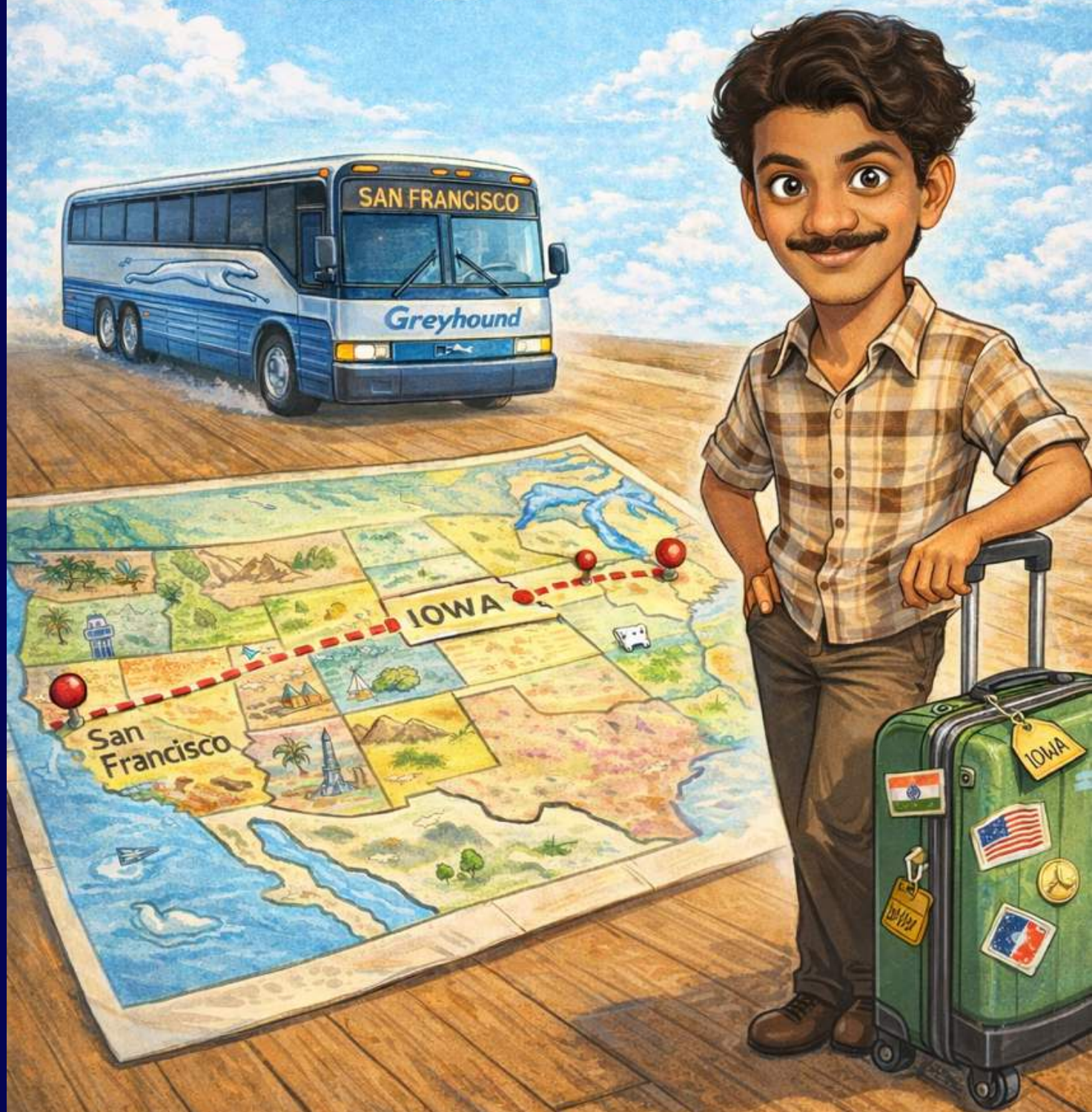


A Hyderabadi in Iowa



Yash Punati

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Hairy Tales!

“Watch out for the American girls! I heard they are out to trap smart and good looking Indian boys!” – this was the ominous sounding warning from my mother [when I came to the US in 1983](#). It seems she got this piece of advise from her friend (so.. it must be true!). I chuckled and told her that I was safe.

She's the one?

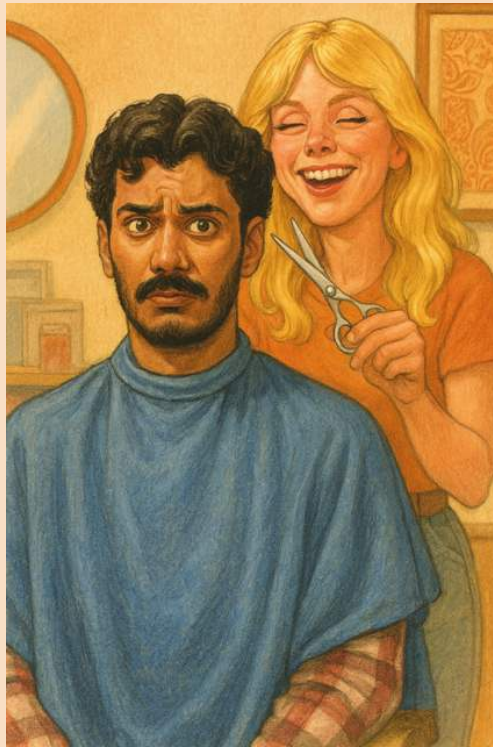
“Do you like Cheech and Chong movies?” the blond beauty asked, while lovingly running her fingers through my hair!

It's only been 5 weeks since I came to the US. I was yet to lose the bad habit of staring at everyone. In this case, it is quite understandable – this was a very good looking young college girl standing next to me and saying something. It could have been her accent or the fact that I was not paying full attention to what she said, but I didn't get it the first time! I suddenly remembered the warning that my mom had given me before leaving for US. I just hoped that this girl would not be too picky about the “smart” and “good looking” attributes and just focused on my Indian-ness! And then .. this smiling and giggling girl repeated

“Do you like Cheech and Chong movies? They are hilarious!”, she said.

“hmm.. I do not know who or what Cheech and Chong are..” – I said, captioning the puzzled look on my face.

Then she went on to give a detailed description of who these guys were and the types of movies they made, all the while giggling and playing with my hair. It took me a little while to figure out the connection between her “Cheech and Chong” references and her giggling. It seems these guys were two comedians who made marijuana/pot themed comedy movies in 1970’s and 1980s! Once this sank in.. I just froze – even more than I was required to (considering that I was in a barber’s chair and she was armed with sharp scissors)! It took me a while but even stupid ‘ol me could put 2 and 2 together! This chick was totally high as a kite! Oh.. and I did not have to guess for too long .. for she came right out and told me that she just smoked a ‘joint’.



In the orientation session that I had at the university or even those informal orientation guidelines given by my roommates and friends, they had not prepared me for this situation. That is, how to react when your hair stylist just announces that she was high (on Pot/Marijuana/Weed) while operating sharp tools inches away from your neck, eyes etc!

What are you supposed to say or do? Much later, I did find out (thanks to “Harold and Kumar go to White Castle”) that offering some snacks to them in such situations would be the right thing to do! Intuitively, I did know that I should not make any sudden movements – for the results could range from hilarious to disastrous!

Most of the Indian students at the University went to “Jackie Goran’s Academy of Hair Science” for haircuts as they were the cheapest (\$5) and were right there on-campus. It turns out they were cheap because you get the hair cut by students learning to be hair dressers. This was my first visit to the “Academy” and turned out to be quite a memorable one! The giggler came to her senses briefly, just as she announced that she was done.

She asked me not to report her to her boss. I gave a faint smile and nodded (that famous Indian bobble head – which is a hybrid of a nod and a shake)! Then her teacher/boss showed up and reviewed the work and gave a huge compliment on my hair – “So thick . nice & natural curls”. Then she gave specific and academic feedback to the student and then she was off to review the next haircut! As I left, the hairstylist-in-training giggled some more and said “Thanks for not ratting on me”! I rushed back to the apartment and breathlessly described what just happened, to my bewildered roommates! When they were done having a good laugh, I asked “what does ratting mean?”

Hyderabadi Trimmin'

Growing up in Hyderabad we had quite a contrasting tonsorial experience! Till I was almost 15 years of age – we used to have the haircut at home!

Chandraiah who was our barber – would show up on a Sunday once every month or so – without any appointment. Then my dad, brother and I would get standard haircuts one after the other. For some reason, it was decided that this needed to be done in the front yard.

It was a beautiful and an unnecessarily public location for such a job. We were surrounded by a Pomegranate tree and several colorful and fragrant flowering plants – Hibiscus, Jasmine, Sampangi. We would sit down on a “PeeTa” – which is a small wooden plank that is only 2 inches off the ground. Chandraiah would squat behind and open up his leather case and go to work.

There were no questions about what and how much to cut or any instructions from us. He did it all very skillfully with just a comb and scissors. He did not ever touch the hair with his hands. Most of the time I was totally embarrassed to be doing this in the front yard. We were always worried that our friends would see this spectacle while walking along the road!



We were quite sure that everyone else was getting their hair cut at a fancy Salon (or Saloons as they were called in India). By the time we were in high school – we also started going to one of those saloons in Chintal Basti! I can still visualize the old guy nonchalantly cutting the hair .. taking a break once in a while for bouts of cough and to drag a few puffs on the cigarette. These places were strictly for men and the barbers were always men. There wasn't much of a small talk or any magazines to flip through while waiting. I am sure it's quite different now.



Scissors or Clippers?

The first thing I noticed about hair cutting routine in the US was that there are a lot of questions –

“Would you like a shampoo or just wet the hair down?”

“How much off?” — When I say an inch off – they actually do a imaginary measurement with their fingers before cutting!

“How do you want the sides? How about the back”

“Would you like some gel”

“Clippers?”

The place I go to now has computerized records (just like the doctor’s office has my medical records) – so no matter who gets to cut my hair they already know my preferences (clippers or scissors? How much off? etc etc) – ‘cos they look it up based on my phone number. They probably also have a note in the system that asks them to compliment me on my ‘lovely natural curls’ – ‘cos they all do it and it automatically prompts me to add an extra dollar to the tip!

“My name is Jenny” , “So how was your weekend” , “Isn’t it a lovely day?” , “I cant wait to get out of here” — she rattled off even before I was seated and she got hold of the scissors! This was the first time she was cutting my hair.. but she was talking up a storm, with me chiming in once in a while!

I noticed that people are generally quite at ease discussing personal details freely with their barbers/sylists. I told her that my kids were off at school and she mentioned that she and her boy friend were thinking of getting another tattoo!!

These women (I had male stylists only 3 times in 31 years) could take the traditional role of the barkeeper or even a therapist – who engages the patrons in idle banter thereby drawing some interesting conversations and feelings out of them..

“I am the best man in my buddy’s wedding this evening” said one guy getting a buzz cut for the event!

“My boyfriend’s coming back tomorrow after 2 years”.. I thought he was coming back from the war in Iraq or Afghanistan. It turns out (based on further conversation) – that he was in prison for something to do with drugs and she was excitedly primping herself for his homecoming!

Kids getting their trim before school starts – the parents are usually right there giving specific instructions about where to cut and how much! “A close shave with the clippers please, I don’t want to have to come back in 2 weeks!”

Jenny paused from her monologue about tattoos in general and the specific one that they had picked, to announce that she’s done! Before I could stop her, she pulled out a mirror to show me the back of my head – bringing to clear view my bald spot! I smiled and nodded my approval on the good job she did and told her “Extra tip for you next time – if you DO NOT show me my bald spot!” She had a hearty laugh.. and before she could recover, I pointed to the hair on the floor and said “Can you see if you can glue that back there to cover up the bald spot?”

As I walked out .. I told myself that I have to keep looking for the hair stylist that will take me seriously!

A Cowboy And An Indian Ride Into Town

“Keep your F***ing hands to your yourself.. you %#@!..” someone screamed! That certainly got my attention... along with the attention of all the others on the bus. There was more screaming and commotion from the back where it all started. The driver pulled the bus to a side and went back to investigate. After a few more minutes of yelling and screaming it became clear that a guy sitting next to a woman was pawing/pinching/sexually harassing her. We had just left Lincoln, Nebraska, after picking up some passengers. I must have briefly dozed off just as the bus rolled out of the bus station and then this happened. I vividly remember the decisive action taken by the driver. He turned the bus around and drove to the nearest police station and handed that guy off to the police to loud cheering from the passengers. After that brief interlude we were off on our way to Cheyenne, Wyoming.

The way to San Jose

The year was 1985 and I was ready to look for jobs as I neared completion of a Masters degree in Computer Engineering. It was obvious that I had to go to Silicon Valley, which was and still is the mecca for our field, to stand any chance of landing interviews.



Posing in my brand new sports jacket and clip-on tie, for a future blog post (-: (circa 1985)

When I came across a sweet deal from Greyhound – \$29 for a round trip from Iowa City to San Francisco, I jumped on it. It did not matter that I would be on the bus for over 52 hours (including breaks and bus changes) covering over 1900 miles. Back then I had all the time in the world and at less than 1 cent per mile, you just couldn't beat that deal. When I got on the bus, I did realize the significance of traveling more than halfway across the continental United States on the historic Interstate 80, which originates near New York City and ends in San Francisco (2900 miles).



Road trip across the continental US on I-80

By the time we got to Lincoln, Nebraska – I had already spent over 6 hours on the bus, and I was getting used to the ride and the assorted fellow passengers. There was a core group of travelers making the long distance trip and then a lot of others who were just going to the next town or two. I was the only foreigner on the bus. I was getting comfortable making small talk with the folks sitting around me. As expected, they were all curious about me – who was I, what was I doing, where was I headed etc. Today there is a lot of awareness about all things Indian, in the US, but back then, an Indian traveling through some of those parts of the Midwest could be an exotic “object of curiosity”.

The cast of characters

Here's the motley crew that I was traveling with for most of that trip.

Chris & Terri : A couple in their 20s – going to LA (bonded immediately with Mr. Hollywood -as he was going to LA too).

Mr. Hollywood : A guy in his 20s, a smooth talker, headed to Hollywood who said that he worked in the movie industry. He was throwing around names of different movies he worked on as a technician and the different stars he walked by etc. "One day when I was working late on the sets, Spielberg stopped by to check on the special rig that he had asked for. He is really an awesome guy, but a bit obsessive compulsive... you know the kind, right?" Being a born-skeptic, I could tell that he was making the stuff up, but for some reason the rest of them were totally taken in by the BS he was dishing out.

Mike & Sherri : An older couple – going to Reno – where their son worked in a casino. Mike, who was a Vietnam War veteran seemed to know a thing or two about world affairs. I clearly remember him saying “It’s too bad about Indira Gandhi.” (The Indian prime minister who was assassinated in 1984).

Katy : A good looking and very talkative young woman (probably in her mid 20s) from Des Moines going to visit her cousin in Sacramento.

A rolling soap opera

The incredible stories that I observed and experienced with the fellow passengers during that long trip were truly fascinating and indelible. Greyhound could run a hit reality show by just installing cameras in their buses and making sure to once in a while get extreme close-ups of the passengers with dramatic mood music thrown in for good measure.

The young couple (Chris and Terri) were very bubbly and seemed excited to be starting their new life in California. They were showing off their love for each other quite explicitly as well as quite frequently. They became friends with the Hollywood technician that they met for the first time on the bus. Mr. Hollywood was quite charming and had a good sense of humor. Everyone was enamored by his stories of movie making.

I was quite excited to share a seat with an actual cowboy from Wyoming. We were seatmates from Omaha, Nebraska to Laramie, Wyoming. If I had a camera, it would have been a perfect “Kodak moment” (reference from 80's and 90's) or a “selfie moment”. I remember this guy describing a long arduous day on the ranch where he was a cook as well as the farmhand and he listened to me with disbelief, when I described a world where folks did not eat beef (the primary product of their ranch).

Katy was quite outgoing and very friendly with all. But, I was convinced that she especially liked me, because of that one time she might have looked in my direction and smiled. *Back then, I was incredibly naïve like that.* She definitely had leadership qualities. At the meal stops she would take the initiative to lead the group to the nearby restaurants. When we were stopped at Salt Lake City and had plenty of time, she said -“The Utah Jazz play here... let’s go check it out”. I had no idea who or what Utah Jazz was, back then. I figured she was taking us to some sort of concert hall. But we followed her as if she was the Pied Piper of Salt Lake City. She confidently pointed out places of interest as if she was a tourist guide. Sometimes, I felt like she was just making up stuff, but we all just went along as she was quite entertaining. I clearly remember her commenting about the Mormons –

"They don't even drink coffee"

"They are allowed to have multiple wives"

"I can't imagine being part of a harem.. ha ha"

Conned in Laramie

When the bus was about to leave Laramie after our meal break, one of the passengers, Joe (who has been with us since Omaha), was standing outside, holding a brown paper bag, waiting for someone. He told the driver that he was holding this bag of money for someone who he met there and was expected to come back to collect it from him. It seems this person put his cash in the bag along with Joe's money (eh?) and asked him to hold it till he came back from the restroom. Uh oh! We all thought that was highly suspicious. As we were already running late, the driver asked Joe to open the bag to see if it actually had the money. Well, just as the rest of us suspected, there was nothing but bundles of magazine clippings in the bag. No money whatsoever. Joe was shocked. He seemed like the stereotypical trusting Midwesterner who fell victim to a conman.

He reminded me of Woody Harrelson's character from the TV show "Cheers". The full force of how he got scammed hit him and he was close to tears.

He had given all of his cash to the conman so he could put it in the bag along with his own "cash".

Obviously, the guy did a quick sleight of hand to swap the cash for magazine clippings. We all felt terrible for Joe and gave him some pep talk...

"Don't worry about it. It can happen to anyone", comforted Katy.

*"Karma will surely catch up with that a**hole", said Mike.*

At the next stop, we all pitched in to buy a sandwich and fries for Joe.

Plot Twist

As the trip progressed, I had front row seat to some changing dynamics. Right from the beginning, I could tell that Terri was taken in by the charms of Mr. Hollywood. Gradually (over the period of 30 hrs. or so), I could see her laughing and hanging out more with him than her boyfriend, who just sat there sulking.

By the time we reached Sacramento, she was sitting with the Hollywood guy. That certainly was a dramatic turn of events right in front of our eyes. A true cliffhanger, whose ending I did not know, as I had to get off at the San Francisco stop.

Those People

While it was long and painful, this Greyhound ride gave me a wonderful opportunity to experience a world that I would not have otherwise. I traveled through areas of the US which are often derisively called “fly-by country” – the region between the more popular and populous metro areas of the east and west coasts. After this trip, I realized that it is important for everyone to have similar opportunities to mingle with a wide range of people and learn about them. This sort of interaction (without any agenda of trying to convert others to our way of thinking), is the only way to bring people of different faiths, political leanings and social strata closer, to build bridges and to clear out the negative stereotypes that we all tend to carry with us about “those people”.

Epilogue

I can guarantee you that there is a grandpa in Wyoming who at this very moment is telling the story of how he met an “Indian guy”, a “real Indian guy from India” on a Greyhound bus over 30 years ago and “guess what? He said that they don’t eat beef in India. Can you believe that?”

“That’s no big deal grandpa. I have many Indian friends at school. Some of them eat beef and some don’t. They even gave me these yummy sweets the other day, for their festival of lights – Diwali”.

It sucks!

As soon as I got my first job in 1985 (straight out of college), my first big purchase was a car! A brand new 1985 Toyota Corolla. I paid \$10000 for it. Guess what the next big purchase was?

I rented a one bedroom furnished apartment in Hiawatha area of Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Within a week, I realized that I needed to buy a vacuum cleaner in a hurry, as the cheap carpet was turning dirty and that small space was quickly beginning to give out the feel of a Greyhound Bus station waiting room. So, I went to the only large electronics store in Cedar Rapids (It may have been called Best or even Best Buy) and picked one up purely based on the popularity of the brand: Panasonic!



Start of my modeling career for consumer electronics! 😊

I had no idea that Panasonic made vacuum cleaners. Later on, I found out that they were into every form of consumer electronics. Among the more unconventional products of Panasonic that I owned over the years – an electronic typewriter (which I had purchased in 1987, just to type up my resume, for the 2nd job) and a rice cooker! Of course, the most popular one is the cordless phone, with a built-in speakerphone and an answering machine. Over the years, I must have bought 10 such phones for myself and as gifts (especially to family in India).

The vacuum cleaner was relatively quiet and did a fantastic job with the floors: both carpeted or vinyl (no wood or tiles in those days, where I lived). Back then my most prized worldly possessions were – the aforementioned Corolla, a 19" Sony Trinitron TV and this Panasonic vacuum cleaner. I moved from Cedar Rapids, Iowa to Ames, and then a year later to Allentown, Pennsylvania with these and a suitcase full of clothes! Over these 40 years – I lived in 5 apartments and 2 houses. Not once did this trusty little vacuum cleaner stop sucking! Along the way we bought a Dirt Devil vacuum cleaner because of the much touted hoses and nozzles that it came with. That one lasted less than 2 years and we had to get rid of it, as it started giving out a burnt plastic smell.

It's amazing that this one from 1985 is still chugging along and taking care of the toughest cleaning jobs without a single repair in all of these 40 years! Hats off to Panasonic for making such a reliable product! I wonder if we can convince Panasonic to bring that same robustness into other areas such as – Soap dispensers in public restrooms, crumbling roads/bridges and shoring up fragile, teetering democracies! It's worth asking, right? 🙋😊

Speller Alert

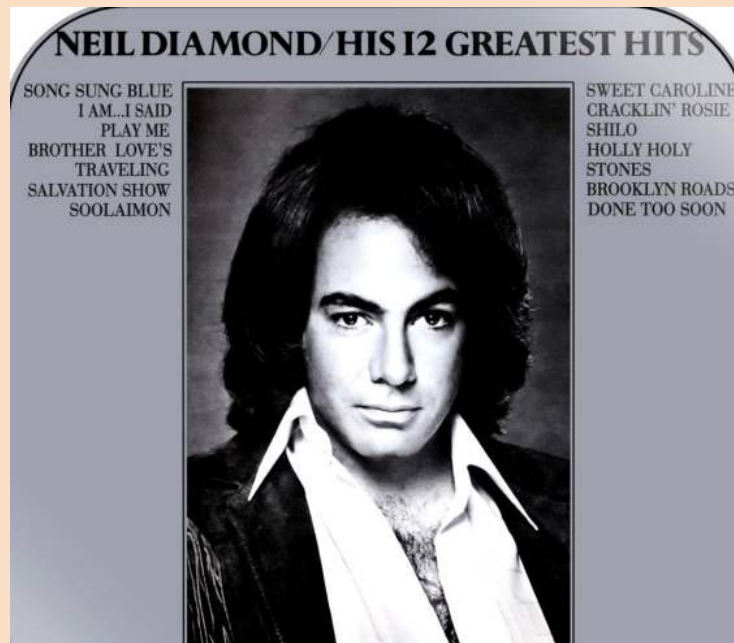
On the eve of the Spelling Bee finals (100 year anniversary of the Bee) the following vignette will do nothing to dispel the stereotype that Indians are born with an innate ability to spell.

Back in 1985, when I was working in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, I was at work late one night on a particularly boring task and so was listening to music on the radio. This FM radio station had a popular contest. You had to be caller number 7 (or some such random number) and then had to answer their question of the day, like, “Who won the World series in 1968” or “What was the top of the country music charts in 1977” etc. That day as the stars lined up in my favor, it was none of these. If you were the lucky caller number 9 and could spell a word given by the DJ, you would win the special prize!

I couldn’t believe that a radio station had a “made-for-Indians” contest such as this! That too on a fricking FM station and not NPR (National Public Radio)!

As luck would have it, I was that caller and was thrilled to make use of my latent GRE vocabulary knowledge! On the AIR that late evening, the word sounded like “Pulcreeetude”! I vaguely remembered hearing it before. This was not Scripps Howard Spelling Bee, which meant the meaning of the word or language of origin etc. would not be given. I just took a chance and spelt – “P U L C H R I T U D E”, haltingly. When the DJ announced with lot of fanfare and FM radio sound effects that I had won, I just could not believe it! Oh Wow!

So, what did I win? A Neil Diamond Vinyl LP Record! Yesss! I was a huge fan of Neil Diamond, from the time when my best friend introduced me to his “Hot August Night” album, when we were in High School. His deep voice painted an amazing and beckoning portrait of “Brooklyn Roads” and America itself in “Coming to America” when I was a just a young boy roaming the “Hyderabad Roads”!



My Winning Album!

Next day I rushed to the station and picked up the record and had a blast showing it off at work. My friends and colleagues were super impressed with my ability to spell such a difficult and uncommon word (meaning “beauty”). Some were jealous about this special skill I had, which unbeknownst to all of us at that time was going to be made obsolete by spellcheck, ten years later! BTW, I did not actually own a record player, and so, was happy to gift my contest winnings to my boss, who, as it turned out, was also a huge Neil Diamond fan!

On looking back, I now feel like that first Kenyan guy who won the marathon, just because he was bored and decided to give this running thing a try!

Seriously though, if you feel we Indians are genius spellers because of our genes, get a load of these hilarious signs from India 😊 :



My First Love



In 1974, I was 13 years old when television first arrived in my hometown in India. It was black and white and had just a couple of hours of programming, primarily targeting the farmers. We were thrilled that they had one movie every week! We were a typical middle-class family, so buying a TV wasn't quite a priority for us, back then. So every week, we'd go to my friend Ravi's house to watch the movie. The entire neighborhood would show up, sitting shoulder-to-shoulder.

This is when I first discovered shows like "Different Strokes" and "I Love Lucy", and thought, "Wow, I wonder if America has more sitcoms like this!"

Fast-forward to 1983 — I arrived in Iowa for grad school, and the number of TV channels here just blew my mind. It was like taking a starving man to a buffet. Almost immediately, I made it my mission to watch every single show. I soaked up American pop culture like I was training for a future “80s trivia night”! I’m still surprised that I actually graduated! I mean, how could you study when “The Jeffersons” were “movin’ on up” and Jack Tripper was rooming with Janet **and** Cindy?

I loved that there was a glossy 20-30 page TV Guide! Every week, I’d mark my favorite shows with a yellow highlighter, as if it were one of my textbooks. My lineup included old Bob Hope movies, Groucho Marx, and sitcoms galore — Andy Griffith, Barney Miller, Three’s Company, Family Ties, and “Sanford and Son”. My GPA was dropping, but my pop-culture IQ was through the roof!

When I got my first job, my first big purchase wasn’t furniture or a car. It was a 19-inch Sony Trinitron. That TV was my best friend. My only friend, actually. If you ask me about Cedar Rapids, Iowa, where I lived back then — I have no idea what it looked like outside. I never left my apartment! My evenings followed a sacred ritual: News, Jeopardy!, Wheel of Fortune, and then one sitcom after another, all the way through Johnny Carson and Nightline with Ted Koppel. Five hours a night! Every-single-night!

Then, in 1988, I moved from Iowa to Pennsylvania — 1,000 miles in my little Toyota Corolla, carrying all my worldly possessions: two suitcases, a [Panasonic vacuum cleaner](#) (which still works, by the way), and my first love — Sony. The following year, my wife, Uma, arrived from India. We had an [arranged marriage](#), and she quickly discovered that I was already in a relationship. Within days, she accused me: “You spend more time with that TV than with me!” She was right. I would spend hours staring lovingly at that screen and maybe ten minutes talking to her. But hey, [Jeopardy with Alex Trebek](#) was a serious commitment! Our first few fights were about the TV. She’d say, “You’re not interested in me!” and I’d say, “But honey, this is a very special episode of Cheers – when Diane finally says Yes to Sam Malone!”



A small subset of the shows that kept me entertained!

Over time, Uma successfully weaned me off my addiction. We did watch a few shows together — LA Law, Cheers, and The Cosby Show. When the kids came along, Uma decided that the TV needed to go... to the basement. Not just any basement — an unheated basement. You had to **really** want to watch TV to go down there. At the time, I thought, “This is cruel and unusual punishment.” But honestly, it worked. The kids didn’t grow up glued to screens, and we actually talked to each other. What a concept!

Years later, once the kids left home, we decided (mostly I) to get a TV for the family room again. Now we have streaming, YouTube, and a million shows — and I find myself scrolling through social media feeds on my phone and flipping through channels while Uma is reminding me about taking the trash out, etc., etc. What can I say, I am good at multitasking! 😊

When I look back at my journey — from Johnny Carson to David Letterman to Arsenio Hall to Colbert and Kimmel — I realize how lucky I was not to have had these distractions growing up. If I’d had Netflix in 1974, trust me, I would still be in high school. That’s why I have so much respect for today’s kids. They’re surrounded by every distraction imaginable — smartphones, tablets, TikTok — and some of them still manage to study and get good grades. That’s definitely superhero stuff! 🦸

So, parents — my advice: be like Uma, not like me. Keep the screens away. Maybe even stick the TV in the cold basement — or whatever the equivalent of that is for smartphones! While my first love was my 19-inch Sony Trinitron, my real love, the one who rescued me from it, is right here, reminding me (again) that I forgot to pay the bills!

In this collection of nostalgic vignettes Yash Punati reminisces about his early days in Iowa, where he cherished the warmth and friendliness of new friends and colleagues while enduring the brutal cold of the midwestern winters.

His encounters with quirky hairstylists and random strangers (on their way to potential stardom in Hollywood) on a cross country bus ride offer a delightful window into Americana of the 1980s through the lens of an immigrant from the south Indian city of Hyderabad. These stories are a part of Yash's collection covered in his humor/nostalgia-centric blog: www.RecoveringNostalgic.com