

Two Worlds

I'm a product of two worlds. There is an ancestral, ancient one that my parents grew up in, a world that teaches morality, values, and has a strong culture. I'm growing up in the other -- the American culture which surrounds me and permeates through everything else.

My father grew up in a small village called Rajnagar. It had been his family's village for ages. However, since his and the surrounding villages were so small, everyone from a series of small towns identified with the district which was named Rajsamand. There were, and still are, only a few small roads traversing the town. The rest are twisted and tangled alleys, a memento to the old way of life. Cows are still allowed to roam freely although they are not as prevalent as before. Shiny new buses and cars are juxtaposed with the street vendors whose families have stood selling *chutpatti* (spicy) food and candy for ages. When we pass a stall selling my dad's favorite foods, he excitedly says, "you HAVE to try this; I loved this as a kid". Many times, the cook recreating my father's memories *is* the same from his childhood. As I walk the streets with my father, I feel like I am seeing him as a child, experiencing life as he knew it, as he still envisions it. Life before it became a whirlwind of responsibility, technology, and stress. In the past, villagers just didn't leave their homes--people stayed, life changed slowly and everyone was somehow related to everyone else. I was once told that every single Madrecha originated in my father's district. Most people did what their father did, what their father's father did, what their father's father's father did. My grandfather was a farmer. My great-grandfather was a farmer. If I start my father talking about the past, he could go on for hours. He always says, "Let's move to a farm and grow crops; you don't need to go to college." He is semi-serious. The great thing about my father is that he still has the small town honesty and way of thinking. It was how he and most people at that time were raised. My father told me that almost 95% of his high school graduating class could still be found in town or nearby.

Born in India, I came to the land of Hope and Opportunity at the young age of eighteen months. However, life in America is the only thing that I remember. The handful of memories captured by our old, battered Kodak are the only memories I have of my infancy in India. My earliest actual recollections are of strong emotions; I remember feeling loved by my parents. We didn't have much money, but we had each other. We moved around a lot, though. I don't exactly remember why, or the actual moves themselves, but I know that between the time that I came to America and my third birthday we had lived in Missouri, Atlanta, New York, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin before finally settling in Illinois. We lived in small apartments and made great friends. We had a neighbor, I can't remember where or when but I remember her face, who worked three jobs to support her son. However, every Friday, she never failed to bring me Gummy Bears, little chewy, multi-colored candy, that to me, were slices of joy. I remember camaraderie from this time period that reminded me of my parents' stories of India. My parents described how if someone was really sick, the whole neighborhood would come together and offer help. I never wore designer clothes, but I also never felt like I was in need of anything. My clothes were never torn, my socks were never holey. Yet, looking back at old pictures, I realize my mom dressed me in pink clothes. When I questioned her about it, she answered, "All the clothes here were so ugly. Who wants to dress their baby in black or blue or green? I liked the cute pink and yellow clothes so I bought them for you!" Apparently, it was normal in India for boys to wear pink. Sadly, in America, pink

had not become 'the new black,' so looking back I remember feeling weird as a child, being the only boy in a bright pink snowsuit.

My mom grew up in a 'small town'. The town is named Udaipur and today it has close to a five hundred thousand people. They still call it a small town. Udaipur is located in the state of Rajasthan which is in the northwest corner of India. Rajasthan is an amazing state with sand dunes, culture, and new six lane paved highways that crisscross the nation. Udaipur is a beautiful place with a great mixture of old and new. There are small alleys with stone houses that are hundreds of years old and are still owned by the same families. Once, my mom took me to her great-aunt's house. She told me, "I used to come here when I was a kid with your nanaji (maternal grandfather) and *nothing* has changed since then. Isn't that crazy?" The central market has been there for generations. Except now Saris, the traditional dress for women, and Kurtas, the proper clothes for men, are stacked right next to jeans, tube tops, three piece suits, bootlegged American DVD's, and, in some cases, the former taboo, porn. The James Bond movie Octopussy was filmed here in a palace that is in the middle of a lake. Udaipur is located about an hour from my father's village. That was a long way in those days. The distance doesn't seem that large now thanks to the brand new roads that traverse the country and the gleaming foreign automobiles, looking as out of place in the small village roads as a man in Victoria's Secret. My mom talks about my grandfather in a loving way that seems uncommon to Americans. She never fought with him or questioned his decisions. As a child, she would always tell me "you're just like my dad, you got his brains." My mom's father was an accountant, a respected man. My mother recalls that she and her siblings would "take trunks of money to the temple" because every year he would away give one percent of his salary. My grandfather's father had been an accountant also. His eldest son is an accountant and business man. My grandfather met my dad because his cousin's wife's sister's brother-in-law knew my father and said that he was a good and well educated person. My grandfather liked my father. My mother liked my father. My father liked my mother. Or rather, "he did not *not* like her" as he sometimes says when he is feeling witty. And so they got married. That's how arranged marriages work. Basically.

Although I wasn't born in Suburbia, I have spent the majority of my life there. From the age of four till the time I left for college I lived in Naperville, Illinois. Illinois is smack dab in the middle of America and is known for the city of Chicago. Naperville is about a fifty minute drive south-west of the great metropolis. Assuming there is no gridlock. But, unless it's a Sunday morning at 7 AM, there is always a traffic jam. Or an accident. Or construction. That's life in the shadows of a big city. If you hop on the express train, you can make it from Naperville to Chicago in about forty-five minutes. Naperville has been ranked in the top three places to raise your kids for the past six years. The library system has been ranked number first for the preceding seven years. It is a really affluent place. There are rich elderly retirees, prosperous young couples, and really affluent people in between. My dad once saw an older man working amongst the shrubbery and flowers of a huge four story Victorian Mansion and said, "I wonder where the owner found that gardener." We later found out that the 'gardener' was an extremely wealthy retiree who had a passion for plants and antique paintings. The more national recognition Naperville gets, the more wealthy people come here, and the 'better' it becomes. It's a cycle. You can drive past Lamborghinis, malls, and multi-million dollar homes with their own runways for airplanes in the same fifteen minute drive. However,

I don't mean to give you the wrong idea-- it's not only about money; there are still small families and daily struggles. Teens still fight about curfew, bills have to be paid, and pain and loss are experienced.

Marriage isn't so simple in Suburbia. Actually, nothing in my life is quite as simple as my parents' life. At the age of fourteen I boldly declared that I wasn't getting married and that if I did, I was NOT getting an arranged marriage. The concept of marrying someone I did not know boggled my mind, but I guess it has worked. That wasn't the only thing that my parents and I disagreed on though. For the first twelve years of my life, I blindly followed everything my parents said. I wore the clothes they bought me. I listened to the music they listened to. I grew up thinking that Donna Summer was current music. I ate the food they told me to eat. Then something happened. I don't exactly know what. Suddenly my parents and I parents agreed on absolutely nothing. I had my culture and religion pulling me one way. I had my friends and TV and just about everyone else dragging me in another direction. My religion focused on 'righteous living' and peace and self-awareness and happiness. MTV didn't. I became torn between following the paths of my parents and becoming 'American.' Looking back, I realize that I don't really know why I rebelled. My parents didn't understand what it was like growing up in America, well because they hadn't. We still could have talked things out. But, I didn't do that; I screamed and cried and became cold and withdrawn. They didn't back down from their culture and still didn't want me to talk to girls; this is when I was thirteen years old. Apparently there are sexually active thirteen year olds.

I visited India alone the summer before my junior year. It was one of the most amazing things that I have ever done. I was still conflicted between cultures and my parents view on life versus my own. Visiting India was like a breath of fresh air. I didn't have to hear how life used to be lived; I could live it and experience it. In India, in my dad's village, life is still simple. Although it has become much more modern from his childhood, it was still a complete picture of the past for me. I saw ancient temples with my cousins and visited my father's old school, and walked around just watching life around me. I saw cows in the streets and played cards till three in the morning with my cousin, a distant cousin, and my driver. There, kids don't drink themselves in to a stupor and do stupid things and call it fun. There is talking. Instead of playing beer pong, I played cricket and cards. In India, life, though not as simple as when my father was a kid, is still not as complex, as hurried, as controversial as in America. My cousin walked down the streets with me, holding my hand, and nobody thought that we were gay. We traveled with his friends, a group of twenty boys, and nobody threw us questioning glances or angry glares. Looking back, I realize that I was astounded by this. I had gotten so used to controversy that innocence was a huge shock. My cousin still wasn't allowed to talk to girls. It was considered taboo and any boy and girl that were seen together suddenly became the talk of the town. He asked "so it's okay for you to be friends with a girl" to which I replied "yea....." He was absolutely boggled. He asked me how I learned to talk to girls and why I wasn't nervous around them. He was twenty three. I was sixteen.

My first girlfriend was when I was in seventh grade. It was the biggest step away from my parent's world that I had taken; it was the most disobedient act that I had ever committed. Reflecting, I feel as if that was the day that I become a part of American culture. Although my girlfriend and I didn't kiss or hold hands or even talk out of class for that matter, the title

made everything different. Life has just become a lot more complicated. I was no longer following the dogma of my parents, of my religion. Although my parents had finally conceded that they couldn't stop me from talking to girls, if my dad had found out that I had a girlfriend, I would be in an all boys boarding school that required ties, knee socks, and shiny patent leather shoes right now. At the time, I felt terrible and agonized over my decision. One part of me felt like a big shot, a rebel, even a badass. I was finally like one of the cool kids. I not only had female friends, I had a *girlfriend*. The other part thought of my family friends, of my temple. I was petrified of the consequences of what might happen if anyone found out. Looking back, I realize that I was making a big deal out of nothing. As I've grown up, I've discovered that many Indian families are much more liberal than mine and did not disdain the notion of having adolescent relationships. Additionally, even my parents have gotten used to the idea that I can be friends with girls. However, at the time, this was the biggest change to my world; my parent's world and mine had a great schism and it took many years for the divide to be bridged.

My father valued education. My maternal grandfather valued education. It is the first value that was instilled in me as a child. As a child though, it was a bad thing to be smart in school. I got teased, called the 'dictionary.' In middle school and high school there was also an accepted level of mediocrity. It was okay not to be smart; many people didn't go to class, didn't do homework, and didn't come to school. Getting detentions fazed no one. The juxtaposition between my own core values and the values that were all around me again caused internal confusion and friction with my parents. I had an inner drive to do extremely well. That corresponded with what my parents wanted, so of course, I tried to not do work and make it seem like I didn't care about school. In high school, although I did exceptionally well, I tried to make it seem like I wasn't working. I would skip class, although I did all the work, and leave for lunch, even though that wasn't allowed. My friend once told me "Jay, you've come to English class an average of two times a week, this SEMESTER." Sadly, he was telling the truth. I still got an A in the class, I just constantly tried to make it seem like I was not doing work. I tried to achieve that level of mediocrity that was the norm.

Until the end of my senior year of high school, there was constant conflict between American culture and my parents. To a certain extent, there still is. I feel a constant pull between vulgarity and morality. I don't know what changed this past year, but at the end of it, I just felt complete. I still can't fully explain why, I just know that it is true. For most of my life, I could never figure out how to balance the two cultures that surrounded me in a way that pleased both my parents and me. American culture has a certain indifference to it. Drinking, pre-marital sex, smoking; although these are not condoned, they are an expected part of growing up. In college, the most heard excuse is "oh its college, it's the time to experience things." But why should I want to experience drugs and greasy food at four in the morning? The response I usually get is "because, for the only time in your life, you can." Depravity is expected and morality is all but extinct. These values, or rather non-values clash directly with my traditional Indian values. Smoking is frowned upon, drinking is looked down upon and pre-marital sex is the worst thing that can be done. In America, there is a general consensus that everything needs to be done fast, no matter what the means are. Fast food, one hour photo, no matter what it is, it has to be done now. In India, siestas are common place. Many

stores are closed in the early afternoon. Life goes at a leisurely pace. People will wait for the street vendor to cook them a piping hot samosa.

I can't say that I'm free from sin. I'm far from being the poster child of India but on the flipside, I can't say that I'm the typical American teenager either. I picked up the terrible vice of drinking at the end of my senior year but I try not to go out every weekend and get drunk. However, since my parents have never touched alcohol, they would be deeply disappointed if they found out. There is a balance between my old, religious, moral world and the world that I was thrust into. And I'm finding it as a go along. This year, some of the things that my parents have been telling me my whole life actually started to make sense. There is a quotation by Truman Capote that says that "Young men think old men are fools; but old men know young men are fools." I'm not saying that I'm an old man, all I'm saying is that I don't feel this urge to either throw myself in to American culture or to be 'hardcore' Indian anymore. I don't know when it happened. It might have happened as I saw many of my close friends, Indians and not, sink in to habitual drug use and mass consumption of alcohol; it might have happened when I became friends with many Indians and Asians who, like me, were trying to find themselves and their place. All I know is that it happened. And I'm not saying that the process is complete. I'm still lost at times, still trying to balance what I'm doing. I still talk to as many, if not more, girls as boys. One of my best friends in college is a girl and I met, liked, and got hurt by a girl that I met in college. However, I now hear my mom's words, words that I previously ignored. I hear her saying "Jayesh, *beta* (son), I know you, you're not ready for a girlfriend. We didn't raise you that way. You care too much." And although I'd heard these words before, for the first time, I realize that she's right.

This is not the story of all first generation immigrants. Some kids may assimilate and forgo their original cultures; others may remain subdued under their parent's rule. I've known both to happen. Coming to college, I've realized that I don't want either. I love my old heritage, but it's not me and I'm glad that I didn't let it be forced upon me. I have decided that I'm not going to participate in 'self-segregation,' a term my friend jokingly used to describe the fact that Indians tend to cluster together, and in many cases, only amongst themselves. However, as much as I love America, and parts of its culture, it is not me either. I have a great diverse group of friends, both Indian and not. Sometimes, I go out and eat hot samosas and listen to *bhangra* (a type of Indian music, similar to hip-hop); other times I'll go to a dingy basement and listen to hip-hop blare from giant speakers and just hang out. These are my two worlds. And surprisingly, they have started to overlap as Americans are showing a growing interest in Indian culture and many Indians are broadening their horizons to include parts of American culture. This has been a surprising and welcome change since I no longer have to always choose a group with which to do hang out with. Like many, I've become a hybrid of two cultures. This is my story. And it's not completed.

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**"Two Worlds" by Jayesh Madrecha won second prize in the University of Pittsburgh's
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[Judges' Commentary on "Two Worlds"](#)