Days of 2005: Mumbai to Iowa City

April 21, 2015 By Jay Vithalani

I arrived on Sunday the 14th of August. Mumbai to Iowa City: needless to say, it was a long and punishing sequence of flights. BOM to AMS, AMS to DTT, DTT to CID--that last code the one for the Eastern Iowa Airport. My lease began on Monday the 15th, and in any case the apartment was unfurnished, so I had reserved a few nights' stay--very low rates for incoming students from distant lands--at the university's Memorial Union. After a brief shuttle ride from the local airport--oh lawd, how marvelously dinky, how laid back, how utterly bereft of any copies of the NYT!--I collapsed on the bed in my generically pleasant room, exhausted but happy. Plenty of cornfields seen from the air on the Detroit-Cedar Rapids flight.

Keys picked up on Monday. Teary pilgrimage paid to the Main Library--I had been without proximate access to an excellent research library for nearly seven years! Now was the time to buy some essentials (a mattress perhaps?) and walk around. It was hot, close to a 100 degrees; and when I saw the track team running by, shirtless, my craning rubbery neck almost led me to walk into passing traffic. I am not by nature a *flâneur*. "Get or rather become lost in any new place, that's the best way you'll get to know it"--that sort of thinking forms no part of my creed, thank you very much. As it is, I get lost in places I know very well all the time, so I much prefer the supposed *gaucherie* of an unfolded, creased map while navigating *novus locus*.

It had been a quiet year. After the application materials had been mailed in January, I did a bit of freelance tutoring; after I was accepted to the Nonfiction Writing Program as an Iowa Arts Fellow, in March, I lived frugally on savings in my parents' home. I stayed in most nights reading, or watching TV with P--the peals of giggles and gasps I shared with her were infinitely more satisfying than going to Indigo for another evening of good martinis and stale chatter. Oh, Bombay and its claims--or do I mean claws?--could not wholly be ignored, but I was satiated with the new habit as it were of monkishness. How different from the relentless restlessness of a year or three ago! I used to be the first one to apply, to myself and with self-conscious glee, that old chestnut of a joke: I would go the opening of an envelope. Ha-ha! Twenty-seven nights out in an uninterrupted row--that was my record. (It is one that still stands, and it has no chance of ever being defeated or bettered.)

As for sex... there had been a rather listless session of mutual masturbation in January with a very tall chap, which turned into an attempt at a sleep-and-cuddle. When *that* didn't work out--small bed, elbows and knees everywhere, struggle for blankets--crepuscular goodbyes were said in haste and mutual relief. After that, it was a half-year of celibacy. Almost. Hadn't Sartre said, with a complex literary *moue*, that "Genet prefers his own caresses because the pleasure that is received

coincides with the pleasure that is given”? That neat formulation about onanism was all I needed as justification--as if any were actually needed!--for my withdrawn self-caressing monkish life.

I had always “booked” my annual physicals--since I turned 21 and if I had any control over the scheduling--for the last week of January. The usual stuff, testing of reflexes, “breathe in and now breathe out,” two or three narrow and brief beams of light poking about. But also and always with a complete laboratory blood work up, including an HIV test. No different this January: comprehensive checkup, everything was shipshape, and that included my *eleventh* consecutive non-reactive HIV-1 antibody test result. In early August, a twelfth happy and negative *pas de deux* with Lady Elisa: the university required X-rays and completely up-do-date vaccinations, and I had requested the local private lab, unnecessarily I suppose, to conduct another round of blood tests. I remember pretty much skipping over the HIV “section” in the sheaf of test results. Nerding out over titers and then over the clinical non-significance of minor fluctuations... Now, that was interesting stuff, and who says that unnecessarily poring over the minutiae of a lab report can’t be fun?

All my bags were packed, I was ready to go. On the jet plane now. Mumbai to Iowa City, door to door, in a mere 30-or-so hours.

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