

SHYAM K. BHAT, M.D.

Dr. Bhat is Assistant Professor in the Medicine/Psychiatry Division, Department of Internal Medicine at the Southern Illinois University School of Medicine, Springfield (sbhat2@siu.edu).

The Paranoia of Prejudice

We've flown 24 hours, from Bangalore to Chicago. My 6-month-old son has slept most of the way in a bassinet, but my wife and I, both battling a nasty cough, are exhausted. Before we can catch our connecting flight to Springfield, we have to first clear immigration. The officer looks at our passports, asks a few cursory questions, after which we are duly photographed and fingerprinted, like all "aliens."

"Your son, too," the immigration official instructs. So, I take my baby boy out of the car seat and hold him up as he looks quizzically at the camera, a small, unfriendly object.

We have to go through security again, where the officer tells us to throw away all liquids. My wife asks, "Even the water? I need it to mix my son's formula."

"Sorry, it's the new rules," the man says. My wife had to sweet-talk a surly Lufthansa air hostess into filling the flask with warm water, and she's not too happy about throwing it out. "We'll get hot water in the airport?" she asks, as we walk to the gate.

My wife, she worries too much. "Of course we'll get water," I assure her. "And, anyway, our flight is in about half an hour."

As it turns out, I am wrong on both counts.

Our flight is delayed due to bad weather, initially by an hour, then 2, then 4, and then indefinitely. "Don't know when the next flight will be out, man," the airline official says. He's smiling, as if reveling in the fact that the delay is not the airline's fault.

We've been here since noon, and it's 6 o'clock, time for my son's feeding. Rishi is wailing by now, and Ashwini tries to soothe him while I go in search of water.

I am walking in the airport, two-day stubble, dark circles around my eyes, irritated, a steel thermos flask in one hand. In another country or in another political climate, this would be completely innocuous—a man with a flask, probably on his way to get some coffee or tea or, as in this case, hot water for his child's formula.

But this is America; specifically, America after 9/11.

As I walk, I become aware of people glancing in my direction. I feel like a leper at a beauty pageant. I wonder if I am making people uncomfortable. After all, they are seeing a brown-skinned, Middle Eastern-looking man, striding along the corridors of the airport, with a steel cylinder that looks like some primitive incendiary device.

I get to the McDonald's counter near the end of the terminal. "Can I get some warm water in this flask, please?" I ask, in my Indian-accented English.

He is polite, this young Latino man. "No sir, we are not allowed to do that."

The guy behind me laughs. I shoot him a glance; our eyes meet. What, I wonder, is so funny? He's a big man, probably raised on football and hockey, while I'm a small-framed Indian male, Gandhian as they come. But at this moment, I think there's a trace of discomfort, even apprehension, in his eyes. Or maybe he's laughing at the silliness of airport regulations; maybe the look in his eyes is a reflection of the angst that he sees in mine.

I turn to leave. We will have to make do with cold water.

As we waited for our flight, I reflected on my state of mind. Maybe it was because we'd just come back from India after almost a month, but I felt alienated here, uncomfortable, like a guest at a party who has overstayed his welcome. In Bangalore, I was just another brown-skinned male, not an oddity, nor a curiosity, or a threat, or an incongruity. Without the oppressive burden of stereotype, I felt a freedom, as refreshing as a monsoon shower.

Why did I choose to stay on in the U.S. then? As a colleague recently said, when I shared my growing misgivings about the current political climate, "No one's keeping you here. Why don't you go back home?"

But it wasn't that simple. I had been enamored with America for a long time. She was a movie star of a country, a free spirit who made her own rules; she was larger than life, rich, glamorous, part of my dreams.

As a boy, growing up in India, I would wait eagerly for new clothes from the U.S. brought by visiting relatives. I loved Rambo, Nike shoes, rock music, pizza, and hamburgers, and by the time MTV got to India in the mid-90s, the seduction was complete. I was in love with America. I would have to find my way to her.

Sometime in 1997, while in England as a trainee in psychiatry, I put up a small handwritten poster on my wall to motivate myself to do well on the U.S. medical licensing exams: "America—Home by 2000!" My poster must have worked, because I found myself in the U.S. by 1999, a full year before my self-imposed deadline.

I remember walking out of JFK. Ah, the noise, the energy, the huge flashy cars. I remember looking at the magnificent skyline, thinking: *Finally. I am here.* I loved everything about America. I admired what every immigrant has admired about the country—the wide open spaces, the roads, the friendliness of the people, the work ethic, the cleanliness, the sheer pleasure of knowing that in America things work, that you can drink water right out of the tap, that there are fewer mosquitoes, and the electricity is always on. But more than anything else, this was the America I'd dreamed about as a child, the wellspring of all that culture I had imbibed thousands of miles away. This was home.

And then everything changed. Thousands died on 9/11. Afghanistan was bombed, and soldiers and civilians were killed in Iraq, and one Friday evening I walked into a bar and someone taunted me: "Jihad! Jihad!" a man said, as

his buddies laughed. A friend of mine was called a "sand nigger" at a gas station. I guess it could have been worse; in Arizona, an Indian man was shot dead because someone thought he looked like a terrorist.

The emotional climate of the country shifted. Subtle and insidious, so many incidents gnawed at the fringes of my consciousness, eating away at my fragile and incipient sense of belonging: a couple at a party questioned me about my religious beliefs and relaxed visibly when they learned that I was not Muslim, as if I would have been somehow guilty of a crime if I were; a few patients asked me about my views on women and if I treated them as equals; cashiers at checkout lines and staff at restaurants smiled politely and joked with other customers, but were surly and rude with me.

And when I bought an old house and moved in a year ago, a fence went up next door. In middle America, there was now an Us and a Them, and I was definitely part of the latter.

The country of my dreams, my America, was not mine any longer. She had turned her back on me.

We get back to Springfield eventually. We settle into our lives, and my thoughts and feelings about India, about post-9/11 America, fade away. Then, a week later, I read a news story about an Indian man in Chicago, allegedly the victim of a racially motivated assault by a policeman,¹ and then another about the ordeal of a South Asian professor caught up in a hysterical bomb scare.² That same day, I see Adam, a 50-year-old man who suffers from chronic paranoid schizophrenia. He's a nice guy, wears bizarre clothes, has long hair and terrible teeth, smokes too much, and keeps to himself. He also plays the piano. Went to Juilliard for a year, he claims.

"Doctor," he says. "I feel uncomfortable when I go out. I wonder if people think bad things about me, you know what I mean?"

"Yes, Adam," I reply. "I know exactly what you mean."

REFERENCES

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