

Neema Avashia

## The Blue-Red Divide

Before Mrs. B got sick with cancer, before Hillary Clinton went to West Virginia and announced, “Coal is not coming back,” before our hometown earned the awful nickname, “Needle City,” and before my blue-from-birth home state went 80% red in the 2016 election, Mr. B’s Facebook posts were about one of two topics:

Riverboats



or Christianity.



As a general rule, I “♥ed” the riverboats and skipped right over the gospel music. Riverboats symbolize a part of our shared past: Mr. B served in the Navy during World War II, and his love of boats tracks back to his time in the service. So deep was his love, in fact, that he decorated their living room with a nautical theme, the mantle peppered with ship’s instruments, the walls dotted with nautical charts. They even owned a coffee table made with a wooden ship wheel overlaid by heavy glass.

My Indian immigrant parents, who looked to the Bs as guides when assimilating into White West Virginian culture in the late seventies, chose to emulate that element of home decor when they furnished our house. A nod to their adopted parents’ nautical past, fused with elements of their Indian one.

To this day, I am never more at home than when in the presence of a ship’s wooden steering wheel.

Mr. B’s obsession with locks and dams and riverboats inspired the Avashia family to go to the Sternwheel Regatta in downtown Charleston every summer—a race where wooden boats painted white and red pattered down the Kanawha River on paddlewheels. When we visited the B’s house high up on a hill in South Charleston, a black and white painted buoy guarded the entrance. On our visits, I stood in awe

of the giant ship wheel mounted on the wall of their wood-paneled rec room, which Mrs. B jokingly called Mr. B's "*wreck* room." Much later in my life, when I found myself on the banks of the Mississippi for the first time in Vicksburg, I called Mr. B and described its muddy expanse to him. He had always wanted to take a cruise up the Mississippi; I tried to take him on one vicariously. It was only when I saw the Mississippi that I fully understood that navigating a river this immense required a steering wheel six feet in diameter.

Mr. B's boat posts on Facebook evoke sweet memories of my childhood. They remind me of growing up in a river valley dotted with chemical plants like Union Carbide, where my dad and Mr. B worked together, and where they struck up the unlikeliest of friendships in the mid-1970s: my dark-haired, brown-skinned father, the nerdy new plant doctor, and Mr. B, a high-school educated engineer nearly twenty years senior, born and bred in the hills of West Virginia. To listen to a conversation between the two was an exercise in sociolinguistics, my father incorporating elements of Mr. B's hillbilly accent into his own Indian-English patter, Mr. B modulating his thick accent to make sure my dad could keep up.

Our family came to the Kanawha Valley in one of the earliest wavelets of Indian immigrants after the passage of the 1965 Hart-Cellar Act, which eased restrictions on immigration from Asia. A small cohort of those Indians travelled to West Virginia to work in chemicals, coal, and the associated healthcare that such deadly work required. Demographically, Indians have comprised less than 0.5% of the population for their entire time living in the state. Outside of Native Americans, they are the smallest statistical minority in a state whose total non-White population has never exceeded 5%.

It was customary, at the time of my family's arrival in 1974, for folks at the plant to invite the new "doc" and his family over for dinner. But my foreign family posed a conundrum. What should one cook for strict vegetarians? The previous plant doctor, and the one before him, and the one before him, had all been White. American. Well-versed in the West Virginia staples of pinto beans and cornbread, in dinner plates that always consisted of a meat, a starch, and, occasionally, an over-boiled vegetable. People had no schema for what a vegetarian meal should even look like.

Mrs. B told me this story shortly before she died. After three full decades of looking no older than sixty, she suddenly seemed incredibly frail on my last visit in June 2017. The softness vanished from her body, the creaminess from her skin. The cancerous growths on her lungs gained ground, making it so difficult for her to breathe that she no longer left the house. Not even for church on Sundays.

Sensing this visit would most likely be our last, I asked how

our families came to break bread together so regularly—they coming over to try Indian food and my mother’s forays into other cuisines, us going to their house for calico casserole (mixed vegetables and cream of mushroom soup baked with a Ritz cracker topping), roasted potatoes, and green salad with Italian dressing.

“No one else knew what to cook for your mom and dad. And I just figured, why not just make all of the side dishes, and leave out the meat?” she told me. “So that’s what I did.”

And cook she did, serving us salads and casseroles, soups and fresh bread, on delicate china once a month for the entirety of my childhood in West Virginia. Even after I went away to college, then graduate school, then life as a public school teacher in Boston, she insisted that I come over for dinner on every visit home. Well into her mid-eighties, she would get out her blender and bread maker and whip up a creamy, dilly zucchini bisque and warm bread when I stopped by. Or fry up a batch of green tomatoes. Or, close to the end, make me drink her perfectly sweetened sweet tea out of a heavy, cut glass tumbler. The intersection of food and love was one that my Indian family, and the B’s West Virginian one, both understood intuitively.

Mrs. B cooked, Mr. B repaired. If any appliance in our house went kaput, Mr. B showed up within the hour, in faded blue jeans and a white t-shirt, a bandanna tied around his forehead to keep his thick, grey-brown bangs out of his face. He assessed the situation, and headed back to his truck for the tools needed to make the repair. And then he tinkered and perspired and wrestled with the machine until he got it to comply, my dad standing alongside, the apprentice watching the appliance wizard at work.

In turn, my father became the B’s unofficial family doctor. He served as consult on every medical decision, including Mrs. B’s decision to refuse chemotherapy upon diagnosis of a slow-growing tumor on her lung, with an estimated twelve-month life expectancy. On trips to India, he purchased the blood pressure medicines they needed in bulk, the cost in rupees being so much cheaper than the prescription drug copay on Carbide health insurance for retirees.

“Wasn’t that unethical?” my partner Laura once asked me, upon hearing this. I couldn’t find the words to explain that “ethical” means something different when it comes to people you love. Or that ethics don’t apply in the same way when you are a company doctor in a company town. Maybe they should. But they don’t.

Even after my parents moved away from Charleston in 2003, first to Kansas City, and then to Austin, the weekly phone consults with “Doc” continued.

And when Mrs. B had a heart attack in 2011, while my parents were in India, my doctor sister took up this role, advocating for her

with the doctors, calling in our Indian uncles and aunties who worked at the hospital to make sure Mrs. B received the best care even in the absence of our father. The relationship, as I saw it, was truly reciprocal, both in the abstractions of love and in the concreteness of service. For that reason, even fifteen years after my parents' departure from West Virginia, I have returned to Charleston each year, largely for one purpose: to see the Bs. They are home to me. Without them, I feel unrooted.

I imagine Mr. B keeping the death watch all those months after Mrs. B decided not to continue treatment and, instead, to let her cancer take its course. How difficult it must have been to watch his partner of seventy years fade away. How my father's step-by-step explanation of cancer's progression, gently rendered in the rec room on their farewell visit, must have run through his mind: first the coughing and shortness of breath, then the spatters of blood, and ultimately, the rupture and bleed-out when the tumor perforated the lung.

The timestamps on his posts indicate as much, peppered with anxious 3 a.m. wake-ups that only seem to have increased in the months after her death. The ratio has shifted, too, with fewer posts about riverboats and gospel, bringing the newsfeed closer to that of an anti-immigrant, anti-woman, anti-Black Lives Matter Trump voter. Just recently, I logged into Facebook to find this:

I called my mom to ask her about it. "Mom, have you seen Mr. B's posts? I don't know what to do. They are so painful to look at."



The palpable resignation in her response made me even sadder. "What can we do, Neema? It's the same thing with so many people from West Virginia. The only thing we can do is not talk politics." I am the child of immigrants—my parents are the immigrants themselves. If Mr. B's xenophobic Facebook posts feel like arrows to me, it would seem they are daggers for my parents. Daggers that they ignore because of the debt of gratitude that they feel, because of the heavy burden that accompanies four-and-a-half decades of love.

"Not talking politics" was the West Virginia way growing up. Sometimes I question whether I just wasn't paying attention or whether this was actually the case, but when I look around my Massachusetts neighborhood at the political signs that pop up on lawns, at the bumper stickers on the back of every car, I am convinced it is true. Even on a recent visit back to West Virginia, the lawn sign game was minor league compared to Massachusetts'. People truly didn't advertise

their political affiliations. I never knew how my neighbors voted, and West Virginia was so dark blue for most of my childhood that I never really thought to even ask the question. Maybe the Bs were hardline conservatives all along, and I just never knew it? Or maybe, as I've tried to justify it to my judgy, liberal New England friends, the destruction wrought by joblessness and rampant opioid addiction on my home state has created a kind of helpless rage that is only stoked by the current President's xenophobic rhetoric.

I scour Mr. B's Facebook page sometimes, trying my hardest to make meaning out of the misery his posts evoke in me. The only other photos he occasionally posts are of a Charleston long gone. One where Capitol Street was full of thriving shops, Stone & Thomas Department store was always busy, and a steady stream of coal- and chemical-laden boats and barges traversed the Kanawha. One where our town possessed a healthy, growing middle class, and you could make a solid living by earning a high school diploma, working thirty years at the plant, then retiring with full benefits and pension at age fifty-five. One that, in truth, hasn't existed since the mid-1980s.

The chemical industry in the valley died a slow, painful death after Union Carbide's Bhopal leak in 1984, known to be the largest chemical disaster in human history. Each subsequent year brought more pink slips, more abandoned production units. As chemicals went, so, too, did coal. Hillary Clinton's campaign message to miners was harsh, but true. Coal isn't coming back. China has cornered the market. Simply put, there is no industry to hold up West Virginia's economy. Wal-Mart is now the state's largest private employer. The only other state I've visited where the poverty feels on par with that of my home state is Mississippi. A drive through the most struggling parts of either will leave you dizzy with despair.

In this way, there is an authenticity to Mr. B's longing for a time back when things were "great"—when he was young, his family thriving, all of them living lives full of purpose and meaning in a town that was significantly more economically healthy than the one he sees now, full of shuttered stores, heroin needles littering the pavement out front. Modern American prosperity has eluded West Virginia. This is not up for debate.

Trump's threats do not negate Mr. B's existence in the way they negate mine, or my family's. What's more, Trump's promises resonate for Mr. B in a way that they don't for me, queer, brown, and living in liberal, economically-healthy Massachusetts. Ultimately, our politics are profoundly personal, our worldview refined through the lens of our own experiences. It can be hard to hold on to this understanding of Mr. B in moments of frustration, and moments of fear, but I am trying hard to do so.

Growing up, only a few members of our extended family lived in the United States: my mom's older brother in Akron, Ohio; my dad's younger brother in Champaign, Illinois; and my mom's nephew in Tampa, Florida. We were lucky to see each other even twice a year. "Family," and in particular, "grandparents," were concepts that I knew were important because I watched my friends and neighbors spend so much time with theirs—every weekend, every holiday. But what could an Indian kid in West Virginia do when so much of her blood family lived so damn far away, and the ones who lived closer were immigrants working non-stop in pursuit of the much-touted American Dream?

I improvised. Put the feelings that normally would have been directed at blood relatives onto my West Virginian neighbors, who became my adoptive aunts and uncles. Took the love usually reserved for grandparents and directed it, full throttle, at the Bs. I referred to them as my grandparents in my mind, and sometimes even out loud in conversation with non-West Virginians, trying to explain the depth of the relationship.

Shortly before President Obama was elected in 2008, I visited the Bs and found myself in a conversation about race in West Virginia. I wasn't yet thirty, so perhaps can be forgiven for thoughtlessly stumbling into a patch of stinging nettles. I shared with the Bs that West Virginia's overwhelmingly negative response to the Obama candidacy had been hard for me, and had unearthed a number of previously-buried challenging childhood experiences with racism. The B's kindness towards our family hadn't been mirrored by some of my peers in school, who wore Confederate flags with pride and took ample opportunities to spit on, slap, or shower me with slurs.

Mrs. B looked at me with her clear blue eyes and said, with genuine innocence in her voice, "You know, it's funny. I never really saw color when I looked at you all. I just saw you, and loved you."

Twenty-nine-year old Neema accepted this statement as fact. As an expression of love, rooted in color-blindness though it may have been. Thirty-nine-year old Neema, post-Obama backlash, post-Oak Creek Sikh Temple massacre, post-2016 election, post-white supremacist killing of Srinivas Kuchibhotla, is full of questions about what this meant about our relationship all along. Maybe we didn't talk politics but that doesn't mean that I didn't *feel* political. Was my family only acceptable because we were viewed as an exception? Would we have been experienced differently, embraced less quickly, if my parents hadn't assimilated so willingly? Is minority presence in a community only acceptable when we comprise less than 1% of the overall population?

In the years between thirty and forty, my questions about our relationship have only grown more complicated. Each time I visited

West Virginia with my partner of nine years, Laura, I left her behind when I visited the Bs. She drank cups of lukewarm coffee at Tim Hortons, wandered around our dilapidated mall, or made repeated trips up and down the aisles of the local Wal-Mart, while I sat on the floral print sofa in the B's living room chatting and sipping sweet tea.

Just as I struggled to share my relationship with my conservative Indian family members, I struggled to test my decades-old relationship with my adopted grandparents by introducing them to Laura. I don't remember a time when the Bs didn't attend the Bible Center Church out Corridor G at least twice a week. They played a huge role in the construction of a new building at the site. Their daughter-in-law teaches at the Christian school located in the church. And the gospel posts on Mr. B's Facebook page replayed in my mind on repeat. When Laura finally met the Bs on our last visit to Charleston, primarily because I needed her to know Mrs. B before I lost her to cancer, she came as my friend, not my partner. I shielded them still, not wanting my identity, my relationship, to be a source of discomfort for them.

Only now do I wonder, does Mr. B ever think to shield me?

But I also have to ask hard questions of myself. What benefit did shielding the Bs from the truth about my love life confer? Would our relationship now be less vulnerable if I had been more honest along the way? Or would it have shattered long ago? I want to believe that the B's love was unconditional; it is only Mr. B's Facebook posts that have sowed the seeds of doubt.

After Mrs. B's death, my parents donated money to create a children's playroom at the Kanawha Valley Hospice, which cared for her until the end. They wanted to make a space for the children and grandchildren who visit their family members in hospice and need a place to decompress and play while there. They requested the room be named in Mrs. B's honor. In India, when a parent dies, this is the custom among people who can afford to do so: you create a lasting tribute that benefits the larger community. You name it after the loved one who has died. My parents dedicated school rooms and hospital wards in India when their biological parents died. This act was their way of declaring to the world, I think, that Mrs. B had been a second mother to them both.

My dad asked me to write the inscription for the plaque outside the door to the playroom. "In loving memory of June B," it reads. "Every room she entered was filled with warmth and joy. Every person she met was better for having known her."

Her daughter-in-law mailed me a thank-you card in response. "I hope you know that June considered you all family just as much as she did her other children and grandchildren," she wrote.



Every thirty days, Facebook “unsnoozes” Mr. B, and I am reminded of our fissures by another post that challenges some aspect of my identity. The most recent one:



My sister, presumably, was an “anchor baby” at birth, born to parents who were not yet citizens. Does he think of her when he reposts the hatred spewed by Russian bots and Proud Boys? When he declares his unabiding support of a President who has successfully turned immigration into a swear word, and made people like my parents, and like my students, the scapegoats responsible for America’s demise?

Does he think of us, or of his daughters and granddaughters, when he posts images like this one, shared during the Kavanaugh hearings?



Surely someone in his family has been assaulted, I find myself thinking. Mr. B is the kind of father, grandfather, and great-grandfather who loves so fully, it is hard to imagine him responding to the attack of someone he loves in this way. Does he know and dissociate? Or does he just live in denial that one in five women, and one in seventy-one men, will be raped in their lifetimes? Some, undoubtedly, by past, present, and future Supreme Court Justices. Still, I don’t engage. I hover over the “Like” button, note that the same three people have liked every single one of his inflammatory posts. Not even one of them is a member of his family. I keep it moving after that. If they can hold their tongues, so must I.

*The Atlantic* recently ran an article about a Pew Research Center study measuring people’s ability to discern fact from opinion based on age. From a list of five facts and five opinions, only 17% of those over age sixty-five successfully identified all five facts correctly.

I thought of Mr. B as I read this study. Wondered how his aging mind, well past ninety, processes the rapid-fire misinformation that social media bombards us with. Especially when combined with having so much more free time on his hands since Mrs. B’s passing. Tried to find a reason, yet again, to push the morning’s posted hateful



memes out of my mind and focus on the sweetness of going with him to a Charleston Wheelers' minor league baseball game when I was eleven. Of eating green beans fresh from his garden. Of discussing a strategic approach to dishwasher repair, and then being able to rejoice with him when I'd successfully fixed mine. Of the firm hug and "I love you" that I get every time we say goodbye.

The posts continue, and each time one comes across my feed, I flinch, then force myself to look away. Each time, I start to respond, then quickly delete my words before I can post them. Each time, I conjure a honeyed childhood memory to counter the sting of his present-day beliefs. And when the posts become too unbearable, I turn to my mom's advice—to not talk politics with loving people whose politics have become so profoundly disparate from my own. I simply click on the three little dots in the top right corner of his latest provocative post and select, "Snooze Jim for 30 days." I won't unfollow. I won't unfriend. I snooze and hope for a time when my only living grandfather and I can find a way to see each other fully once again.

