I sustainably be either if the roots of my identity depend on fleeting cultural experiences? Or is there power in scavenging memories? Sanctity in stories as a means of filling the void?

My H Mart is less grand. There is no hustle and bustle, but rather, just a vague hole-in-the wall grocery store. There are only ever a few customers at a time, a dash of Hindi, Tamil, or Telegu sprinkled amidst the obediently lined sachets of turmeric and curry masala, faint Bollywood notes suspended in the background. Every April, my mother and I would trek to our local haven in search of the elusive ingredients for *Ugadi pachadi*. A tradition of Ugadi, the Telegu New Year, is assembling this special pachadi or “chutney”—a strange concoction of six ingredients, signifying the essential emotions of life: salt for fear, tamarind for unpleasantness, pepper for anger, jaggery (unrefined brown sugar) for joy, raw mango for surprise, and my favorite, neem for hardship. A successful life entails wholehearted acceptance of all facets. While each flavor alone is overwhelming, their synergy is harmonious.

Neem, *Azadirachta indica*, is endemic to South Asia. Known for its bittersweet fruit masked by deceptively fragrant flowers, neem has been utilized by ayurvedists for centuries for its medicinal properties. A receptacle of irony, a symbol for purification through adversity, the neem flower has always been intriguing to me. I find myself wondering how many stories it encapsulates. Every April as I peruse shelves of colorful spices, I am reminded of a little girl and a neem tree. A simple story I was not there for but has been passed down to me—a story I feel connected to *because* of my absenteeism, not in spite of it.

When my mother was young, on her way home from school she discovered a fledgling twig, its leaves frail and wilting. She ran home to her father begging they salvage it. My grandfather smiled as he wrapped his hands around my mother’s, the tiny bud of a neem flower peeking through her fingertips. They dug it a new home and together watched it blossom over years and decades as its single withered stem metamorphosed into a magnificent tree-trunk, its willowy branches adorned with green ornaments like pearls on a string.

As it grew, so did my mother, first playing as a child, then studying as a teenager, and ultimately laughing with her own daughter under its gaze—she a catenated expatriate. My grandfather still sits under that tree, always smiling. He has read to both my mother and me under its cover, two little girls and a neem tree. I didn’t know when I was young, but now, whenever I return to my grandfather’s porch after the long passage to my motherland, I am reminded of all the footsteps

before me, and I think to myself, “My god, how many moments have been lived in its shelter? How many stories has it borne witness to?” And somewhere, in the midst of envisioning those chronicles—journeys I did not walk but have nonetheless led to me—a puzzle piece falls in place. And I wonder, *is this belonging?*

In *My Grandfather’s Blessings: Stories of Strength, Refuge, and Belonging*, physician Rachel Naomi Remen writes:

*The marks life leaves on everything it touches transform perfection into wholeness. Older, wiser cultures choose to claim this wholeness in the things that they create. In Japan, Zen gardeners purposefully leave a fat dandelion in the midst of the exquisite, ritually precise patterns of the meditation garden. In Iran, even the most skilled of rug weavers includes an intentional error, the “Persian Flaw,” in the magnificence of a Tabriz or Qashqai carpet...and Native Americans wove a broken bead, the “spirit bead,” into every beaded masterpiece. Nothing that has a soul is perfect. When life weaves a spirit bead into your very fabric, you may stumble upon a wholeness greater than you had dreamed possible before.<sup>2</sup>*

Despite the diversity of our experiences, underlying all our efforts is the desire to belong. Some of us, like myself and Michelle Zauner, search for memories of our heritage and loved ones in places as banal as a grocery store—the quest for the perfect galangal or neem truthfully a stab at cinching an elusory identity. Others bottle memories of lost experiences and people like pickled mango jars. In medicine, both providers and patients alike are grasping at churning meaning out of illness and suffering—wholeness out of void. Yet ironically, it is perhaps the feeling of not belonging that allows us to belong. The fat dandelion in the middle, the woven Persian Flaw, the broken spirit bead, the absent puzzle pieces of our own identities—maybe this is what unifies the human condition.

It has been a few years since I have sojourned under that neem tree, but the image of its leaves gently billowing away on the wind’s currents is within reach the moment I shut my eyes. I wonder where these leaves taking flight might land, if a little girl might stumble upon them, giving them a new home, if a new magnificent tree may be birthed, its memories tightly encircling a child in a foreign country. Somewhere, a puzzle piece is falling, and someone has come home.

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## References

1. Zauner, Michelle. “Crying in H Mart.” *The New Yorker*, 20 Aug. 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/crying-in-h-mart>.
2. Remen, Rachel Naomi. *My Grandfather’s Blessings: Stories of Strength, Refuge, and Belonging*.

