



KAITLIN CHAN

ROOM SERVICE ECONOMICS: SEVEN PRINCIPLES

RAKSHA VASUDEVAN

Chitra is with my family long before I am. But once I'm born, she becomes mine.

"Enna, kutti?" she says. Meaning, *What, little one?* There is a smile in her voice.

Chitra cradles me on long strolls along the Chennai beach, changes and handwashes my cloth diapers. Even nurses me with breasts still milky-full from her own infants. My first few years in the world, all I know is the glint of Chitra's silver nose ring against her dark skin, her smell of sweat and jasmine from the flowers pinned to her hair.

When I'm five, *patti*, my grandmother, moves in with us, hands too gnarled by arthritis to continue sickle-cutting the grass on her farm. Then, Chitra stops coming. Patti, now, is the one taking me to the ocean, the one cooking rice and *chana*, scooping them up into a tight ball with shaky fingers to pop into my mouth.

"Why doesn't Chitra come anymore?" I ask my mother.

"She has her own family to look after," she replies, not looking up from her book.

"But how does she look after them without money?"

"She'll find another family to work for," my mother says. "Anyway, that's not our concern." She raises the book higher, blocking her face, and the conversation is over.

For weeks afterwards, I won't speak to my mother. Only years later, in college, slumped in the lecture hall of Economics 101 will I understand my mother was not heartless—or at least, not only heartless. She'd been thinking like an economist, like this spectacled man with tufts of white hair pacing at the front of the classroom. He points at a graph with two diagonal lines that intersect in an X.

"If everyone thinks only of themselves when they make decisions, supply will always meet demand," he says. "Beautiful, isn't it?" He grins.

No wonder my mother had been so confident that Chitra would find another job. Supply always meets demand; demand always meets supply. No reason then to hesitate in firing her, a woman who'd been with our family since my mother herself was a child. Indeed, she would have broken the rules of the system by *not* firing her, depriving another family who

needed Chitra’s nanny-cum-maid services more than us.

Later, I’ll also realize that a servant, disposable by definition, could never have felt part of our family in the way I’d imagined her to be.

Maybe this is why, eventually, I become an economist, so I won’t make such miscalculations again—so I can be rational and removed like my mother, carefully carving my place in the world, my concerns, apart from others.

But as a child, I only know that without Chitra’s bursts of laughter, our house vibrates with silence. We no longer eat from the large banana leaves she plucked from the tree in our backyard; now, we eat on plates, lifeless and spotty with dishwater.

After Chitra, I yearn to leave this house, to find home elsewhere. Soon, we will indeed leave; the rest will be trickier.

1) The Invisible Hand theory in economics suggests supply and demand for goods and services will “self regulate”—as if guided by an “invisible hand”—if only all players act out of self-interest.

I first have proper room service when I turn ten, the day after we move to Calgary. “Opportunities are better there,” is all my parents say when we leave Chennai. I don’t know what this means and I don’t care because I’ve already made up my mind to be miserable. And I am, through the taxi ride to the Chennai airport, Lord Vishnu gazing mournfully at us from the dangling air freshener. I’m miserable through thirty-something hours of flights, our necks cramping and stomachs distending from salty airplane food. When we finally, *finally* get to Canada, my blue frock is damp with tears.

Our hotel unexpectedly lifts my spirits: a tower of glass and metal, rising sleekly into the clouds. And our room, sumptuous: plush grey carpeting, impossibly soft beds. I want to stay forever and I believe we will because I don’t yet know what a hotel is, its temporal

nature. Our first night, I carefully arrange my friends on the bed: Eddy the Teddy Bear, Ravi the Snake, and my favorite: Chitra the Princess.

On our second day, cool and clear enough to reveal the white peaks of the Rockies in the distance—a world away from Chennai’s sticky overcast heat—I turn ten. To celebrate: carrot cake, cream cheese frosting, one candle.

“Thank you, thank you so much,” my father gushes. The uniformed white woman delivering the cake nods, looking bored. As she sets out plates and cutlery, my father shoves his hands into his pockets, licks his lips nervously. Shuffles. Watching him, my mother’s mouth twists with mild disgust. In India, my parents only acknowledged waiters to snap at them for being slow to refill their waters. But here, my father is clearly unsettled by this new world where most people are paler than us, which, according to Indian reasoning, makes them superior. Even as a child, I’d learned to equate lightness with beauty and wealth. In India, aunties pinched my pale cheeks, congratulated my parents for producing such a “fair baby.” At this, my parents’ smiles grew fat. We were an upper caste family and I showed it.

But here, no longer.

2) Human capital theory suggests assets like education, work experience, and IQ determine a person’s worth. Economists have not traditionally factored race or nationality into such calculations.

In Brooks, a town of fifteen thousand, I wait at the motel bar for my salad to-go. The waitress and one other customer—a sunburnt man with hair like the wheat fields surrounding the town—try not to stare at me. The motel advertised room service, which this isn’t, but at least the result will be the same: a mediocre meal eaten before the TV’s dim warmth. No one to question with their eyes or words my being here. Even I can forget where I am, the off-white walls and framed flower prints indistinguishable from those of any other hotel room in the world.

It's the summer after my first year of college and I'm interning at a government agency that builds electric transmission lines. For this job, I travel across Alberta, the province we've now lived in for a decade but barely seen outside of Calgary. I am glad for the chance to escape the city. Six years have passed since 9/11 and still, skin like mine is not trusted. At Payless, where I work part-time during the school year, my boss goes from complimenting my "child-bearing hips" to sneering, "what are you, Osama's wife?" when I don't reciprocate his interest.

My mother, now a salesperson at Chapters, a national bookstore chain, refuses to be affected by racism. "We haven't done anything wrong," she says, slipping off the shapeless brown vest she must wear to work. "Shuba" is embroidered on there, a more pronounceable version of "Subadra," her real name.

"If people want to think we're terrorists, that's their problem," she says.

As always, I want to be like her: uninterested in others' approval, unconcerned with their affection. She is an island, my mother: self-contained. Even when my father left us three years ago, she'd been eerily calm, signing the divorce papers dry-eyed, watching a Tamil comedy afterwards like she did every evening.

"Aren't you even a little resentful?" I asked her.

Eyes still fixed on the TV, she answered, "If he wanted to leave, how could I stop him?"

Her lack of need—for him, for being needed—irritates me, aggravates my itch to leave home. That summer after my first year of college, Kelly Clarkson's "Miss Independent" plays on all the radio stations; I blast it as I barrel across the yellow Prairies in a rented Chevy Silverado, my feet barely reaching the gas pedal. For the internship, I drive to Lacombe, Brooks, Bonnyville, Beaverlodge, Taber. In community halls and church basements, I set up poster boards printed with maps of the province. Lines snake across them: solid black to show existing transmission routes, dotted red for potential new lines. These bloodshot routes will come to seem as angry to me as the people who attend the community consultations: ranchers worried about radioactive waves harming their cattle, families worried about property values, Indigenous tribes claiming violations of their ancestral lands.

My boss, Nancy, receives the brunt of their outrage. A woman who favors eighties-style big hair and pantsuits, she nods and jots down every complaint, her smile never wavering. Then, she urges attendees to sign up for the newsletter to keep up-to-date on plans for the new lines. People pause on their way out where I sit with the sign-up sheet. I worry the fluorescent lights cast me darker, almost sinister. And sure enough, an unspoken question always bubbles up in people's eyes—except for one man who verbalizes it: "Long way from home, huh?" he says, and leaves without waiting for an answer. There's nowhere in this country, it seems, to escape what I'm fleeing.

After the last community meeting, I'm packing up the poster boards when I hear Nancy sigh. She stands in the middle of the church basement, hair limp, devoid of its usual sprayed buoyancy.

"You know it's already decided where the lines will be built, right?" she says, gazing at the last standing poster board. "All these consultations are just to build up goodwill. So at least people feel like their opinions were heard."

She turns to look at me and I can only blink back at her. In the country I've called home for almost half my life, I toggle constantly between being invisible and hyper-visible. I'd never considered that people fair-skinned and light-eyed, on and of this soil for generations, could also feel unseen, unheard—unimportant.

3) When one party has more knowledge about an event or transaction than the other, there is said to be an "information asymmetry." This is also known as "accumulation of power."

The end of college approaches and I'm afloat, trawling a job market dried up by the financial crisis. One night, bleary-eyed from job applications, I stumble upon the website of a student exchange organization. One thing leads to another and soon, I find myself on a flight to

Bangladesh for another internship, this time with a charity that provides loans to poor women. As the plane's wheels lift off the runway in Calgary, I feel a rush: how lucky I am to cross continents almost as easily as crossing the street. Later in life, this will start to feel like a curse. But not yet.

In Dhaka, the world's most crowded city, I dodge masses of people, goats and electricity lines that dangle dangerously low en route to the charity's office. I am paid little at this job, which seems fair since I mostly just sip chai with the charity's director, Mr. Islam, a gentle man in his seventies, more interested in showing me pictures of his grandchildren than in assigning me work. Thankfully, my rent, like my salary, is absurdly low: I share a windowless two-bedroom apartment with a family of mice and six other foreigners, none of us quite knowing how we got here or what exactly we're doing.

The glares of our neighbors though, who hate us for drinking and blasting music, are especially hateful when directed at me, a girl who looks like one of them. But precisely because of that perception, I am happier than I can remember. Everywhere, there is brown skin like mine: walking on the streets, driving trucks and rickshaws, hawking jumbo prawn pakoras and eating them. Brown women on billboards, modeling jewel-toned *salwar kameez*. Brown imams sounding the *adhans*—calls to prayer—that I awake and fall asleep to. Brown couples shyly holding hands in parks. For the first time since leaving India a decade ago, I see myself as how a person should be, without any need for lightening or lessening.

Also for the first time, my skin buys me privilege that even white people aren't privy to. The staff favor me over the other interns who are both white. Only I receive invitations to colleagues' birthday parties, weddings and Eid dinners. The women slip colorful bangles onto my wrists, bring me *gulab jamun*, dot a *bindi*—the third eye for protection—on my forehead.

One day, P, a Bangladeshi colleague, tells me breathlessly of the rickshaw *wallah* who brings her from home to the office each day. "The best part is watching him work the pedals," she says, eyes glazing with desire. In three months, she would wed a man twice her age in a marriage arranged by her parents.

S, another colleague, confesses she walks the streets for hours after work to avoid

returning home, where her mother's senility awaits with clenched fists and screams. "I don't know why I'm telling you this," she says, dabbing her eyes with the tail of her sari.

"You can trust me," I say. This solidarity is new to me, and deliciously heady. I didn't know my own hungers until coming here: for whispered secrets, for a spectrum of brown, for the Asian sun to deepen my skin into the darkest shades along that continuum. The circles under my eyes vanish: in Bangladesh, I, a lifelong insomniac, sleep soundly not only at night, but nod off in rickshaws and buses, in the backs of taxis and at the office, sometimes still clutching a cup of chai.

"They say you sleep well where you feel safe," P says, smiling.

When my internship ends after four months, there are tearful goodbyes at the office, in the car ride to the airport, outside the airport. And when my flight is delayed until the next day, I can't bear repeating any of those again. So, I take a taxi to the nearest hotel.

There, I consider calling my mother—but what to say? That I don't want to come back, to a place that will feel more alien than ever—where *I* will feel more alien than ever? My mother and I talk only about grades, money, career—rational things. We do not talk about feelings, especially not fear. Finally, my gut knotting and snarling, I pick up the phone. Instead of dialing her number, I call room service.

But when the order arrives, it's all wrong: the man who wheels in the trolley of dishes could have been family, his bulbous nose my mother's, bushy black eyebrows threaded with silver exactly like my grandfather's. I am embarrassed that he's serving me, a girl who could be his granddaughter, that he has to wait stiffly while I root around my purse for a tip.

When he finally leaves, I have only a few spoonfuls of the *machcher jhol* before stopping. The sauce is bland, lacking the kick of fresh green chili, and the prawns tiny and hard. This, without doubt, is a meal for foreigners. And over the past months, I'd let myself forget that's exactly what I was.

4) “Homophily” is the tendency to seek out and form relationships with people similar to oneself. This tendency influences most decisions, economic and otherwise.

After Bangladesh, I go to graduate school. When I finish, a Master(’s) in Economics, I move to Uganda to work at a think tank. I know little about the east African country aside from the weather being supposedly great, mosquitoes minimal, mangos and avocados bountiful. At 25, those reasons are enough.

In Kampala, Uganda’s capital, I live with two expats in a sun-filled house, attached to a garden of plantain and papaya trees. Our clothes dry quickly on the rope stretching between them, where Jackie hangs them after washing. A stout woman with apple cheeks and greying braids, Jackie comes twice a week to do our laundry, mop the floors and cook. We are very happy with Jackie’s work and tell her so repeatedly. If, occasionally, some beer goes missing or the bag of sugar empties overnight, we say nothing.

“We have to keep the help happy,” the Americans tell me when I move in. There have been many break-ins at expats’ houses lately, and disgruntled maids are always suspected. This is also why we pay Jackie well above the market rate: a loyalty bonus.

I am happy with this arrangement, especially since I like Jackie very much. If I’m home while she works, she blasts Bollywood songs on her phone, bobbing her head along with the music.

Once, she asks me, “Indians like spice, right?”

“I do, a lot.”

After that, she adds chilies to everything she cooks. For my birthday, she makes chapatti and samosas. For both, the dough is too thick, like rubber. I go back for seconds anyway.

“Have more, *muwala wange*,” Jackie says, laughing. *Have more, my daughter.*

I fill my plate once more, knowing I’m making a mistake, falling into the same

delusion I had with Chitra—the fantasy of family, of belonging—but I can’t stop myself. It’s so nice to feel at home, to eat a home-cooked meal made especially for me. The last time I’d been home, my mother and I had sat across from each other at the dining table, eating takeaway salads from Safeway. Since her last check-up had shown high blood pressure, she’d been on a ruthless diet. Still, she looked tired, the bags under her eyes dark and puffy.

“How’s work?” I asked.

“Work is...work,” she said. Then, after a pause, she added, “You know, customer service can really make you hate people.” She stabbed at the kale with her fork.

“You don’t have to keep working, mom. You’ve saved enough to retire, and I can help out too.”

“Che, che,” she tsked. “No. You just look after yourself and I’ll do the same.”

As she got up to clear the salad boxes, I sat, staring at the dark walnut tabletop, now rubbed to beige in some spots. Why couldn’t we take care of each other, like family was supposed to? Was it because I’d been gone so often these past years? Or would it have been this way even if I’d never left?

Either way, I couldn’t stand it. I’d planned to be home for a few weeks; after six days, I decided to leave. When I told my mother, she was silent for a moment. Then, she smiled.

“No offense, dear, but it will be nice to have my space again,” she said.

The house had two floors, three bedrooms, both front and back yards. Was she serious or joking? I didn’t ask, scared of what her answer might be.

The cab ride to the airport was a grey blur.

In Uganda, paying Jackie well lessens my guilt over her starring role in my maternal fantasies. Safer to adore someone paid to care for me than my own mother, whose love felt fickle and slippery. Yet, I sometimes also wonder if Jackie put on a show, showering affection to keep us from seeking out a cheaper alternative. I try not to think about this; instead, I focus on my housemates’ missteps and miscalculations. They take paying for loyalty too far in other ways. Rachel has a *boda*—motorcycle taxi—on a monthly retainer of a million Ugandan shillings, the same as what I pay in rent. And Kathleen pays every *boda* forty thousand

shillings, regardless of the distance traveled.

“It’s like, five cents,” they say. Every price is like five cents to them.

I, on the other hand, bargain hard, like most Ugandans, like my mother did in India, stone-faced, fingers tight on her purse, always ready to walk away. Eventually, the drivers in our neighborhood refuse to take me.

“I’ll wait for your housemates,” they say. “They pay more.”

Sometimes they confuse me with Kathleen and Rachel, which shocks me: my housemates, after all, are white. When I point this out to Peter, one of the boda drivers, he laughs.

“My friend, you are *mzungu* whether you want to be or not,” he says. *Mzungu*, white person. “Skin color is only part of it, you know.”

He gives me a look before driving off. I watch as his boda climbs the hill purpled with jacaranda trees. I feel dazed. Even with my good salary, my big house, my maid, I’ve never thought of myself as white.

Before me, Peter crests the hill and disappears into the sky.

5) When certain buyers pay significantly more than the prevailing price for a good or service, sellers start serving only these privileged customers. This creates “market distortion,” which theoretically should not occur if everyone acts out of their own self-interest. In reality, market distortion is common. The invisible hand no longer applies.

The prawns, huge and lustrous pink, are the best I’ve had in years.

“Fresh from the water,” the waiter says. The restaurant is perched on a hill overlooking the Kenyan coast. Bay windows frame a glittering Indian Ocean. The same body

of water that had yielded the prawns I’d so loved in Bangladesh. And, a lifetime ago, the same ocean by which I’d been born.

Gazing again now at the expanse of blue, I feel listless and heavy, as if each of my 27 years has taken on new weight. I am still living in Kampala, but I suspect I’ll soon move again. Jackie is gone, moved back to her village to take care of her aging mother. I am sorry for her in a way, and jealous of her in another. My mother, only in her sixties, has already chosen assisted living facilities for when the time comes. Forever rational, my mother, even as her body veers erratic.

We are six economists and sociologists in the restaurant that night: four Americans, a German and myself, all here for a two-day conference. Earlier, I’d presented a study on the economy of Kenya’s western region.

“Tourism is no longer a viable pathway for economic growth,” I’d said. “I strongly recommend opening up regulations on foreign investment.”

Even with the air-conditioning on high, I sweated inside my suit. This was my job: studying, analyzing, making pronouncements about places I’d never fully understand. But it still unsettled me. In moments like those, I thought of Nancy: the big hair, the pantsuits, the shields against similar discomforts.

“I can’t believe the Minister started snoring,” the German says, shaking his head. The light streaming through the windows bounces off his red hair, setting it ablaze.

I picture the conference hall that morning: government officials, UN leaders and non-profit staff in perfectly ironed suits and tailored *kitenge* dresses. During our presentations, many asked questions, agreed or disagreed vigorously with our conclusions—but a few, like the Minister, stared at us vacantly, not once opening their leather-bound notebooks.

“What are the chances of our recommendations actually being applied?” one of the Americans asks. He voices what’s on all our minds: would our work be used? Would it influence poverty reduction programs, public health campaigns, tax breaks for different industries?

“Unlikely,” someone answers.

Heads nod around the table, punctuated by grimaces. Deep down, we fear our

audience—even the ones genuinely interested in what we had to say—might represent agencies like the one Nancy and I had worked for: our studies commissioned as token gestures. Decisions already made at some distant headquarters.

I notice the waiter, a slender man in pressed burgundy uniform, staring at us. For a moment, I see us through his eyes: a group that doesn't belong here and would soon split apart. What he doesn't see—what none of us can see—is what we'll leave behind in our wake: perhaps nothing, but potentially, decisions affecting thousands, based on our inevitably imperfect analyses.

Suddenly nauseous, I put my fork down. Why do we—I—keep doing this work, coming to these places?

Because it's all I know to do.

Because home is a moving target.

Because now, a “home-cooked” meal is one made by kitchen staff I'll never meet, usually eaten alone, in a hotel room I may never return to.

Because I still hope to travel to a different self—one who can reckon with the perpetual pushing together and pulling apart.

Of what? Of those who serve and are served. Of theory and reality. Of herself and the woman who made her.

No one without the other.

6) *The “sunk cost fallacy” is common, occurring when a person continues to pursue a course of action because she's already invested money, time, or emotion towards that outcome. But a rational decision-maker would only consider future costs as past costs are “sunk” and cannot be recovered.*

The shrill calls of ibis break the quiet of Dar es Salaam's peninsula district. This is the neighborhood of the Sheraton, where I'm staying, and of expat mansions. Here, the roads are wide and smooth, lined by gated compounds with high walls topped by barbed wire and bougainvillea. Guards in gray uniform slouch under cashew trees.

Another conference, another afternoon to kill before the flight home: still Kampala, but only for another month. I've handed in my notice at the think tank. What or where next remains a question mark. When I think of the future, all I can picture is lying under a tree—a sapling that I've planted, watered, loved into old age.

Maybe one day.

Today, in Dar, I walk without aim, fallen hibiscus flowers crushing under my sandals. Luxury sedans and four-by-fours whiz by; I see my reflection in one. My face looks different, I think. Rounder, more like my mother.

Soon, compounds give way to elephant grass high as my shoulders on one side, ocean on the other. I gaze at the water for a while as it deepens to indigo. Dusk is coming. As I'm about to turn away, I sense something fluttering above. Looking up, I see a bird high in the sky, no bigger than a dot from where I stand. It's hovering, as if trying to decide its next move. Swoop forward, or veer sideways? Or maybe it's trapped in an air pocket, struggling against invisible currents.

I watch to see what it will do, admiring the blue and silvery pink on the underside of its wings. Then, I spot the thin, almost invisible line extending down from its tail. I should've known: a real living creature couldn't be so still, even if trapped—especially if trapped.

Following the line down to earth, I see it's held by a girl of six or seven years old, her smile bright against umber skin. Her mother stands behind her, dressed in a sari, open-mouthed as she also gazes up at the kite.

A sudden gust of air makes the girl's arms wobble. She tries to reign in the kite and her mother shoots out her hands, placing them atop her daughter's. Together, they fight to control the lurching line, both giggling, the wind tossing up the girl's hair around her face and into her laughing mouth.

She looks so terribly carefree, so flush with joy at being exactly where she is and who she is and is with, I nearly experience those things for myself.

7) “Utility” is the satisfaction a person gets from an experience. There is no consensus on how to predict or measure this. Economists are still wrestling with the notion that people’s desires, and therefore the utility they derive from any one thing, are endlessly variable—perhaps beyond the grasp of economics. 

