

The tenth annual short story competition

The Mogford Prize
for Food & Drink Writing 2022

‘One Afternoon in South Bombay’

by Drishya Maity

Short List Runner Up

The judges for 2022...
Michael Morpurgo & Andi Oliver



‘One Afternoon in South Bombay’

They met again at their favourite Parsee café from all those years ago. The grand Renaissance-style red-brick townhouse was still there, as was the old, dusty chalkboard behind the reception that displayed the day's specials – handwritten in looping cursive letters with pale ivory chalk. The faded sepia-toned portraits of the Yazdani Zoroastrian family who started the café hanging from the panelled walls, the bentwood chairs, the wrought-iron tables with smooth, round marble tabletops covered in chequered linen, the embroidered napkins, the bone-china serveware and the steel cutlery, the staff in their cummerbunds and turbans – everything was the same, everything in its rightful place, out

of another time, except for the dense fog of unfamiliarity that now sat quietly between them.

The night before, he had called her and asked if she'd like to meet. She could not recognize his voice at first. So many years had passed, and so many things had changed. But then there was the way he said her name, the way *only* he said her name – *Sah-mah-rah* – stress on the first syllable, stress on every syllable, so symmetrical yet so oblique, so important and so complete, like a solid, tangible object in his mouth. She remembered the day they first met (at a famous Bengali writer's reading of his latest attempt at authoring the next great Indian novel), where she was (the Strand Bookstore in Fort, Mumbai), and who she was with (one of the men she was sleeping with at the time – an older, married professor of English Literature at the university). It was as if no time had passed at all.

Yes, Samara answered. Of course, she'd like to meet him. But where would they go?

He fell silent and did not say anything until she spoke again.

Robin? she asked. What are you thinking?

I was thinking... Robin said. I was wondering... what was that place we used to go to? The one that used to serve

those great buttered buns? God, Sam! What was it called? Do you know what I'm talking about? Do you remember?

Of course she remembered. How could she forget their café? And all the meandering conversations they'd had over the luxuriously long breakfasts and lunches she'd shared with him back in those days when they were both so young and thought – *believed* – they had all the time in the world? The endless cups of cutting chai, the buttery soft bun muskas, and the bowls of berry pulav – fragrant basmati rice and shredded meat slow-cooked to perfection, seasoned with saffron-infused milk, and garnished with fine slices of caramelized onion and dried sour barberries and roasted almonds – with a side of delicious *sali boti* – succulent pieces of lamb cooked on the bone and stewed with dried apricots and tomatoes and onions and palm sugar and vinegar in a thick, spicy gravy and served with strings of deep-fried potatoes – and all the ramekins of caramel custard she could go through without a second thought about the inches at her waist – she remembered it all. Even now, even after all these years, she could close her eyes and practically taste every single note from memory. She closed her eyes, took in a long, deep breath, and opened her eyes again.

Yes, she answered. I remember the place you're talking about. I'll text you the address.

And so they met again at their favourite Parsee café on the corner of Sprott Road and Ballard Estate. Robin laughed, throwing his head back, looking at the old-fashioned fans hanging from the cavernous ceiling. I can't believe this place is still standing, he said. And it hurt Samara even though she could not properly articulate why. She stole a glance at the chalkboard behind the reception and chose to change the subject.

Have you had lunch? she asked. Will you eat anything?

I had breakfast at the hotel, Robin answered. But I'll take a cup of tea or coffee with some of those buttered buns, he said. What about you?

Bun muska, Samara said quietly. They are called bun muska.

She raised her hand and summoned a waiter with the practised ease of a regular, even though she had deliberately avoided this place since he stood her up, here, so many years ago.

We'll take two cups of cutting chai and a basket of bun muskas, she said to the waiter.

So... Robin said, leaning across the table and taking Samara's hand after the waiter left.

So... Samara said, pulling her hand away.

It's so good to see you, he said. How are you? What's up with you? Tell me everything.

Samara smiled. She looked at Robin and paused for a moment to gather her thoughts. He was still beautiful, she thought. His hair had begun to thin and grey near the temples, and soon the wrinkles would be as prominent as his cheekbones – but he was still, undeniably, a beautiful man. His eyes were as luminous as the noonday sun, and his smile was as dazzling as her best memories of him. She looked away.

Where do I begin? Samara answered. Let's see... I'm good. I'm good, yeah. I have been spending most of my time between reading and writing since my husband and I separated.

Oh, you're writing again, Robin said. That's good. That's great, actually! No kids?

No, she said. Well... a son from my husband's first marriage, but I practically raised him from high school through college. He lives in Canberra now. We still talk sometimes.

Oh wow, Robin replied, shaking his head. You, a mom! Who would have thought?

Samara smiled. What about you? She asked.

He raised his hand and showed her the wedding ring. Still married, he said. Two kids. Girls. The older one will be off to college next year. The younger one is still in middle school.

Just then the waiter arrived, and Samara forgot what she was going to say. She looked at the man and gave him a quick smile. Thanks, she said. But the man only nodded in response.

Isn't this great? Robin said, tearing into a bun muska and dipping a piece in his cup of cutting chai. Oh, this is just perfect! Robin said, relishing the soft warmth of the chai-soaked piece of bread melting in his mouth. It's like nothing's changed.

But everything had changed, Samara thought. Everything.

What's wrong? Robin asked. Why are you looking at me like that?

Samara didn't answer. This time she leaned across the table and took his hand in hers. She traced his wedding ring with the tip of her thumb. The precious metal was pleasantly cold and smooth to the touch. Why did you call? she asked. What were you thinking?

I don't know, Robin said. I suppose I was curious. I wanted to see if you would come.

And now that I'm here? Samara asked. What now? Honestly? he replied. I hadn't thought so far ahead. I didn't think you'd actually come.

Samara laughed. What did you think? she said. I'd stand you up like you stood me up?

Yes, Robin said sheepishly, playing with her fingers.

God, you haven't changed a bit, Samara said. And then: Why did you stand me up? Why did you leave so suddenly? Without saying goodbye?

Robin lowered his gaze. He looked at Samara's hand – her slim, perfect fingers – for a long time and then looked up again. I don't know, he said. I was so young, and I was so incredibly foolish. I was so scared, Samara... so frightened that I'd fuck things up. I'm so sorry.

Samara felt the knots in her stomach tighten and then slacken. He was sorry. How long had she waited to hear those words? Years? A decade? Longer.

And now, here they were. Samara thought: And so life goes. And so move the earth, the planets, the sun, the stars and the celestial bodies. The cosmos. And what does it all mean?

Nothing at all, really. But still, we love. And we hurt in love. And we hurt those we love. And wasn't it true that she

loved him still? Yes. So many years had passed, and so many things had changed. And yet everything was the same.

I thought about this, you know? Robin said.

And what's *this* exactly? Samara asked.

About *this*, Robin replied. About you, about us... what it would be like to see you again.

And? Samara asked. Is this how you imagined it?

This is exactly how I imagined it, he said.

They finished the rest of their food engaged in circuitous conversation. He told her about his job (he was in the advertising business now, visiting Mumbai for the weekend to oversee the production of a television commercial for a client) and showed her pictures of his family – his beautiful wife and teenage daughters – and she told him about the novel she was working on (it was a novel of ideas, she said, but she did not yet have a clear idea of what those ideas were). She even read him a chapter from her phone. Afterwards, standing outside the café, he told her his hotel was right around the corner and asked if she would like to come in for a drink. And she said yes, because, at that moment, she loved him. They were moving particles mixing with moving particles racing through time and space beyond the speed of light. She knew then that she would sleep with

him. This was a truth she knew with the certainty of all inescapable truths.

Later that evening, lying naked and exhausted on the unmade bed after they had both dominated and submitted to each other several times, Samara tried to imagine what her life might have been like if Robin hadn't left all those years ago – if their love had survived and they had married each other instead of the people they eventually married and lived so many years with.

But she could not do it. The spell had been broken. The veil had been lifted.

Robin's sudden reappearance in Mumbai this weekend, the surprise phone call the night before, the lunch at her favourite Parsee café, the cutting chai, the bun muskas, the berry pulav, the *sali boti*, the caramel custards, the picture-perfect photographs of his wife and children, and the seemingly spontaneous, mind-blowing sex... all of it had been part of an elaborate lie – a meticulously choreographed fantasy she had nursed in her breast all these long and terrible and lonely years. The half-naked man who was now getting dressed in front of her in the hotel room she had booked and paid for looked nothing like Robin because he was not Robin. In fact, Samara did not even know his name.

And who was he anyway? A no-name struggling actor she had found on a website for hiring high-end male escorts.

She closed her eyes and told him to turn off the lights and lock the door on his way out.

