

## *Diwali*

Aarti waved at the big Cathay Pacific jumbo as it took off from Indira Gandhi airport in New Delhi. Somewhere behind one of the little oval windows was her mother, no doubt crying from the sheer exhaustion of all the goodbyes. It seemed like the entire family tree – with its many extended and tangled branches – had come to the airport to see her mother off. She had noticed early on how much her female relatives loved a good cry. Any opportunity for tears was grabbed with both hands and embraced. Aarti and her mother had so far been generous sources of several such opportunities. First there was their arrival – the long anticipated homecoming – then there was the wedding they had come for, and now her mother's departure. Aarti's farewell was yet to come. That would be the jewel in the crown of weeps.

"Stay for Diwali," her cousins had pleaded. As she had a few more weeks of holidays she decided she would. The plane was now a small trail of vapour in the sky. In less than a day her mother would be back in New Zealand. To Aarti it seemed like her colourless nine to five life back home was somebody else's life – somebody she was beginning to feel sorry for. Aarti was soon swept up in the family entourage and they headed back into the city. Diwali, she had been told, involved lots of shopping. There were the sweets to be bought, boxes upon boxes of *barfis*, *jelabis* and *gulab jamun* to be distributed throughout the neighbourhood as gifts; new clothes for everyone in the family; and the fireworks and *diya* lamps.

"Auntie back in New Zealand I work in a bakery so I want to make you something special for Diwali – a New Zealand sweet."

Her Aunt looked skeptical.

"Indian sweets are the best how can anything compare with our *rasagullas* and *gulab jamun*? And what is this New Zealand? Two little, little dots, like teardrops, at the bottom of the world. You should live in India, Aarti."

Aarti smiled.

"Just wait until you try my dessert, Auntie, better even than *gulab jamun* and definitely better than *jelabi*."

Her tastebuds were still reeling from the sickly-syrupy *jelabi* her Aunt had insisted she try. Aarti was known for her sweet tooth but this was off the richter scale of sweetness, even for her.

The next evening was Diwali. Aarti stood on the roof veranda of her Uncle and Aunt's house. It was dusk and the neighbourhood was lit up by rows of little clay diya lamps, lining every window sill. Like the rest of her family, she was wearing new clothes for Diwali – a pink silk *salwar kameez* embroidered with small golden stars. The city looked magical with lights everywhere, houses and trees were dripping with fairy lights. People were passing around boxes of Indian sweets. She remembered the surprise dessert she had yet to serve.

The lamingtons had turned out beautifully. She had even made the sponge cake from scratch. The chocolate was moist and goey and the Indian dessicated coconut somehow tasted fresher and more coconutty than in New Zealand. Everyone tried one. Her Aunt was almost speechless.

"Really Aarti, this is one of the best cakes I've ever tasted." Everyone agreed. Someone said "You could sell these Aarti, truly, people would queue up. You could charge ten rupees a piece."

One of her cousins who had lived in Australia as a student said, "Yes, nothing can beat a good lamington. Those Aussies know their desserts. I used to love pavlova too."

"Those are both New Zealand recipes!" Aarti said mock-indignantly.

Back on the roof one of her young cousins handed her a sparkler. They were playing a game where you had to write your name in the air with it.

"Name my new bakery and café, the one I'm going to open this year. My own place," Aarti said.

Someone wrote with their sparkler, 'Aarti's Cakes.'

"I've got one," Aarti said. For a few moments the golden script against the inky black night read 'The Luscious Lamington.' And then it disappeared. Now she only had to decide if the bakery was going to be in New Delhi or New Zealand.

706 words

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