

5524 Yellow Poplar Drive, Salisbury, North Carolina

A brick ranch house with green shutters on a five acre plot of forest and field, at the intersection of a gravel driveway and a rural state highway and at the intersection of contrasting identities.

My house was not a melting pot. It was never a place where cultures converged and combined into something silky and smooth and uniform. It was, at best, a crock pot. My mom's crock pot. A place for a succession of diverse recipes to be cooked for the length of a day, filling the air with a temporary but genuine aroma and similarly filling my family's stomachs. But each recipe was also its own declaration of compromise and of cultural clash. There was mixing and alteration and distortion in the pot, too.

My mom's tandoori chicken was seasoned intensely and perfectly with a yellow-boxed spice mix sold at the halal store. It was fragrant, and as the meal cooked on the crock pot's 8-hour setting, the smell leaked out of our front door and drew us inside. This food was our imitation of a culture we'd converted to, yet we never worried about the authenticity of the meal. We knew the chicken itself was haram; we stopped being able to afford halal meats sometime in the late 2000s, so our crock pot slow-roasted Islam alongside poverty. My dad prayed over the dinner for a little longer than usual. My sister and I welcomed the compromise; the new meat tasted better, anyway. The grocery store legs and thighs were larger and filled our stomachs more.

Sometimes the crock pot performed culture. For St. Patrick's Day, my mom slow-cooked corned beef alongside cabbage and potatoes in a salty broth. It was the same meal her mother had made for their fully (meaning 100%, completely, wholly) Irish family each year. My mom set the table for her new family — she, my dad, my sister, and I — and we posed as Irish for a day. There was something so lighthearted about that meal; my sister and me, with our curly hair and big, brown eyes, wearing “Kiss Me, I'm Irish!” pins on our shirts and consuming huge portions of this once-per-year delicious meat. My dad grumbled, saying something we heard every other week about how Irish people are crazy, how we shouldn't claim ourselves as Irish; and we smiled, shaking our heads into our cabbage and potatoes. At that meal, I filled myself completely, but I never felt heavy. I don't know if I realized the absurdity of the scene as I was living it. I probably did not. But I smiled, and for some reason, felt full and light.

Sometimes, the house reeked of beans for three days at a time. Those beans, cooked so slowly for so long, must have been the softest beans molecularly possible. On the evening of the third day, my mom scooped the smelly, tan mush out of the crock pot and into a blender and transformed it into a smooth paste. The paste went in to a mixing bowl where it met nutmeg and cinnamon and sugar and lemon and whatever else you put in a secret recipe, and an hour later, the house would smell of the most delicious pies I'll ever taste. My sister and I ate the ones that failed quality control — with cracked crusts or burnt tops or forgotten ingredients — and the rest of the pies were exported outside of our house, sold to Muslim brothers and sisters eager to taste their culture and traditions. Bean pies are an important part of the history of Black Muslims in America, somehow symbolizing freedom and identity and community, but I didn't actually know

that until I went to college. Growing up, all I knew was that bean pie's taste and its smell and its recipe and its tradition belonged to my family, belonged to my house.

My house was not a melting pot. It was a crock pot, the creator of things that filled my stomach. For all its disjuncture, for its confusion of culture and intersection of identity, 5524 Yellow Poplar Drive was my truest definition of home. And it became my definition of safety. It was the place, and sometimes the only place, where my existence made total sense. Outside of my property, and even on its borders, my family's identity offered challenge to the societal structures around us. And just as the fullness and warmth in my stomach was the harbinger of safety, tensions in my stomach warned me of danger.

Walking out of the kitchen and down the front steps every day, I passed a smooth stone engraved with "*Asalamu alaikum*" peeking out from the corner of a flower bed. The stone, proclaiming "peace be upon you," was a gift to my dad from my mom, sister, and me. We had worried so much about how to spell it; as one-word *assalamualaikum*, spaces-in-the-right-place *As-salamu alaykum*, or as an accurate Arabic inscription. We'd grown up using the phrase when we needed to pass as good Muslims, but had never learned to spell or read or write it ourselves. The inscription was ultimately inconsequential. Shortly after laying the stone in center of the flowerbed, anxiety and fear bubbled up in my stomach. The next day, I pushed the stone to a corner, where the growing branches of a weeping spruce tree covered its message inch by inch with each passing summer. The branches kept us safe from the conflict of our family's presence in the Bible-belt south. Hiding the stone settled some of the fear in my stomach, but supplemented it with shame or guilt or confusion.

The outer edges of our home invoked even greater tension. On the front border of our property was our mailbox; always dust-covered and annually replaced when it was dented or struck down by what my parents described as “stupid high school kids with baseball bats.” My parents taught me to be careful at the mailbox; it was at the intersection of our gravel road and a highway, so I was instructed to stand ten feet behind the box until I was certain no cars were coming, to run forward and quickly grab the mail, to close the box, and to back away from the road as quickly as I could. This procedure became memory for my body. The anxiety of listening for cars, the tension of the blind moment of reaching into the box without walking in front of it, and the relief of the safe return back to my front door with two bills, one check, and four predatory credit card offers in hand were retained in my mail-fetching practice long after I was old enough to approach a roadway without fear.

My interaction with the mailbox was hurried and anxious and sometimes blind because my parents told me to be safe around cars. But the mailbox also confronted a different danger; it faced a sea of confederate flags proudly hung from our neighbor’s porch. Growing up in North Carolina, I cannot remember a time when I did not know the meaning of that flag. I knew it was a symbol of slavery and hate and the concept that I hadn’t yet learned to call white supremacy. I knew that seeing it made my gut feel especially bad; the weight of history and oppression sat heavy in my stomach, the the tug of white guilt twisted my intestines into knots. I hurried away from my mailbox as quickly as I could.

Back in my kitchen I could wait patiently for my stomach to settle, allow the waves of dissonance and distress to move through and past me. I knew that what I felt in my home was

safety and peace and fullness, and I knew it was the opposite of the gut-feeling-tension I felt outside. I searched for a name for that tension. I called it insecurity, vulnerability, a product of social constructs. Multiracial angst, “just the way I was raised,” the stress of uncertainty. I didn’t know what exactly I was feeling, or when it might pass. But I do know it was something I was born into. I think it must be inherited, not like freckles or full lips but like an antibody or disease or addiction. Something you pick up in-utero. I wonder if the stretching of the insides, the conflict between a gut feeling and a person’s sense of self began in my mother’s womb as her white body fed and nurtured a kicking, discontent black baby. Half-black baby. I wonder if something in her worldview shifted or cracked as this thing pushed against her spine. Through the umbilical cord, my mom must’ve fed me her worry and her insecurity around whether or not there’d be a place for me outside. I stayed in the womb for 3 extra days.

From my mother’s uncertain body, I was born with an uncertain feeling in my gut. My discomfort was an impulse resembling instinct, sounding an internal alarm each time I stepped out from the safety of my home and entered the deeply divided, and thus personally dissonant, outside world. Though I carried my conflicting identities with me into every space I entered, including my home, at 5524 Yellow Poplar Drive I was allowed to feel comfortable. My mom fought off tension by packing our stomachs instead with things that were warm and storied and compromising and safe. She grabbed a ladle and filled my bowl with intersecting ingredients. I ate slowly, and fullness returned.