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[A Tale of Two Dufferins](#)

By

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Yesterday, this Books@Torontoist editor [interviewed Sarah Elton](#) about her recent collection of literary pieces about Toronto, *City of Words*. Today, we excerpt one of the contributions to the book, novelist Anand Mahadevan's ode to Dufferin Street and his father.

subzi bazaar

by Anand Mahadevan

Walking south of Bloor on Dufferin Street, one is presented with two choices. To the right is the Dufferin Mall anchored by one of Canada's busiest Wal-Marts, a prodigiously stocked No Frills supermarket, and scores of generic mall stores squeezed cheek-to-jowl with their backs to the city. To the left, a large grove of trees flanks an outdoor ice rink and a grassy pathway hosting a weekly farmers' market. Beyond them are a basketball court, soccer fields, and extensive children's play areas.

My family immigrated to Toronto when I had just finished high school. My brother and I were primed for change, and my parents for an unwelcome mid-life crisis. Now, a decade later, when we walk down Dufferin Street, the family splits. My brother and I typically turn left into the quiet green of the park while my parents seek the markdown prices and bustle of the mall teeming with people. Our split is symptomatic of this city's influence on our immigrant personalities and fuelled by the possibilities we see on either bank of this asphalt river.

On a Thursday afternoon, I coax my father over to Dufferin Grove Park to buy vegetables at the organic farmers' market. We have a long history of shopping for vegetables together. My warmest memory from my childhood in India is riding pillion on my father's well-scratched old Vespa scooter to Shivaji Market. The women from farming families around the region converged on this open air subzi bazaar to set up stalls, laying their produce in neat pyramids on wet gunny sacks, the edges of their

vegetable castles secured by wicker baskets filled with onions and potatoes. Even today I can slip into the memory of colours, textures, smells, and above all the noises of vendors crying out the names of their vegetables in Marathi, Hindi, Gujarati, and Urdu.

Naked forty-watt bulbs hanging from a metal mesh illuminated tomatoes too ripe to be contained in their red skin, water globules sprinkled by sun-leathered hands to simulate dew on crisp green spinach, glossy aubergines the colour and size of purple eggs nestling among fragrant nests of cilantro, a giant pumpkin carved with an ancient machete, and cauliflowers, drumsticks, turnips and eddoes piled in heaps.

Subzi, vegetables, picked in the darkest hours before dawn and in my child's imagination, pilfered from a secret world.

In bringing my father to this farmers' market in Dufferin Grove, I am again that child stealing from the past to evoke a lost past here in Toronto. Even as I let farmer Ted talk me into buying green cympling, wrangling a recipe to cook this unfamiliar vegetable, I want my father, inspecting fuzzy peach-like tomatoes and deep-orange Hubbard squash, to remember those Saturday mornings in India when a brash dad had all the answers for a wide eyed boy. Here in Toronto, these new vegetables scare him rather than provoke his curiosity. Later when we drink from a jug of organic cider (from Timmins) under the shade of a large maple, he points to the large bunches of basil, mud still clinging to their roots, stuffing my bags and asks:

"What do you do with them?"

"Pesto."

He gives me a blank look.

"Like chutney," I explain.

He nods and after another glug of cider notes, "Too expensive."

I remark that dirt has filled the grooves of the fingers and caked under the fingernails of the farmer shop-keepers here, hoping he will remember Shivaji Market.

"Let's shop at the mall," he announces, "Very hygienic and cheaper too. It's air conditioned as well."

He loves the interconnectedness of bargain and bustle at the mall. It's busy because it's cheap; the tautology only firms his belief. As we walk in the constancy of light and conditioned air through row upon row of plastic-covered merchandise, he gestures to the welcome hallmarks of western triumph. I remember the comic sadness of watching my parents run into the mall to escape the cold of Toronto's winter as, over-warm in their winter coats, they left a dripping trail of melting snow from aisle to aisle sharing knowing looks of sympathy with other immigrants from the tropics.

"This is a bazaar," he announces as we line up at the cash register.

He looks at me, expecting some reply, but the crowds have made me sullen.

It is only when we cross Dufferin Street again that it hits me. We have both been trying to evoke the same memory in the other. Whilst I remember the freshness of vegetables and their taste from Shivaji Market, my father remembers the haggling and the crowds. And in his oblique look, does he also worry about what I have lost in coming to this city? I smile at him as I take his arm for the long walk home.