



Artwork: Aleks Crossan

## Pomegranates

Roshan Taneja

Pomegranates are not fruit; they're a task. A multi-seeded, succulent, red and sweet job that requires skill, time, and a hefty spoon. Their leathery skin protects a treasure trove of juicy arils, nature's equivalent of Gushers, that lie packed together like rubies in a jewel box.

Pomegranates have been celebrated for thousands of years, symbolising abundance in many cultures. And modern science, for once, seems to back up ancient sentimentality. Research indicates that pomegranates are full of antioxidants, can improve cholesterol levels, and might even fight off some types of cancer. All this, and they're low in calories and fat. They are, perhaps, the healthiest inconvenience you can subject yourself to, a lesson in delayed gratification that pays off in health benefits and the occasional stained T-shirt.

Which brings me to my pomegranate tree.

When my family moved to

California in 2011, our neighbours, Mr. and Mrs. Rao, had an enormous pomegranate tree that leaned over the fence between our properties like another old soul. Mr. and Mrs. Rao were in their 60s and immediately made us feel at home. As a 5-year-old, I felt like they were my third set of grandparents.

We already had figs, avocados, lemons, apples, and peaches growing in our yard; the only thing missing was a pomegranate tree. But that didn't affect us, as we had a natural marvel leaning over the boundary line. During the summer when I was 10, a pomegranate sapling appeared on our side of the fence, a little blessing from Mr. Rao's tree. My grandparents tapped a tiny irrigation pipe into the baby, and miraculously, it bore fruit within two years. As if cued by the universe, Mr Rao's tree fell sick and died. It left me with the Herculean task of keeping its only offspring alive.

Our first harvest brought us four enormous fruits, each larger than a grapefruit. Two went to the Raos with a note reassuring them that their tree's legacy would live on. One went to the temple with my mother, a gesture of gratitude. And the last one? We beat it with a spoon, collected the seeds, and devoured them in less than five minutes.

Despite some squirrel-induced setbacks, the tree continued to bless us with more fruit each year. As per tradition, Mr Rao would receive his share, as would the temple, leaving us pondering what to do with our remaining bounty. Every breakfast and dinner would be bookended for the next few weeks with either a bowl of seeds or a glass of juice. I liked to eat the seeds slowly, one at a time, savouring the taste.

The years passed, and I became close friends with Mr. and Mrs. Rao. Our fall tradition of sharing pomegranates became a cherished event, a way to connect again

after a long summer break. These meetings happened frequently, but more was needed.

Mr Rao died last month. I had left for camp the day before and didn't learn about it until I returned three weeks later. The grief was slow. As writer Trebor Healy put it in *A Horse Named Sorrow*, "I felt my heart crack, slowly, like a pomegranate, spilling its seeds."

Throughout mythology, pomegranates have referenced death in one way or another. Pomegranate seeds are what Hades used to entrap Persephone in the underworld for six months a year; in Ancient Egypt, pomegranates were buried with the dead to help them pass into the afterlife. They were also said to symbolise paradise and temptation. But they also represent fertility and life. Often, pomegranate seeds are crushed underfoot at weddings to ensure a fertile life together with many children.

I try not to think about my own mortality. As Andy Dufresne said in *Shawshank Redemption*, "Get busy living or get busy dying." Still, standing beneath the branches of my pomegranate tree, I can't help but feel that I, too, have taken on the herculean task of... living. The tree's very existence is interwoven with the cycles of life and death. The tree, roots, and branches all shared the same soil with another now-gone tree, inviting me to ponder life's impermanence. Seneca once said, "It is not that we have a short time to live, but that we waste a lot of it." Perhaps he's right.

Just as these pomegranate seeds burst forth from their leathery skin, only to be consumed and

eventually gone, so do our lives unfurl, vibrant but brief. Each seed is like a single moment, fleeting and lovely. We devour these seeds, thinking that one day, we will run out – for the tree, for Mr Rao, for all of us. But for now, they offer the sweetest (or most sour) lesson: that life, with all of its tasks, is meant to be savoured, one moment at a time.

I don't see Mrs. Rao much these days. She stays inside, understandably so. I take her trash bins out on Tuesdays and return them on Wednesdays. The pomegranate tree, however, stands resilient, still bearing its burdensome yet glorious fruits. After the harvest this fall, they'll be there on Mr Rao's doorstep.