

OPINION by Shyam Bhat

The element of danger

Shortly after the terrorist attack that Americans refer to as 9/11, a professor I was working with at a university in southern Illinois told me that it would probably be better if I didn't venture out at night for a few weeks, "until things settle down". Overnight, images of the brown-skinned hijackers, and of Osama Bin Laden had been burned into the American consciousness. There were reports every day of brown skinned men being beaten up and when a man was shot death in Arizona because he looked, according to the shooter, "like a terrorist", I became acutely self-conscious of the colour of my skin and even my foreign sounding name.

The next week, I had to go Atlanta for a conference. Midway, during the three-hour flight, I stood up and the airhostess came running to me. "Is there something I can do for you, sir?" she asked me, her eyes slightly wide. A tall man sitting across the aisle from me seemed to be ready to leap out of his seat, should the need arise.

"I need to use the restroom," I said, feeling like a first grader whose nervous bladder has brought the class to a standstill.

In Atlanta, after the conference I decided to visit the Coca Cola factory. As a single brown guy in a building that housed one of America's most recognizable symbols of capitalism, I suppose I should not have felt surprised that I was followed all day by a discreet but eagle-eyed security guard.??

Back in Springfield, Illinois, not much changed at work – white coats help – and other than one patient who asked me, "Is it true that you guys treat women badly?" the hospital was a sanctuary against the changes outside. A few days later, after I was refused entry into a lounge "because of the colour of your shoes", I decided to take a break from the Midwest and head to California. Like every liberal who is stuck in Middle America, I always enjoyed my visits to the state. The sight of veshti-clad men, and women in saris walking along the El Camino Highway never failed to comfort me; where else could one eat creamy and spicy dal makhani in a restaurant right

opposite one that served quite possibly the best char-grilled burgers in America? (OK, maybe in NYC, but this didn't seem like a good time to be visiting that city.)??

I was staying in Mountain View, at a friend's place. Kirk, a doctor who had recently moved from Springfield to Stanford, was "Asian", which is of course an American euphemism to describe anyone with a prominent epicanthic fold. His parents were from China, and he had a Chinese name – "Chang Yung Fa" – but everyone called him by his western name – Kirk. I asked him once what he thought of himself as – Kirk or Yung Fa – and he said he hadn't really thought about it.?

As we ate prawns and rice at a restaurant that was more authentically Chinese than any restaurant that I had been to before, I told him about how things had changed in Springfield these past few weeks.

'No, no, Osama always has time for you baby, what's up.'

"Nothing's changed here, right?" I asked.

"I think you should meet a friend of mine," Kirk said in reply. "His name is Osama."??

The next morning we had breakfast at a small deli run by an irritable old white man. Back in Illinois, I would have assumed that his irritability was reserved for people with the colour of my skin, but here in the Bay Area, in the warm and inclusive atmosphere of California, I really didn't care. As we were finishing up a demitasse of espresso, a red Mazda stopped in the parking lot. "There he is," said Kirk.?

Osama was wearing a skullcap even though it was not cold. He walked with a side-to-side swagger and exchanged high fives with Kirk. "Whatup whatup, homie?" he said and sat down. Over breakfast, Osama told me that he was from Lahore, Pakistan, and had been in the US for three years. He had a green card, he said, and worked at a

grocery store part time while completing a degree in anthropology at the university.??

"What's it been like for you after 9/11?" I asked at some point during breakfast. Osama shrugged, as he lit a cigarette. "My work is okay, it's no big deal. Actually it's better after 9/11 because my boss can't shout for me in front of the customers. But the campus is out of control, man, I am partying like a mother."?

"Excuse me?" I said.

Kirk interpreted for me. "He's partying a lot, like crazy, right?"?

Osama nodded. "Yeah, first of all nobody, I mean nobody, asks me to spell my name anymore, none of that, 'what's your name again?' Or 'What an interesting name' or any of that crap. Like, everyone knows my name, dude. It's like I am a freakin' celeb or something. I am telling you bro, when they started showing Osama Bin Laden on TV, I thought I was screwed. I said, 'shit, my life is over now. I have to change my name or something.'?"

"So what happened?"?

"It started slowly. I was in the dorm and I started getting emails, invites to parties you know. I think they wanted to make me feel welcome, like they were not judging me or anything. So I went to, like, four parties in a week man. And the women, dude. The women just want to hook up with me."?

"Meaning they want to sleep with him," Kirk explained, in case I didn't understand what Osama was referring to.?

"Yeah, that's right. They want to take me back to their rooms and they want to be in bed with me shouting out my name, 'Osama! Osama!'"

I looked sharply this way and that to ensure that nobody had heard. The deli owner was busy slicing pastrami and there was nobody else around.?

"Hey it's my name man, I should be able to

say it loudly if I want to. It means the brave Lion, Osama!" he said once more and then polished off his espresso in one gulp. His phone rang, some new top 40 pop number, and he glanced at the phone: "It's a girl I am meeting up with tonight. If you know what I mean."

"Hey Amy." He winked at us. "No, no, Osama always has time for you baby, what's up?"??

Of course, Osama's new found success with women was not surprising: women (or at least those under the age of 30) from all over the world find themselves torn between the familiar and the unfamiliar, the safe and the exciting, the stable and the unpredictable. Nice guys may not finish last, but they don't always get the girl either, and so while the rubble was still being cleared, as George Bush was in the Oval Office preparing to launch an attack on Iraq and Afghanistan, my friend Osama from Lahore was reaping the unexpected benefits of sharing a name with the most wanted man on earth. The name lent him just enough danger, a frisson of menace, to transform him (at least in the eyes of impressionable young sophomores) from boring to attractive, from geek to cool, from ordinary to exotic.

Of course, there are other possible explanations for Osama's new found success with the ladies: perhaps the name drew prejudices out into the open; like draining an abscess, the name "Osama" acted like a lancet, allowing hidden and unconscious stereotypes to be released, freeing people to connect with him on a more human level. ?? Or maybe I am over-analyzing the whole thing, and maybe women in California just have a thing for south Asian men.



Overheard under the influence Dhoni proves that there is university in diversity.