



*Amit is a neuroscience PhD student from Detroit, Michigan. In his spare time, he likes to run, read, write, and juggle.*

When I pictured strength as a child, I pictured my Dadima, my paternal grandmother. She was legendarily bullish and indomitable. I would watch laughing as she casually ignored my parents attempting to stop her from doing something, as she would continue to talk to her friends for hours on the phone despite my father telling her not to, as she insisted on packing my lunch for years and making Gujarati snacks that I could not escape from until I was positively sick of them. It was only later that I learned she had fought for freedom in India. She had grasped freedom with two hands and held it aloft, never letting it go. After Dadima passed, I began to picture my mother as well. My mother has a deep kindness mixed with a distinct toughness. She has sweetness that enables people to open up to her but she will not tolerate being taken advantage of. Around the house she emanated authority and yet I still see her as one of my best friends. I grew up with the fortune of many strong women helping to guide my life.

However, when I moved to college, I first experienced elements of mainstream masculinity. I lived on a floor that exalted those elements. They drank heavily, smashed televisions, and roiled in sexual exploits. Walking to the bathroom during my first week, I glanced over at the whiteboard in our common room to see in blocky marker letters that on this day a member of our floor “had finally had sex with a woman.” I felt inadequacy crawl up my spine as flaws appeared to me all over my body. As I waited outside a classroom, two men talked about members of their fraternity when one lampooned the choice of another to become vegetarian chuckling “how’re you gonna get protein? Tofu? There’s so much estrogen in it.” I had been vegetarian my whole life both out of following an Indian tradition and to do as my mother did. But the comments seeped into me and, suddenly, at the vegetarian café on campus, I became uncomfortably aware of being the only man in the whole building. As an adolescent, I had problems with weight, partially out of a wait to grow and also out of indolence but throughout high school I had become a long distance runner and established a ballast to right the ship. At college, the balance was lost, and the ship began to sink. As a South Asian man, I’ve struggled with the paradox of attempting to defy not only masculinity but also stereotypes about South Asian men lacking masculinity. Despite the influence of strong women in my life, I still subconsciously absorbed the values of toxic masculinity, which eschews emotion and the feminine instead valuing physical strength and sexual prowess. Moreover, while I tried to fight against those toxic qualities, I feared becoming a stereotype of a nerdy, weak Indian man. Caught between the two, I developed a toxic relationship with my body. I started eating less and less but running more to find the muscles the others had flaunted; I rippled with self-consciousness as I talked to most of my friends who happened to be women; I looked at myself and felt only disgust.

My relationship with my mother and grandmother turned the tide. I had lost an unhealthy amount of weight in two months but I arrived home for the first time since moving to my mother’s Palak Paneer. As I ate, I tried to stop short of being full only for my mother, taking a page from my grandmother’s book, to place another paratha on my plate gently encouraging me to continue eating. Before I left to return, she packed numerous curries and shaks into my bag along with the thepla my Dadima used to make for me when I was a child. I did not recover all at once. For years, I remained secretly delighted when my mother said I had lost weight while still fully aware of the danger. But I reignited the love for all the snacks my Dadima made for me as a youth reminding me of the joy she brought and found refuge in talking to my mother about

these difficulties. While I still struggle with my relationship to my body, I have developed a new one, freer from the toxic labels of South Asian and masculine stereotypes. And I rediscovered what strength is.