

REFLECTION

Growing up Indian-American by Seema Bhat

It's Sunday evening and my parents are coming to visit me. I sit in a brown armchair in my living room and stare in the south direction out my apartment window. I span left and right and around the street corner to see if I can spot their car. It's already 6:30...where are they?

They're already a half-an-hour late. This shouldn't surprise me; after all, even my sister and I have learned to follow IST.

IST is otherwise known as Indian Standard Time. As a child, I was always dragged to those parties where all of the adults pinched my cheeks and I smiled and nodded, acting as if I enjoyed it. Instead, I wanted to escape to the basement to play with the rest of the kids.

As my mom dressed me up in a lahanga or an "Indian" dress, I asked her, "Why do we always show up so late to these parties?"

"Well, we don't want to be the first ones to show up."

"But why doesn't everyone just show up when they're told to instead of being late?"

"If we're invited to come at 6:30pm, then we arrive at 7:30pm because it's closer to when dinner will be served."

"But why don't they serve food at normal hours like 8:00pm instead of 10:00pm?"

"Not everyone arrives by 8:00pm though. Then the food would get cold."

Such debates became tiresome, and so instead of trying to understand this phenomenon of Indian culture, I just learned to accept it. Eventually, I began to do the same, even showing up

to my friends' parties late. 📷

As I look to the left again, I see a forest green



Suburban round the southwest corner of the intersection and park directly in front of my house. My mom and dad march up the steps with three grocery bags each in their arms and open the door. "Hello!" my dad says to me in a singsong voice. My

mom is behind him, smiling at me as she leans back to keep the door open. I still try to be the rebel, acting as if their visit is just so that they can bring me food, cash, and take me out for dinner. But I can't contain my excitement to see them again, so I get up to hold the door open while smiling back at them.

"Hi! Where have you been?" I ask them. I felt like a mother at that moment."

“Nanu nimagay...Didn't I tell you? We might come around 6:15 or 6:30?” 📺

Because my parents find that it is extremely important to follow the news, they watch the local, national, and investigative news shows, including Dateline and 20/20. My mom also loves to watch the cop shows filled with car chases and dysfunctional people. After watching these programs over and over again, my parents, especially my mother, began to think that these crimes occur all the time and only when they are not present. They rarely let me drive alone because “you never know. What if something happens to you?”

“ Even if you were with me and a guy with a gun came up to us, you couldn't do anything!” I argued.

“Yes we could.”

“What?” I was just anticipating the completely illogical answer they would give.

“ We would do something ! It's too dangerous. Tell your friends to come pick you up.”

I continue to tell them that I take safety precautions and that they are just over exaggerating over the amount of violence in this world. In response, I receive numerous urban legend e-mails from them everyday followed with phone calls of, “This wouldn't happen in India!”

“ This is the year 2001, not 1977. Things have changed in India. They are just as bad there as they are here. You just don't know about it.”

With that, I am told to make sure the door is locked and call again tomorrow. 📺

I walk across the lawn with my mom and we climb into the car. My dad puts in one of my favorite Hindi CD's, 1942 A Love Story. I try to sing along, yet I don't know Hindi so it's just a bunch of sounds being thrown together. We arrive at Pizza Hut, a family favorite. We are seated right away and have been given menus but there is no need to look at them; we already know that we'll be having pizza with jalapenos.

I seriously believe that over the years the spices that I have consumed have numbed my tongue. Everything needs to be covered in spice. Even the basic macaroni and cheese tastes better with some masala thrown in. My mom sometimes makes “foreign” foods like manicotti or spaghetti, but she always includes the spice, which makes it even better than the kind served in Italian restaurants. We even bring a bottle of crushed red pepper with us in fear that the restaurant we attend cannot provide us with any.

Our waitress takes our order, gathers our menus, and leaves. My parents ask me how my classes are going and when my MCAT classes will begin. The recent news has improved their, and supposedly my, reputations among the Indian community.

I recently told my parents that I wanted them to begin to speak Kannada with me more often. As a kid, I just wanted to be like everyone else in school, so I never really cared to learn to read, write, or speak Kannada. My friends would ask me if I knew how to speak “Indian”, and I would tell them that I could say a few things. When they asked me to say some phrase, I sometimes wouldn't know how to say it. I'd kind of fudge it—they wouldn't know whether I was right or wrong anyways.

This was good enough for me at the time. Over the years though, I began to realize that I've been losing a lot of my Indian roots. Sure, I watched the Indian films, ate the food, took the dance lessons, even been to the country, but I didn't feel that I had enough of the cultural knowledge, something as simple as religion or language, that I could pass it on to my kids. I want the chance to learn before my parents are gone.

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