

The Orange World

Beginning of my American Experience

Introduction

The following writeup is my personal tribute to Syracuse, the place where many of my close friends and I began our American journey. I have presented the story mainly through personal sketches of people who were responsible for making my Syracuse days most exciting and beautiful.

The story must begin with Vikas Joshi, without whom my Syracuse experience might not have even happened in the first place. To appreciate the true depth of my association with Vikas in Syracuse, I must go back to our high school days.

Vikas Joshi

Vikas and I were born only three days apart. Vikas had the interesting privilege – some might say burden – of being born on Mahatma Gandhi’s birthday (Oct 2nd). I think Vikas has been carrying that burden quite admirably in his own unique way. Throughout our years of friendship, Vikas has used his seniority of three days over me to take his big brother’s role quite seriously.

The beginning: high school days

Vikas and I got to know each other because we both secured a place among the top 20 students in our state in the SSC (10th grade) board examination, and we met at some of the many felicitation ceremonies. The first such program was in Kolhapur organized by the Teachers’ Association, and Vikas was one of the few of us who gave a thank-you speech. He looked handsome, had an impressive personality, and his speech was short, articulate, and witty. He certainly looked the part of a “promising future scholar” that we were all supposed to be.

The next time we met was in Mumbai at the Taj where a famous travel company called Raja-Rani Travels felicitated all of us – some 50-odd bookworms – in an impressive auditorium of this five-star hotel. I attended the program with my mom, and I remember that I was so shy that my mom had to literally shove me around to get introduced to other students. I intersected with some of these scholarly chaps later in life, most notably Sujata Joshi who was later to be my classmate when I did Instrumentation Engineering in Pune.

I don't remember exactly when and how Vikas and I struck a connection, but very soon we started writing letters to each other. Being enthusiastic letter-writers, we became pen friends in a short time. (In those days "writing" actually meant writing on paper with a pen!) I found out that at his school Vikas was not only a topper in his class, but was also good at practically everything – elocution, essay-writing, acting, drawing, and so on. He invited me to his Kolhapur residence where for the first time I met his mom, with whom I was later to form a close bond. She welcomed me with utmost affection and treated me to some amazing food. I played the game of carrom for the first time ever at Vikas's house. Later in college I was to become a carrom addict and a fairly good player. But at Vikas's house I was quite pathetic, and probably caused major frustration to the other players.

Vikas visited me in turn in my little town called Warananagar. He was full of lively curiosity about village life and loved folk traditions such as music and food. He did not enjoy sitting idle at home or spending time on entertainment for too long. Going for long walks was his favorite pastime and I remember our late-night strolls along deserted streets listening to crickets and other night life and talking about a variety of topics. Vikas loved to stop

by and strike conversations with occasional groups of villagers who sat around campfires in those winter nights.

Vikas and I repeated our academic performance in the HSC (12th grade) board examination by once again securing a rank in the top 20 list. Coincidentally we both tied for the 6th place – the only time I came so close to Vikas academically. He was consistently a brilliant performer all throughout and I honestly have no idea how I had ended up in that merit list the second time. My effort in that year as well as my innate brilliance did not justify that accomplishment. Nevertheless, it was certainly an event that drew Vikas and me closer together. Vikas probably felt then that I might be an interesting fellow after all.

Undergraduate days

Vikas got into one of the prestigious IITs after his 12th and I joined engineering in Pune. We once again kept in touch through letters. We were both interested in literature and also loved to write in Marathi, our mother tongue. Our letters were always long, and we (especially Vikas) experimented with the kind of paper we wrote on as well as with the layout and format of our writing. It was unquestionably a most enjoyable activity for me to read Vikas's letters and to write to him. Vikas had beautiful handwriting and a witty sense of humor. He was a master of playing with words; I learnt the art of puns from him. I wish I had preserved our wonderful exchange, but sadly not a single letter from our undergraduate days has survived.

After finishing my bachelor's program – BE in Instrumentation – I was rather clueless about my future direction. Thanks to a rather un-serious and casual environment at the Instrumentation department, I did not have the feeling upon graduation that I had learned anything to be called an "Instrumentation Engineer".

And yet, jobs were available dime-a-dozen to all of us. Companies poured in for campus interviews and all we had to do was pick one of them, show up for interview, and negotiate salary and benefits! Instrumentation was indeed a hot career those days, and we used to joke about which company's "truck" to jump in. RCF (a fertilizer company) reportedly sent the largest truck every year, but I did not relish the idea of spending my prime youth smelling like a fertilizer.

I once dropped by the career center of COEP, saw on the noticeboard that DRDO (Defense R&D) was in town and was interviewing people for jobs in 'Biomedical Engineering', among other fields. That caught my eye. I immediately did a walk-in interview – which consisted of a written test containing puzzles followed by oral questions by a panel of DRDO officers. I don't think I did very well on either, but sure enough, the very next day I saw that I had been selected! DRDO had more than 50 labs all over India, and I was selected for DEBEL (Defense Bioengineering Laboratory) in Bangalore for the post of Scientist B. It felt like a big joke – someone with little or no understanding of basic engineering was going to do serious research in Bioengineering!

Teacher at TKIET

The joining date of my DEBEL job was November 1st and so I had almost 4 months to kill. Luckily, I discovered that in my own hometown – Warananagar – there were openings for part-time teachers at the local engineering college called TKIET. I signed up and was asked to teach a course called 'Electronic Materials' to the second-year engineering students. This was another big joke – here was someone who had just got his engineering degree, who could not possibly be qualified to teach, and who had not even taken this particular course ever in his life, was appointed as a

lecturer! I ran to my COEP friends in Pune for help and acquired written notes from Rajesh Idate who had taken that exact same course a year before.

How I managed to teach that course just by reading from someone else's notes, I have not the faintest recollection. Ironically, a few of my students in that course later followed me to the US for a master's degree, and one of them – Anand Vaidyanathan – came to Syracuse!

Scientist at DEBEL

I distinctly remember the day when I hitched a long bus ride from Kolhapur to Bangalore. It was 31st October 1984 and Mrs. Indira Gandhi, India's prime minister then, had been assassinated in New Delhi that same morning. The atmosphere was tense and there were large groups of people gathered on the streets discussing the news. I was somehow oblivious and continued my journey to Bangalore. I reached Bangalore the next evening, hired an auto and asked him to take me to any nearby hotel. He drove me around for about 15-20 minutes and dropped me in front of a decent-looking hotel. Funnily enough, the next day, when I got out of my hotel for a morning walk, I noticed that the bus-stand where I had hired the auto-rickshaw the previous evening, was right across the street. I even met the same auto-driver. He admitted with some embarrassment that he had taken me for a ride and justified his act by saying, "Sir, what can I do? I have to make money!"

I spent a wonderful year in Bangalore. Everyone at DEBEL was extremely friendly and helpful. In terms of work though, little seemed to be happening there. Most scientists appeared to be doing their own personal work or reading magazines, and some killed time solving puzzles.

DEBEL had an excellent computer lab – with Tektronix graphics workstations, microprocessor kits, and other systems. But I never saw a soul working there. I used the opportunity to teach myself some programming and build a few fun microprocessor-based projects. The kit had an LED display, and I wrote assembly programs to display silly messages on that display and create waveforms on a CRT tube through an IO controller. I also worked on the graphics workstation and did some rudimentary image processing using BASIC. But I had no real work, and no one ever came and gave me assignments. If I had not been somewhat driven to learn by myself, that year in Bangalore would have been a total waste.

Vikas takes off for Syracuse

When I was in Bangalore, Vikas was in his final year of IIT (his being a 5-year program), and through him I learned that there was this wonderful option of pursuing post-graduate studies in the US. He himself was pretty certain about applying for admission after his graduation and he encouraged me to think about it. I wasn't sure about my chances since my confidence, as mentioned above, was pretty low. But, by then, I discovered that a couple of my own classmates in Instrumentation had left for the US for a master's degree. So, it wasn't such a crazy and far-fetched idea after all!

Vikas helped me understand the process of applying, he worked with me through the nitty-gritties of the process such as the preapplication, shortlisting universities, and so on. We even appeared for the GRE together. I remember once visiting Vikas in IIT Mumbai and staying with him in his hostel room (dormitory). I thoroughly enjoyed my stay during which Vikas introduced me to several of his friends, took me to his mess (food club) for meals

and snacks, went for walks with me in the beautiful campus of the IIT, and took me to watch a movie at the student movie theatre. Vikas was always the consummate host, making me feel special and well looked-after. I got to see up close his multi-talented personality and his life full of tremendous intellectual activity. He had a vibrant social life, edited a bi-lingual literary periodical called 'Tantra', had founded a Marathi Literature Club where they discussed and read popular and their own prose and poetry. And Vikas did all this while staying at the top of his highly competitive class in all academic activity.

It was no wonder that Vikas got a fellowship at Syracuse University, and so, he went to Syracuse in the Fall of 1985. I got admitted to the Biomedical Engineering program at a few places, but did not receive any financial aid, without which my graduate study venture was impossible. I decided to postpone my plans and try again the following year. One possibility was to take a bank loan and go to a relatively inexpensive place such as the University of Saskatchewan. But I had no immediate regret and was happy that Vikas was taking the next step that he fully deserved.

I remember going to Mumbai airport to see Vikas off. I had a few other common friends with me, such as Vinit and Kailas. After Vikas's plane took off and disappeared into the clouds, which was sometime after midnight, we had the crazy brainwave of going to the Taj for a cup of coffee. Collectively, we had all of Rs. 35 in our pockets. It turned out that a cup of coffee at Taj actually cost Rs. 35 and the waiter was gracious enough to divide that one coffee into 6 cups!

In the front seat with Sundararajan

After a fun but unproductive year in Bangalore I resigned from DEBEL and headed back to Pune looking for some “real” work. My college professor Prof. Gadgil hooked me up with Dr. SS Sundararajan, CEO of Datapro Electronics, a small startup working in the field of Control Systems. There were less than 10 people in this firm – a far cry from DEBEL – and my title was ‘Application Engineer’ – again quite a demotion from the Class 2 ‘Scientist B’. But I was happy to be back in action, which meant long hours at work and a lot of learning. I reported directly to Sundararajan, and he insisted that I call him every evening and report my accomplishments of the day. He was an MS/Ph.D. in Biomedical Engineering from Ohio State University and had an acquired western accent. He spoke in a soft voice making it difficult to figure out what he was saying. To make matters even worse, I had to call him up using payphones which in those days were quite pathetic. Needless to say, I used to be the happiest man on the planet when our call got over. I used to rush to a nearby restaurant to celebrate my freedom with a sumptuous meal!

Sundararajan had a car which he drove himself. Once, when he was in a good mood, he said to me, “Abhay, let’s go to the Coffee House and have a chat.” I followed him to the car and as he got behind the steering wheel, I proceeded to sit in the backseat, thinking that I should not sit next to such a great man who was also my boss! Sundararajan immediately shouted, “Hey, I am not your chauffeur! Come to the front seat!”

Preparing for Syracuse

My correspondence with Vikas continued during this time. Now he wrote from Syracuse and his letters came in beautiful envelopes with pretty-looking stamps. He had launched into his leadership and organizational activities in Syracuse as well. In a

short time, he had not only settled down in the new environment but had also started making an impact in the local Indian student community. He joined and eventually became the president of the Syracuse India Association, took active part in organizing festivals such as Diwali, and organized several cultural programs including a film festival and music concerts of such maestros as Hariprasad Chaurasia and Zakir Hussein. And he was cruising along in his dual master's program.

Although I had somewhat given up on my dream of doing an MS, Vikas had not given up at all. He asked me to consider changing my focus area from Biomedical Engineering to Computer Science/Engineering and apply to Syracuse University's Computer Engineering program. Frankly, I was not in a position to choose and would have been happy even to do Metallurgy! But, still, the little computer work I had done at DEBEL had certainly given me some confidence that I could tackle that new field. So, I promptly sent in an application for the master's program at the ECE department of Syracuse University for the Fall of 1986.

Unbeknownst to me, Vikas was working hard for me in Syracuse. He knew that just getting admission to the ECE program – not a straightforward proposition in itself – was not enough; I depended on getting some financial aid. Vikas himself was in a dual Mechanical Engineering and Computer Science program, which was located in Link Hall, the same building as the ECE department. Through his friends in ECE and using his own ingenuity he started sniffing around for avenues to get financial aid for me. One fine day, he discovered Prof. Daniel Pease, an ECE professor who had employed an army of graduate assistants thanks to a rather generous grant from IBM. To make a long story short, Vikas latched on to Prof. Pease, trying to make a case that I was ideally suited to join his army of assistants. Vikas of course

continually asked me to furnish documentation or evidence that would strengthen my case with Prof. Pease. Vikas was able to make his magic work, and finally in May 1986 I received the most beautiful official letter ever – a letter from the ECE department confirming my appointment as a graduate research assistant. This letter would change my life forever. And I owed it completely to Vikas. If it were not for his persistence in telling me not to give up, his persistence in finding opportunities for me, and his insistence on seeing things to their very end, I would not be in Syracuse in Fall 1986 and my life would be in a totally different universe today. Vikas knew that even the financial aid wasn't the end of the story. There was the US visa, which was always anybody's guess. So, he made the trip with me to Mumbai for my visa interview and breathed a sigh of relief only after I had got it.

Off to Syracuse

Since Vikas was in India on summer break, it was natural for us to plan our travel to Syracuse together. Sundararajan, although upset with me for keeping him in the dark about my study plans, arranged a little send-off ceremony in which he proclaimed his famous line: *"What can I say about Mr. Joshi ... you cannot slow him down, you cannot speed him up!"* Practically everyone who has known me well would agree enthusiastically with this insightful proclamation.

Vikas and I booked ourselves on Air India from Mumbai to New York. The sensation of my first-ever take-off in an airplane will stay with me forever. As it became daylight outside our little window, Vikas and I got busy trying to guess the countries we were passing underneath. When the pilot announced that we were passing London, Vikas cracked the pun "लंडन दिसे मज".

We separated after reaching JFK, New York. Vikas was going to hang around in New York a bit and I had an evening flight connecting to Syracuse on Piedmont Airlines. I was all by myself for the first time, which was exciting as well as frightening. In the recent few months, I had come to depend on Vikas so much that I am sure he felt there was a need to push me a bit to fend for myself.

It was late evening when I landed in Syracuse – probably 8 or so on 24th August 1986. It was a small airport, but for me, I had no sense then of small or big because it was only the 3rd airport I had seen – all of which I had seen in the previous 24 hours!

When I reached the baggage claim area, I met an Indian student who, from my appearance and demeanor, quickly and correctly guessed that I was his customer and whisked me away in his car to the campus. It was about a 30/40-minute ride although at that time I had lost all sense of time and it felt like a really short ride. The broad and smooth highway, fast moving cars, the beautiful landscape – it all felt like a dream.

I was dropped off at an apartment – 739 Ackerman Avenue. A girl named Nina opened the door for me. I have a very faint recollection of events thereon. I was utterly exhausted and sleepy, and I refused any food and in a very short time crashed on the sofa in the living room.

Syracuse: staying together

Even though I had known Vikas for almost 8 years by Fall of 1986, and had become so close to him, Syracuse offered the first real opportunity for us to be in the same city for an extended duration and to actually spend time together. For the four months of the Fall semester, I stayed at 1000 Westcott Avenue with three other

newcomers to Syracuse – Sushil, Manu, and Vaidy. But by Spring, an opening at Vikas’s Ackerman Avenue 2nd story apartment-house became available and I immediately moved in. Our other housemates were Dilip and Vatsal. Since that time, for almost two continuous years barring minor gaps here and there, I got the opportunity to live in the same house as Vikas. Looking back, I cannot find any other period in my life that was so transformative and so thoroughly happy. I was back on a more-than-satisfactory academic track, I was in a wonderful new world certainly beyond my dreams, and I was living with Vikas.

Prof. Daniel J. Pease

In the portly form of Prof. Dr. Daniel J. Pease Vikas had found not only a sponsor for my studies but the best possible sponsor in the ECE department. Dan Pease was hands down the coolest, kindest and most fun professor to work with. It was a shock for me when in the very first meeting he asked me to address him as just “Dan”. With his generous paunch, twinkling blue green eyes, silver hair, sweater and tie, and a permanent smile, Dan looked more like a kindly, young grandfather than a professor managing an army of 7-8 graduate assistants on one hand and negotiating with IBM officials on the other to keep the funds flowing.

I was certainly unprepared for the kind of work expected on Dan’s project called ‘*Automatic Vectorization of Fortran programs*’. I was as green as one can be to Vector Computers, C programming, UNIX, practically everything needed for this work. And yet, Dan had the wonderful ability to create the kind of space and motivation required for me to take a confident plunge. The first assignment he gave me was to go to the library and simply make a list of articles on Vectorization and Vector Computers in the IEEE journals on computer science. It was a pretty pointless assignment

really, as I later found out, but he had created it just to give me time to settle down.

As it turned out, the most I learned at Syracuse – things of practical importance anyway – was on Dan’s research projects. Dan provided all his research assistants dialup terminals to work from home. These were pure text consoles that could be connected to Unix systems in the campus at speeds of 1200 bits per second! And yet, even such terminals were a luxury in those days. I do not think I have had a more intense learning stretch as I did during my time at Syracuse, a large part of it thanks to Dan’s work. I remember spending entire nights in the CASE Center completely mesmerized in the world of C and Unix.

Besides the graduate research assistants, almost all of whom were Indian or Chinese, Dan also had a couple of white American undergraduate assistants – Tim and John – who helped with things like lab setup and system administration. They were amazingly adept with computers and were certainly more tech-savvy than many of us. One day, we invited them both for dinner and challenged them to try some spicy Indian food which they accepted bravely. One of the dishes was a rice pulav that contained pieces of clove. John spotted one and asked me what he was supposed to do with it. I said carelessly, “*Oh, just chew on it. But don’t swallow!*” Sure enough, John was all pink and red within a few seconds of chewing on that piece and started sweating profusely. Fortunately, one of us knew a quick remedy to relieve John from his distress.

During summer semesters, Dan increased our assistantships from 20 to 30 hours a week. It was really just a pay hike because the amount of work remained the same! When Sanjay and I said to Dan that we would like to make a road trip to Washington DC he

supported the idea enthusiastically and even suggested places of interest to visit. I remember him recommending highly the IMAX theater at the Space Museum, a place where we ended up spending an entire day watching movie after movie!

Having a supportive and forgiving professor like Dan Pease sponsoring my tuition fees and my expenses, besides creating a most conducive environment for me to learn, was a huge plus for me in Syracuse.

Rohini's first snow

Through Vikas I got to know Nandkishor Abhyankar, a young professor in the Mechanical Engineering department. He was a warm-hearted, friendly gentleman who was recently married to Rohini, a girl from New Delhi. Rohini too was new to America and to Syracuse just like I was. So, Prof. Abhyankar took it upon himself to help us prepare for the upcoming winter of Syracuse. We all piled into his car one day and went to K-mart for winter shopping. I returned with a huge winter jacket, heavy snow boots and other paraphernalia.

One fine November day, when I was still enjoying my usual early morning slumber, my phone rang. It was Rohini, who said in an excited voice, "*Abhay, look outside! It is snowing!*" I woke up with a start and peeked outside the window. There I saw big white flakes of snow drifting down. It was unbelievable! I had never seen snow before. I hung up and ran outside bare feet in my pajamas and let the flakes cover my face, hands, my whole body. Looking up, the sky seemed full of those alien objects coming down in millions, billions. There was barely any wind and the world looked incredibly serene and peaceful.

Syracuse was known to get the highest precipitation (translation: snow) in New York state. And so, I saw more snow in my 2.5 years in Syracuse than any time afterwards. Still, I can never forget that first snow!

Joshi and Koshy

Just nine days after I landed in Syracuse, I attended a free dinner organized for all international students at a private home on Ostrom Avenue – hosted by Dr. TE and Indira Koshy. Dr. Koshy was an evangelical chaplain at Syracuse University and Mrs. Koshy was a physician in the university health center. Vikas came along and I met several other new students like me who had come from all over the world. I met a girl called “Misha” from Hungary, who – poor girl – had to bear with the unnecessary knowledge of what her name meant in Marathi!

The dinner party was certainly a great idea, for it brought all of us together giving us a sense of community. Later on, I met Dr. Koshy quite often and got to know him very well. He took great pride in his work of helping international students – work that he had started right after his own student days at Syracuse years ago. Going to Hendrick’s Chapel for free coffee became a daily ritual for me. Some of my Indian friends warned me that Dr. Koshy might try to convert me to Christianity. I found that suggestion quite ridiculous and continued my association with Dr. Koshy and company throughout my stay in Syracuse. He was always very friendly and helpful and never brought up religion in our discussions even if he might have secretly hoped that I might show greater interest in the chapel’s activities.

Host family

Vikas highly recommended the University's host family program, so I decided to give it a try. The program basically connected individual foreign students with local American families. I was hooked up with Leslie and Ann Moyer-Grice, a wonderful, friendly couple that lived in Pennellville, a small town about 30 miles north of Syracuse. We started off with a dinner at their house which went quite well, and I thoroughly enjoyed the visit to their country home. (I later wrote a fictional story about this visit titled "*Turkey Masala*".) When it came to my turn to treat them to some Indian food, I went into panic. I was neither good at cooking nor was I sure what kind of food was best suited to the American taste. Vikas came to my rescue by cooking a number of dishes that Ann and Leslie seemed to at least be able to gulp down without any untoward incident. I had several meetings with the host family later on and I even exchanged letters with them for some time after leaving Syracuse.

My first love

After two semesters of research assistantship, I was able to save a respectable sum of money (as the standard of graduate students in US goes!). When I toyed with various shopping ideas, a thought came to my mind – why not purchase a bicycle which would help me get around the campus? My middle-class upbringing allowed my imagination to go only that far. Our friend from Delhi, Sumer Gupta, who first bought a car before even an omelet pan, said to me in disgust, "सायकल क्या खरीदता है? गाडी ले ले या!" (*Bicycle? What nonsense! Get a car man!*) Sumer was so good with cars, he used to buy wrecks at throw-away prices, put them back in order and then sell them for a profit! My superficial knowledge of cars was limited to ambassadors and fiats – the only cars seen in India those days – but Sumer routinely discussed features of strange

models such as Volkswagen Scirocco and Nissan Stanza! Sumer went on to do an MBA from Baruch College in NYC, but I think he could have been a highly successful car dealer.

Sumer had certainly sowed the seed of temptation in my mind which took hold quite rapidly. This new proposal was so dramatic and wonderful that my heart fell in love with it. So, instead of a bicycle I ended up buying a used 1978 Toyota Corolla. My behavior after that purchase was no different than that of bewitched Romeo. It was a beautiful compact car with perfect upholstery, flawless yellow paint, and a nice sporty shape. I knew driving by then (I had started taking lessons from Vikas soon after the idea of buying a car had intoxicated me completely) and had a driver's license too. And so, right after I got the keys in my hands, I drove around the campus, proudly showcasing my new love. Hours passed, but I had no thought of stopping. But, of course, the car did. It suddenly stopped, just a short distance from my apartment. I was on a smaller road, so there was no problem in terms of blocking the traffic or attracting a cop's attention. But I was in panic anyway, and I started turning the key repeatedly trying to bring the engine back to life. After 15 minutes of failed attempts, I was stricken with grief. I summoned Sumer for help. He, being a true-blue car lover, rushed to the spot and within a few seconds of glancing at various gauges, hissed at me, "*You idiot! You need to fill gas in the thing, man! It doesn't run on air!*"

The car had run out of fuel! I was surprised at my stupidity, but at the same time I was tremendously relieved to know that there was nothing wrong with my beloved.

Driving became my favorite activity, and I was happy to hop in behind the steering wheel to serve any kind of request from my friends – be it doing groceries, picking up someone at the airport,

or simply pleasure-riding. Driving in and around Syracuse, with its spacious roads and highways, beautiful byways like East Genesee and Meadowbrook Drive, and scenic routes like Randall Road, was pure joy.

The Rochester connection

Rochester is about 80 miles west of Syracuse and about halfway to the famous Niagara Falls. In those days, Rochester had a thriving Marathi community and Vikas was already connected with some of the prominent members such as Yashwantrao Kanitkar. Soon after my arrival in Syracuse, Vikas took me to Rochester and introduced me to these wonderful people. The Kanitkars were a progressive family with interest in music, theatre, as well as in contributing to development work back in India. Yashwantrao was a cofounder of the 'Maharashtra Foundation' which funded development projects in Maharashtra, and Vikas worked as their Area Coordinator for the upstate New York region.

Music was a major passion for the Rochester community, and we often sat together playing music. That's where I met Parag Sadhale, an amazing harmonium player, who soon became a close friend. Parag was pursuing a Ph.D. in Biology at the University of Rochester. He always had some classical or semi-classical music playing on his car audio. Besides accompanying other artists on harmonium, he occasionally sang as well, and I loved his rich, deep voice. I fell in love with the Marathi song बगळ्यांची माळ फुले only after I listened to Parag's rendition of it. Parag was gifted and intelligent and yet had a pure, innocent heart and his uninhibited laugh at our silliest of jokes still rings in my head.

I also met Vrushali Gokhale, a rather shy high-school senior who had grown up in Rochester. Her dad played the Tabla. And then

of course there was Rati, a ravishing but enigmatic and elusive beauty, who became a perennial source of attraction and wonder for us eligible bachelors.

Weekend trips to Rochester became a standard routine for us, and through them we formed close friendships with all these people. Vikas once participated in a Marathi play for the Rochester Marathi Mandal in which his role was that of a charming guy pursued by a crowd of female fans – a role which I daresay fit him quite naturally.

The road to Rochester was primarily a 75-mile stretch of Highway 90 whose median strip (space that separates opposite lanes of the highway) consisted mostly of a wide, shallow ditch.

Once, Vikas and I were on our way to Rochester, and Vikas was at the wheel. He was cruising at more than 75 mph – way above the speed limit of 60. We were dangerously high on adrenaline and were whistling along, not particularly afraid of anything or anyone. We were, of course, scanning the landscape ahead of us looking out for cops, but there were none in sight. We concluded that they were all off in the Adirondacks enjoying the good weather. Just when I was voicing this exact thought to Vikas, I noticed an ordinary-looking large pale green American car standing in the low median between the two parts of the highway. I pointed it out to Vikas and said, "*Look, some fool is stuck in the ditch!*" And Vikas continued cruising at 80 mph. Soon after, when I turned around to glance at the road behind, I noticed a new object on the road approaching us. The guy who we thought was stuck in the ditch was quickly cutting the gap between his car and ours! And he even had a flashing blue light on his rooftop! Uh oh! So, it was actually a cop waiting for his prey. We had no choice but to slow down immediately and stop the car on the shoulder.

Within seconds, a tall and smart-looking cop in dark glasses walked over to us, bent over at the driver's window, and said, "*In a hurry, guys?*" We offered some meaningless explanation. The cop, whether because he bought our story, or because he was in a good holiday mood, just gave us a warning, and let us go without imposing any fine.

Another time, once again Vikas and I were driving to Rochester and I was driving in the fast lane, when we saw an odd-shaped car that looked like a beat-up station wagon. It was moving quite slowly and was swaying slightly as if its driver was dozing off. I said to Vikas, "*Let us give these guys a wake-up nudge!*" So, when I was right next to it, I swerved slightly to the right, coming a little too close to this wagon. Then I proceeded on my way at a high speed. When I glanced in the rearview mirror, I noticed that the poor wagon had taken the nudge rather too seriously. They had gone off the highway altogether and ended up in the shallow ditch on the right side! Fortunately, there didn't appear to be any damage and I saw them again return to the highway and continue moving in a wobbly fashion.

Thousand Islands

One summer weekend, a proposal came up to make a trip to Thousand Islands, a scenic spot north of Syracuse. The plan was for the Rochester gang to drive early morning to Syracuse and then for the Syracuse gang to join them and drive together to Thousand Islands. Vrushali and Parag and their respective parents drove in Vrushali's large family station wagon and reached Syracuse by 8 am or so. In those days, there were no cell phones and of course no way to Google your way to a destination. Generally, people drove to an approximate close-by location and called from payphones to hone in on the exact destination. That's

what Parag and Vrushali did and called our number to which there was no human answer. There was the voice mail, where they left a confused message, wondering aloud where the hell we were. It so happened that that particular night, I was at a friend's place, and Vikas himself was away somewhere, hoping that I would be at home. As a result, there was no one to receive the Rochester folks and poor guys just roamed around from street to street hoping to magically see a familiar face. Which they surprisingly did – when they happened to drive in front of Seema and Tanuja's house and one of them happened to be out in the front. I am sure the seniors (Vrushali's and Parag's parents) were fuming with anger by then, but somehow, they managed to continue smiling at the apparent "absent-mindedness" of the youngsters. Vikas and I joined the ladies soon after and I offered to cook breakfast for the visitors, which consisted of a huge panful of scrambled eggs. That too they gulped down graciously praising my substantial cooking expertise.

The insult suffered by the Rochester folks so far should have been quite enough. But it was not to be. When we were all ready to embark on our journey to Thousand Islands, we exchanged our cars. That is, we – meaning the youngsters – took the nice, comfortable station wagon and gave Vikas's Dodge Aries to the seniors, with Vrushali's dad at the steering wheel. There certainly wasn't any malice intended in this exchange. We had happily forgotten that the Aries had a few unique features that would cause consternation to the seniors. For us – Vikas, Seema, Tanuja, Parag, Vrushali and I – the ride in the wagon was super. We drove off chatting and singing in that comfortable, music-enabled, air-conditioned, smooth-running car. We had a wonderful ride to Thousand Islands. In the adrenaline rush of the trip, we hadn't given proper directions of Thousand Islands to the other car, and

the poor fellows went one exit too far and had to find their way back.

Upon reaching Thousand Islands, a profusely sweating Mr. Gokhale approached us and exclaimed, “*Looks like the Aries does not have air conditioning!*” Oops! The Aries not only had no air-conditioning, its heater was always ON! There was no way to turn it off. The poor fellows had driven 100 or so miles on that hot summer day without AC and with the heater blasting hot air! We felt utterly ashamed to have caused such discomfort to Vrushali’s family. They had brought along some amazing lunch for all of us, which we then proceeded to devour quite shamelessly.

After returning to Syracuse, we tried to make up for all the injuries of the day by cooking a delicious dinner for our guests. But, sure enough, there were no future suggestions from them of joint trips with us anywhere!

The car accident

Vikas had once rented a car for his trip to New York. The trip was sponsored by a prospective employer that had invited Vikas for an interview. Since the bill was on the company, we allowed our imagination to wander on the various options available on the car, including insurance – we purchased 100% insurance coverage! In hindsight this bit of splurging turned out to be a prescient move.

We returned from New York very late in the night. The car had to be returned to the rental company before 830 am the next morning. We had no choice but to throw our warm blankets aside and get up at about 8. After splashing some water on our sleepy eyes, we got into the car with Vikas at the steering wheel. We got on Interstate 81 from the campus and started wobbling toward the destination – the car rental company’s office near the airport. Soon

after, we were cruising in the slow lane on one of the curvy sections of the highway that had a high cement wall as median. At the next entry to the highway (near Pearl Street) we noticed a huge silver American truck (it's called a rig) entering the expressway. Within seconds we were right next to it. Instead of settling on the merging lane the truck came in on to us. The rear wheels of the truck collided with the passenger side of our car! We started to literally toss between a rock (the median wall) and a hard place! Our car rammed against the cement wall and went belly up. Everything after that was a blur. The next thing we realized we were hanging upside down under our seatbelts and peering through a smashed windshield. The car had come to a standstill. We unbuckled our seatbelts and crawled out through the broken windshield. Vikas quickly came to me and checked if I was all right. Astonishingly, we were both able to walk to the shoulder of the highway with no apparent damage to our bodies. Just a few seconds later we saw another car come from behind and hit our mangled car. Within, what seemed like seconds, we saw a police car and an ambulance screeching to a halt near us. The truck had vanished.

The police officers quickly got out and one of them approached me and reviewed my physical condition all over and mumbled something about a bloody elbow. He asked me if I had a preference with regard to which hospital I should be taken to. I said I didn't. Quickly, the ambulance guys got into action – they put me on a stretcher (I didn't know why, I thought I was quite ok) and drove me to St. Joseph's Hospital. Vikas also was similarly taken to the University Hospital. In the brief glance before departing, we saw that our car was a total wreck sitting in the fast lane upside down in a pathetic condition.

It turned out that Vikas had had minor injuries on his feet and he was released after treatment the same day. I had smashed my right elbow because that's where the truck had hit our car. The doctor attending to me – Dr. Harold Weichert – was an elderly and kind physician. He spent a long time cleaning the wound; he said it was filled with all kinds of muck. He told me I was lucky that all the nerves were intact. Still, I had to park in the hospital for 7 days!

I think the only truly unpleasant part of my hospital stay was an embarrassing moment when one of my friends, Manisha Kher, visited me in the hospital. I was sitting in the hospital bed bare from waist up because the nurse was washing my wounds. Upon seeing me Manisha commented quite spontaneously (and with rather too much mirth), *“God! Abhay, you are so skinny!”*

My India trip (accompanied by Sanjay) was just days away and I was in no mood to cancel it. I did make the trip, but unfortunately, I had to go with a sling in my right arm and a lot of lost weight. All the nice fat I had put on through my first year and half in Syracuse in order to impress my parents was all but consumed during the hospital stay and I looked like a skeleton when I was discharged!

Since we had taken 100% insurance coverage, all our expenses – the ambulance ride, medical expenses, car damage, etc. were covered completely by insurance.

Junaid and Ashfaq: our Pakistani connection

Before coming to Syracuse, my view of our neighbors in South Asia was at best one of indifference. Joined at birth like Siamese twins India and Pakistan had spent all the years after independence fighting and hating each other. I had no idea I

would one day come face to face with real Pakistanis and the meeting would lead to a friendship. And what a beautiful friendship it turned out to be!

I first met Junaid on a campus bus carrying us to our department. Junaid was sitting and I was standing next to him. He offered to make room for me to sit next to him and that's how we got introduced. I don't have a clear recollection of how I first met Ashfaq, but my guess is he also was there on that bus.

Ashfaq and Junaid were both in the same degree program as I was and were also as new to Syracuse as I was. That common background certainly helped speed up our acquaintance. But soon our connection went far beyond that mundane cause. Vikas came in the picture soon and others like Neeraj, Kuldeep, and Manisha followed, and Seema and Tanuja joined a year later. In no time, we became close buddies and started exchanging tea invitations, rides to grocery stores and what not. I had a budding interest in ghazals and Ashfaq and Junaid opened a treasure trove of Pakistani music for me. My first encounter with the music of Mehdi Hassan, the ghazal maestro, took place in Syracuse, thanks to Ashfaq. To this day, I often call up Junaid when I am trying to figure out the meaning of some Urdu ghazal and he lays out for me not just the literal meaning but also the hidden beauty of those couplets.

One of the gifts of Syracuse was this realization that one could have a meaningful and enjoyable connection with anyone irrespective of their nationality or cultural background. It wasn't necessary to agree on everything, and I am sure we would have had several disagreements with Ashfaq-Junaid when it came to politics and religion. But all that mattered during those days of student life in a foreign country was the acknowledgement that

we all loved to build friendships. Vikas and I even went to their apartments during the month of Ramadan and prayed along with them. We enjoyed their amazing food for Iftar. Junaid, a bit older and wiser than us, had a very caring attitude towards all of us, and used to caution us about taking undue risks. But there was also a child in him that made him laugh uncontrollably at silly jokes and make spontaneous proposals such as racing cars on the highway or making surprise visits to Manisha's house for a cup of tea. We used to lovingly call Junaid "Junnu uncle" and he did not mind.

During the spring break of 1988, Junaid and I made a trip from Syracuse to Florida (and back) in a rented car along with Sanjay and Nazeem, and that road trip remains a wonderful memory – full of mischiefs, traffic violations and other adventures. Since we had to drive more than 2500 miles, we shared the driving duty among the four of us. Junaid was the most enthusiastic driver and he used to drive superfast – way above the speed limit. He said to us that he had a lucky charm and would never be caught by the police. Nevertheless, the rest of us got frightened whenever he went beyond 80 miles. So, we repeatedly begged him to slow down. But it was to no avail. At one point Junaid said, *"Ok guys. You want me to slow down? I will!"* And then he started driving excruciatingly slowly – something like 20 mph! This went on for quite a while until we all got exasperated. We finally said, *"All right! Drive anyway you like! Just don't get us killed!"*

Junaid indeed was not stopped by the cops even once in spite of all his mischief. Whereas I got myself into trouble when I had the strange inspiration to race with a cop who saw me speeding and was following me! It's a long story which I won't go into here. Fortunately, I only got a speeding ticket and not jail time.

I think among all of us, Junaid lived in Syracuse the longest – until he got his Ph.D. Our friendship is alive and well even today and it has matured like a seasoned pickle.

Ashfaq was from a different area of Pakistan – that’s the other thing I learned in Syracuse, that Pakistan had multiple provinces with a rich diversity of language and culture. Ashfaq was very sociable and had the amazing ability to charm anyone of any age. You were instantly drawn to him and felt you could trust him. Unsurprisingly, Ashfaq had the most women friends, including Indian, who always went to Ashfaq for advice. We tried to observe Ashfaq and learn the secret of this particular skill – which of course was impossible to learn because it was so innate to his personality and character. His excellent culinary skill probably helped too!

Ashfaq was ambitious, focused, and tenacious. Through all the fun and wealth of activities we all busied ourselves with in Syracuse, his eyes were set on a Ph.D., and he kept at it through his brief stint at Columbia University and then a longer and fruitful one at USC. He performed the amazing feat of driving all alone from New York City to Los Angeles in an old Nissan Sentra!

As luck might have it, I moved to Los Angeles about the same time to work at a company in Santa Monica. Initially I stayed in a miserable, expensive dwelling and Ashfaq soon rescued me from there by letting me be his roommate in a house near the USC campus. The house was owned by a 90-year-old Russian Jew who lived downstairs. Once this landlord allowed us to visit him in his living room where I saw the biggest English dictionary I have ever seen – a 10000-page thick monstrosity – mounted on a stand. Our third roommate was John, a movie student at USC’s famous George Lucas School. Raised in a small town in Colorado, John

was as talented as he was simple-minded and innocent. Ashfaq and I used to play a lot of mischief on poor John, but he always took it sportingly.

Once, while discussing the beauty of the Urdu language, I said, *“You know, there is no negative in Urdu. Every sentence is positive.”*

In obvious disbelief, John said, *“But how is that possible? How would you say, for instance, that ‘I am not going to the market’?”*

Without blinking, Ashfaq said, *“Oh you just say I am coming from the market!”*

As part of his graduate study, John made several short films – some no longer than a few minutes – and one of them was simply a long shot of Ashfaq’s huge Syracuse snow boots. For some reason, John found them quite fascinating.

Ashfaq not only provided me with a wonderful place to live in LA – I had a short 10-minute commute to my office in Santa Monica – but also allowed me to use his car. The one year I spent in Los Angeles is full of indelible memories thanks in large part to Ashfaq’s friendly generosity and freewheeling nature.

At my wedding in Urbana, Ashfaq undertook the massive task of carrying food for 100 guests from Chicago to Urbana in his car. Looking back, I am amazed at how much I took Ashfaq for granted and put him through so much trouble.

Close shaves with Sanjay and Milind

I first met Milind Abhyankar at Dr. Koshy’s party. Having brought up in UK, Milind had a wonderful British accent, although he also spoke Marathi quite well. He had a booming

voice and responded to my silly (and sometimes off-color) jokes with a hearty laugh. Milind had an unfortunate weakness in his vision and had to use special magnifying devices to be able to do his reading and work on the computer. But he showed no hint of insecurity or lack of confidence and carried on with normal activities and even adventures with full gusto. He became a part of our friend circle very soon.

Sanjay Jejurikar arrived in Syracuse in Spring 1987 and soon joined the Dan Pease research group. We thereafter worked together closely for the entire duration of our stay in Syracuse and became close friends. Before coming to Syracuse, Sanjay had had a background somewhat similar to mine. He had done his bachelor's degree at VJTI in Mumbai and had worked for a couple of years. He might have arrived the same time I did, except for a visa snafu, which delayed his arrival by a semester.

Before joining Dan's group, Sanjay had to endure a good part of the first semester working in the Schine Student Center doing menial work which would shape his character forever. Sanjay would later in his working life become highly successful, but the small amounts he earned cutting pizzas at Schine would retain a permanent special place in his heart.

Sanjay had a warm and helping nature and people flocked to him for all kinds of favors. He also was very conscientious about assignments and commitments. During the trip that he, Milind, and I undertook to Washington DC, Sanjay constantly worried about Dan's work (because we were still getting paid!) and even called Dan from a payphone once or twice to ensure there was no problem if we continued our trip. Dan of course was full of encouragement!

During the summer break of 1987, Sanjay, Milind, and I decided to do some sightseeing. People recommended various spots and we zeroed in on Washington D.C. I had my newly acquired companion – the yellow Toyota Corolla, which we decided to take on this trip. Upon reaching Washington D.C., we wanted to roam around and check out the heart of the city, the place where the big shots – the President, the Congressmen, etc. – played their political games and managed the affairs of the nation. There was no street parking available, which wasn't a surprise. So, we went for paid valet parking and went out for a long walk around the place. It was a beautiful summer evening, and we had a great time strolling along those world-famous roads.

After we had satisfied our curiosity about the White House and other government buildings, we went back to the parking lot and got into the car. It wasn't dark yet, so we drove around a bit longer, watching famous buildings and reading famous street names. Suddenly, I noticed that something was terribly wrong. The brake wasn't working! I panicked and shouted, "*Hey guys, the brake isn't working!*" At this time, I was cruising at a comfortable speed right on the famous Pennsylvania Avenue. Immediately I let the accelerator go, hoping that the car would slow down. At the same time, I continued pumping on the brake pedal, hoping desperately that the brake would miraculously come to life. But that didn't happen. Then Sanjay remembered that Sumer always shifted gears (in addition to pressing the brake pedal) while slowing down his car. Sanjay suggested this idea to me, and I immediately changed the transmission to first gear. The engine made a terrific noise, obviously complaining about the sudden change from fourth to first. But that trick worked, and the car came to a standstill within a few seconds as I glided it to the curb. No damage was done, no one was hurt, there was no police car or secret service in sight, and the faces sitting in the car were

regaining their color once again! We heaved a big sigh of relief because we were driving at 30/40 mph and might have easily rammed into some important politician!

After a bit of scrutiny, we quickly spotted the reason for the brake failure. The valet had put the handbrake on which I had not noticed because I never used the handbrake. Since the brake was on, the brake fluid had heated up and lost its viscosity. That's why the brakes had failed. In just about ten minutes, the fluid cooled down sufficiently and lo behold! The brakes were back in action. We drove on watching the famous buildings and streets of Washington DC as if nothing had happened.

Our Washington trip was a great success. On our way to Washington, we had halted in New York and other places to meet up with fellow graduate students, such as Atish Dabholkar in Princeton. But, on our way back to Syracuse we drove straight without any long breaks. I was in a groove with my driving. The beautiful scenic highways of upstate New York were so enticing that I never felt like stopping. Even the occasional construction/repair zones marked by glittering orange cones didn't deter me; I zig-zagged along the curvy detours without slowing down even a bit. The car was totally tuned to my style of driving; it appeared to sense my thoughts even before I pressed any controls.

I drove through the night on Highway 81 and as the dawn gave way to bright sunlight, we came near Cortland – the last city before Syracuse. My co-passenger Sanjay and the backseat passenger Milind were fast asleep by this time. My eyelids were heavy, and I had to occasionally bat them feverishly to stay awake. Driving through those bright reflective orange cones in the

night had had a delirious effect on me. I didn't think I would fall asleep. But I actually did!

The next thing I remember, I heard Milind yelling loudly "Oy, Oy, hey! Where are we going?" I jerked up from my sleep and immediately noticed chest-high grass all around us. Sanjay was awake too and was shouting incoherently. The car was still moving at a very slow speed. Just as I propped myself up to take control of the car it shuddered to a halt. We were in a field full of tall grass, and the sound of the highway wasn't too far. Without getting out of the car, I restarted the engine and slowly got the car back on the highway. I parked the car on the shoulder. All three of us jumped out and reviewed the situation. Apparently, after I had gone to sleep the car had slowly veered to the right. Since we were in the slow lane of the highway, the car had left the highway and driven through the ditch on to the vast green field that we had just seen a few minutes ago! We shuddered at the thought of what might have happened if instead the car had drifted to the left of the Highway. The oncoming traffic was getting heavier by the minute for the morning office commute; we would most certainly have hit one of the oncoming vehicles. We also marveled at our good fortune that we had slid gently down into a flat green field instead of jumping off a cliff or a bridge!

The three of us were quite all right and in fact fresh from the brief nap. We reviewed the damage to the car. Two tires had blown off – obviously due to all the thorns in the open field. But our amazing luck hadn't run out yet. We had two spare tires in the trunk! We promptly used our recently acquired skills of changing wheels and within minutes were on the way again! Cortland's first food exit was very close. We took it and laughed all the way to McDonald's for a hot cup of tea!

My namesake

We all like to believe that we are unique and so are our names. Any such ideas that I might have harbored about myself were punctured quite often. In my high school, there was another Abhay Joshi who was in my younger sister's class. Even our middle names were almost identical – they differed only by a point (बिंदू), literally! In Pune, while I did my engineering, there was another Abhay Joshi in my department.

After coming to Syracuse, I discovered that this other Abhay Joshi that I knew from engineering was doing his master's in NJIT. We connected soon and he started pestering me to help him transfer to Syracuse, since for some reason he felt Syracuse University was better than NJIT. It didn't work out unfortunately, but we exchanged visits and also did a memorable trip together to Atlantic City, also known as "the Las Vegas of the east coast".

This was during my trip with Sanjay and Milind to Washington DC. We visited Abhay Joshi at NJIT, and we decided to drive down to Atlantic City. For some reason which I don't remember now, Abhay decided to rent a car for this trip. It was a black Ford Escort and we drove to Atlantic City on a fine sunny morning. After enjoying our time at various casinos and after losing some money, we decided to start driving back to Jersey City. It was becoming dark, and Abhay realized that he could not turn on the headlights. We all put our collective IQs into the problem and still could not figure out how to turn those damn lights on! So, we decided to just drive slowly, feeling our way along the road. This was obviously a silly idea and at a particularly deserted junction in the city, lights suddenly blazed all around us and sirens started blaring. The cops had seen this suspicious black car moving slowly without lights and had pounced on us! A police officer approached the car cautiously and shone his bright flashlight on

all of us by turn and realized that we were not some dangerous gangsters but just a scared bunch of graduate students. When he understood our unique little problem, he just put his hand inside and turned a knob to put the headlights on! It was quite an embarrassing moment. He then asked, *“Is there anything else you would like to know about your car?”* and allowed us to go.

Confessions of a hacker

Anyone who has ever worked in the world of Unix and C knows what a beautiful universe it is. I certainly got totally intoxicated by the power Unix offered to a programmer. I felt a direct connection with the computer’s mind – if one can ever feel such a thing – while running various shell commands and other programs. I learnt mostly by making mistakes and discovered concepts and features quite accidentally while simply exploring. I suppose that is really the crux of the Unix universe – it is a wonderland that would be rendered dull and uninteresting by a map.

Inevitably this powerful world also inspires mischief. I misused my newfound knowledge and skills often, but fortunately, I was saved from punishment by circumstances and kind people. Here are just a few examples.

Once, Abhijit Chavan, one of our Marathi friends, who was sometimes paranoid about things, was working along with some of us in the computer lab. At one point, he rose and left his Unix terminal unlocked to go somewhere for a short time. Upon returning, he discovered to his horror that all his files were missing! He immediately called us for help, and I went to his terminal and ran various commands to confirm his suspicion. Poor guy started sweating very soon, which is when I “fixed” the problem by undoing my own mischief. When he had left his terminal unattended, I had used a shell command called “alias” to

render all his file-listing commands useless, thus creating the illusion that the files were gone, but in reality, they were all there, safe and sound.

In another instance, I once got my hands on the source code of the Unix “talk” command and figured out a way to modify its working. “Talk” was used in those days by everyone to do text chatting across the Internet. I modified my copy such that I was able to impersonate other people. As the folk tale of “the monkey with an axe” goes, this was a wrong toy in the wrong hands! I started playing mischief on people by having “talk” sessions with them while impersonating their friends or even foes. Once I “talked” with Tanuja as her advisor and questioned her “laziness in submitting the project”. Very soon, people discovered what was going on, and I shut down my project.

Stealing passwords is one of the biggest allures for all budding computer enthusiasts and I was no exception. I wrote programs that acted as trojan horses and stole passwords of people. But there was no malice intended; the purpose was never to misuse those passwords to access their accounts, but only to surprise them with my knowledge! In one hilarious instance, Ashfaq and I were chatting with some of his Pakistani friends and Ashfaq mentioned to them my “password-stealing” expertise. One of his friends immediately challenged me to steal his password. I said I could do it right then and there. I asked for a few minutes to do my “coding” after which this friend ran a Unix command called “rlogin” to remotely connect to the campus computer. This command prompted him to enter his password and he merrily went about typing it. We all started laughing because we could all see his password (which was a girl’s name) in plain text! All I had done in those few minutes was to plant my own “rlogin” script which he had then run. This guy then asked me how I had

managed to lure him into this trap. I shared this insight with him: most people look at the keyboard instead of the screen while typing their passwords!

Nazeem Noordeen

As the Spring semester of 1987 wore on, the wintry weather gave way to the thaw of spring and a few weeks later summer started lurking around the corner. The weather became considerably pleasant and conducive to outdoor activities. Sanjay and I decided to try our hand at tennis. We somehow got hold of a racquet and a ball and headed to a tennis court near our Euclid Avenue office. Since we had only one racquet we started playing like cricket – one of us throwing the ball and the other hitting it back. Nazeem happened to be passing by at that time, and watching us he couldn't help hollering, *"Hey guys, do you need another racquet?"*

That was my first encounter with Nazeem. That first line of his brought out two salient qualities: his love for tennis and his passion for helping.

In the summer of 1987, the three of us became close friends and it turned out to be one of the most fun-filled summers ever. In addition to getting us an additional racquet, Nazeem gave us tennis lessons. Later he also gave us swimming lessons. It practically became a routine for us to work a little bit in Room 357 of Link Hall – a room where we worked for our respective professors – and then proceed to play tennis or go swimming. We usually ended the day by going to Nazeem's apartment for dinner which invariably consisted of fresh orange juice and a delicious rice dish that later came to be called "Nazeem pulav".

Nazeem was Indian by birth, but after spending his childhood in India, he had migrated to Switzerland to pursue his schooling. He

then obtained his bachelor's degree at Penn State University. Nazeem exhibited a wonderful mix of Indian and Western cultures. He had a brilliant brain behind his bright eyes and was acing all courses at Syracuse. What struck me most was how cool he was and how comfortable he was with himself. In him I saw the first real demonstration of the American idiom "cool dude".

Due to his Swiss schooling and US undergraduate experience, Nazeem was certainly much more polished and sophisticated compared to us (I was only slightly better than a villager in comparison). It is entirely to Nazeem's credit that he still took a liking for us and accepted our hand of friendship. Come Fall of 1987, he even moved in with Sanjay and Milind into an apartment, while I moved in with Vikas and Sandeep Pande just a floor below in the same building. It was thus inevitable that Nazeem became an honorable and beloved member of our extended friend circle. He jelled with us all so beautifully. Later, he joined Sanjay, Junaid and me in an audacious and adventurous road trip to Orlando, Florida.

Nazeem became a role model for me, because I was trying to figure out how to reconcile my Indian-ness with my desire to find a footing in the western world. Nazeem just seemed a perfect example of how one could bridge the two disparate worlds. He was as comfortable roaming around with us true-blue (or brown?) Indians, as he was going up the stage to assist Bill O'Farrell – a white American professor who taught CS 623. On the vexing question of accent, he presented the simple idea that *"You just need to pronounce words correctly and not worry about accent."* When I heard that simple idea it felt as if a huge burden was off my mind.

Nazeem was a brilliant programmer. Once I took a programming lab course and picked LISP as my language of choice and decided

to implement the game of Mastermind for my final project. Nazeem knew LISP and he became my advisor. I remember that while I was struggling to complete my project, he had already written up a fully working version of mastermind although he was not even taking this course. (I am sure I ended up pilfering some of his code!)

Behind his simplicity and cool nature, Nazeem was a focused guy. I never saw him wasting time or giving in to indulgences of any kind. He was up and ready by 8 every morning after which he would proceed to the campus for work. His heart was set on “chip design” and that’s where he headed after completing his master’s, to Hewlett Packard in Bay Area.

Some people affect you every time you meet them. Nazeem continues to be one such person, and he is now joined by Paula whom he met soon after joining HP. Nazeem and Paula got married in September 1993 in a beautiful park in Bay Area and Nazeem honored me by asking me to be his “best man”. It was my first opportunity to be such an intimate part of a western-style wedding.

In comparison, I offered Nazeem a pretty lowly job at my own wedding – of the official photographer. He had a sore neck due to a long flight and inadequate sleep the previous day, but he did his job magnificently – going around the hall taking pictures tirelessly. He even developed all the film rolls at his own cost and mailed a stack of beautiful large size photo prints to me a week or two later.

Every time I visit Nazeem and Paula, I return from their house affected by their kindness, friendship and vivacity. Even the normally stressful experiences of parenting seem to have only

sharpened their good qualities. During one of my visits, I got to meet their puppy Banji. It seemed to me that Banji knew how lucky he was to be a part of that wonderful household and he lost no opportunity – literally – to dance to Nazeem’s tune and beat. Nazeem even played one-on-one soccer with Banji and their duel was a show to watch. I have never seen a dog so much in tune with his master.

Besides designing server chips Nazeem continues to pursue his passion for tennis, and I hear that he routinely puts to shame players much younger than him. Nazeem is one of the few true “Zen” people I have been lucky to meet.

Seema and Tanuja

People often use the “concentric circles” model to describe their various relationships – the innermost circle is the most intimate one, and then there are outer circles with differing levels of closeness.

I prefer the Venn diagram model: one in which the circles do exist, but they could be entirely separate and disjoint, or they might overlap. How close or intimate each circle is remains independent of other circles.

Undoubtedly one of my most beautiful friend circles in Syracuse contained the four of us: Seema and Tanuja and Vikas and I.

Seema arrived in Syracuse in Fall 1987, a full year after I had arrived. She actually was not a Syracuse University student: she had taken up Landscape Architecture at the SUNY ESF campus that was adjacent to (or within) the Syracuse University campus. Seema had done architecture in Mumbai and was extremely talented with creative drawing, painting, that sort of stuff. She

had an artist's eye: she would move a piece of furniture a bit or change the orientation of a photo-frame slightly, and suddenly the room would start looking much more pleasing.

Tanuja arrived soon after, in Spring 1988. She was from IIT Bombay, and she already knew Vikas from undergraduate days. One day, as I was riding the campus bus from Roney Lane to Link Hall, Ashfaq introduced me to Tanuja who happened to be standing next to him wearing a dark winter jacket. He said, "*AB, here is someone who speaks your language!*" As it turned out, Tanuja also happened to be in the ECE department, and so, we all happily walked together to the department.

Tanuja initially stayed on Walnut Avenue right across from the International Students Office. She stayed with two other Indian girls named Sridevi and Malini. We used to jokingly say that 605 Walnut was rented by three famous Indian actresses.

I later found out that I might have met Tanuja sooner if I had not avoided joining a dinner party that Vikas had arranged at our *own* apartment to welcome a couple of Marathi newcomers! In my rather roguish attitude of "*Oh, they are Vikas's friends, not mine!*" I had declined participation.

Fortunately, that serious lapse on my part did not matter and very soon the four of us became buddies. Our common Marathi heritage was certainly one factor. My owning a car was another. As mentioned previously, I was obsessed with driving and was happy to drive anyone to anywhere. Seema and Tanuja put my enthusiasm to good use by having me ferry them to grocery shops and to public laundry facilities. I remember driving Seema a couple of times to meet a "Kelkar" friend of hers who lived quite far from the campus in some remote village. Without Google

maps and cell phones, it was quite an adventure to track down that dark, remote house. It was also curious to meet a Marathi fellow who drove trucks in America.

The four of us soon started spending a lot of time together. Seema and Tanuja often cooked and invited us over. Sometimes Vikas and I helped out in small things like cutting onions and tomatoes and operating the microwave. Sometimes we went out to Marshall Street and ate Falafel sandwich at King David's or pizza at Acropolis. We would also go for hikes and picnics to nearby scenic spots. Walking around the beautiful campus watching the Spring bloom or the Fall colors was our favorite pastime. One semester, I was auditing a couple of courses at the School of Management and had to walk some distance from Link Hall to attend the lectures. If Seema and/or Tanuja spotted me on the way, they were easily able to persuade me to forget about the lecture and go to Hendrick's Chapel instead for coffee!

During winter days when the rolling landscape was dulled by grey skies and brown housetops became barely visible beneath white snow, we busied ourselves with indoor activities like chatting, munching chips, laughing, and singing songs. Not versed with skating or skiing, we contented ourselves with sliding down snowy slopes in plastic boards or bags. Or we took "boat rides" by driving our Corolla through small roads filled with snow. If nothing else, we would simply drive to Denny's for late-night coffee and endless chatting.

Student life in Syracuse

We were all graduate students living thousands of miles away from our homes. Letters took anywhere from 20 to 30 days to make a round trip. Phone calls were so expensive, our phone bill was always the largest chunk of our monthly expense. We

constantly looked for cheaper (sometimes hacky) ways to make calls. I remember once the long-distance service of AT&T broke down and it became clear that one could make international calls for free from any payphone. Immediately there were long lines of international students at payphones around the campus making calls to friends and foes alike!

Not all of us had cushy scholarships or assistantships either. Some of us had to get started by washing dishes in the cafeteria or sorting books at the library or manning security booths at late night. Financial anxiety had to be managed while ensuring good grades.

In such an environment, friends were all we had in Syracuse. It was natural for us to depend on each other for support, to seek help and to help out, to share food and music, to exchange life stories and disclose future plans, and in the process form close friendships.

The essence of Syracuse

Although I can safely claim that my life has in general been happy and devoid of traumatic or painful periods, Syracuse would still count for me as the most beautiful period. For one, Syracuse helped me completely and forever get rid of any complexes I had regarding my career and my professional capabilities. I fell in love with Computer Science and have never looked back or had second thoughts. Syracuse made me confident of my place in the world's business.

Syracuse also broadened my mental and cultural horizons dramatically. Before Syracuse, I had an incipient feeling all along that the world was a vast place. But how big and how diverse and how mysterious I got a glimpse in Syracuse. As a teenager I was

exposed to western values thanks to my school principal Sam Mahableshwerwalla. But my belief system was largely theoretical and unverified. Syracuse cemented some of my beliefs and freed me from some of the dubious ones. I was lucky to meet lots of Americans who were kind, progressive and friendly. My interactions with them were very positive and nourishing.

Most importantly though, Syracuse gave me so many friendships – with people that were smart, intelligent, talented and with diverse cultural backgrounds. Ashfaq, Junaid, Neeraj, Seema, Tanuja, Sanjay, Nazeem, Kuldeep, Madhuri, Dilip, Milind, Sandeep, Shubhangi, ... the list just goes on. These friendships were not just connections formed for some common purpose such as taking a course together, doing a project, or working for some professor. They went far beyond the cause-and-effect principle. I felt a bond with many of them that was incredibly beautiful and at times unbearably intense.

Many of the people I met or knew of at Syracuse went on to do great things in life. For example, Rajesh Subramaniam became the CEO of FedEx. Sanjay Jejurikar joined Microsoft and quickly rose to be a General Manager in the Windows NT group. Most notably though, my own roommate Sandeep Pandey, whose staple diet at Syracuse used to be Ramen noodles, went to Berkeley for his Ph.D. and while there, founded the famous NGO “Asha for Education”. He later moved to India and dedicated all his time and effort to social work. He was awarded the prestigious Magsaysay Award in 2002 for emergent community leadership.

Vikas Joshi

Vikas was definitely both a crucial factor and a catalyst in all the beautiful interpersonal chemistry that I experienced in Syracuse. He not only had the capacity to build such beautiful bonds for

himself, but also knew how to inspire less capable people like me for such adventures. Anything seemed possible in Vikas's company. Everything appeared beautiful in his company. It was like being an ordinary bird and getting to fly with a Swan. I am sure I got a bit cocky too at times as a result of the inflated sense of myself in Vikas's company. One rather embarrassing example of this comes to mind.

After my arrival in Syracuse, Vikas took me around to meet all the important people. He took me to the ECE department office where I met Barbara Hazard, secretary of the department chair. Upon being introduced I made this completely unnecessary observation: "*You don't look like a hazard at all!*" Fortunately, Barbara did not understand my accent and I was saved from a poor first impression.

Vikas was a natural leader, and he constantly thought of interesting artistic, intellectual projects in which he could rally around like-minded folks and pursue challenging or fun activities. He had a particular attraction for creative pursuits (and for people who showed promise in them) such as designing, painting, composing, and constructing. He got uneasy with just playing old tunes – literally and metaphorically. He once suggested the idea of writing a play about students like us who were constantly torn between conflicting choices: whether to hang on in the new world by taking up jobs or to return to their homelands after studies. Junaid even gave this play the fitting title "*Last Exit Before Toll*".

Whether it was taking up excursions with friends to places like Thousand Islands, doing music jams with visiting artist friends, cooking special dishes for friends or visitors, or just going for late-night drives and having coffee at Denny's, Vikas was always the instigator and an indispensable participant.

It was largely because of inspiration from Vikas that I later attempted to start my own independent consulting. Meeting Vikas has continued for me to be a “recharge time” – a time when I shake out of my laziness and small thinking and get inspired to think big, learn new things and take up challenging work. Vikas continued to visit me and keep an eye on me, like a big brother, wherever I went – first Chicago, then Los Angeles, then back in Chicago, Urbana-Champaign, and finally Seattle.

Vikas’s involvement in and contribution to my life has been far greater than what I have tried to demonstrate in the passages above. Vikas did everything with utmost sincerity and intensity: that was his hallmark. Once he accepted a person or a situation as his own, he applied all his capabilities and willpower to contribute to that person’s progress and happiness or turn that situation into a most beautiful one. He did not know how to be stingy, how to hold back. Nature has endowed him with amazing qualities: qualities that I have not seen all together in any single person!

Setting of the Orange sun

As with everything in life, our days in Syracuse, unfortunately, were finite in number. During 1988, people from my friend circle started finishing their degree programs and moving out for jobs or other pursuits. It was hard to leave Syracuse but also exciting in a way because we all felt ready and eager to take on the world. Vikas was impatient to leave academia and get into the real world. He had interest in renewable energy and was working with a professor who had an independent lab focused on energy research. Vikas already had one of his master’s degrees in his pocket (I forget which one exactly, Mechanical Engineering or CS) and needed to write a thesis to bag the other one. At one point, he

got exasperated with the passing time and never-ending thesis work and considered leaving the University with just one master's degree. I encouraged him to finish since he was so close, and he eventually mustered his willpower to write a top-notch thesis and finish his dual master's program.

Vikas then took up a job with Niagara Mohawk, the main utility company of upstate New York. He had a used American car, a large Dodge Aries, for his daily commute. The car was a constant headache though – and a joke among us – and was ridden with problems and breakdowns. The most annoying thing with the Aries was its reverse gear – it was hard to locate in the first place and made an irritating sound when engaged. Vikas endured the Dodge Aries with utmost patience and fortitude, although it cost him a lot of wasted time in addition to a substantial chunk of his salary.

All the while Vikas worked at Niagara Mohawk, his heart was beckoning him to India. In February 1989, he packed his bags and bade goodbye to Niagara Mohawk, to Syracuse, and to America. In the meantime, I had myself left Syracuse for Chicago for my first job, at Lachman Associates. Seema had moved to Charleston for her first job in landscape architecture. Tanuja would soon move to Urbana for her Ph.D. Most of our friends had dispersed to their new jobs or new universities for their Ph.Ds.

The Syracuse chapter was finally over, and it became a beautiful and unforgettable memory.

*Written by: Abhay B. Joshi (abjoshi@yahoo.com)
Last updated: 1 October 2023*

Photos

Parag, the Bhel-maker



Vikas entertaining visitors from India:



Ashfaq pointing at the real Niagara Falls



The famous Link Hall



Kitchen dance



Vikas's favorite activity: cleaning up



Accident news in local newspaper:

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Syracuse
Herald-Journal
(Metro Ed)
12/11/87



Police & courts

Fire traps two men

By Gary Gerew
Staff Writer

Two people had to be rescued by ladder Thursday after climbing out on a ledge to escape a fire outside their Oakwood Avenue apartment.

William Burger, 67, and his son, William Burger, Jr., 34, were both standing on the ledge of their second-floor apartment when firefighters arrived at 506 Oakwood Ave. about 3 a.m.

Both men were brought down ladders. Neither was injured. Roy DeRoo, his wife, Pamela, and their four children who lived in a first-floor apartment escaped the fire unassisted. But firefighters said they had to go inside to bring out the family's three small dogs.

Fire damage was confined to the second floor, but there was smoke and water damage to the DeRoos' apartment and the King's Market on the ground floor of the building.

The building, which also was the scene of a fire last year, is owned by Ghaleb Alnwairan of 307 Rosemont Drive.

Crashes block I-81

Traffic on the northbound lanes

of Interstate 81 near Pearl Street was stopped for 45 minutes Thursday morning after four vehicles were involved in a series of accidents.

Syracuse police Officer Larry Gardiner said the tie-up began about 8:15 a.m. when a silver tractor trailer changed lanes. The truck's rear wheels collided with the front of a car driven by Vikas Joshi and caused the car to strike the median of the highway and overturn.

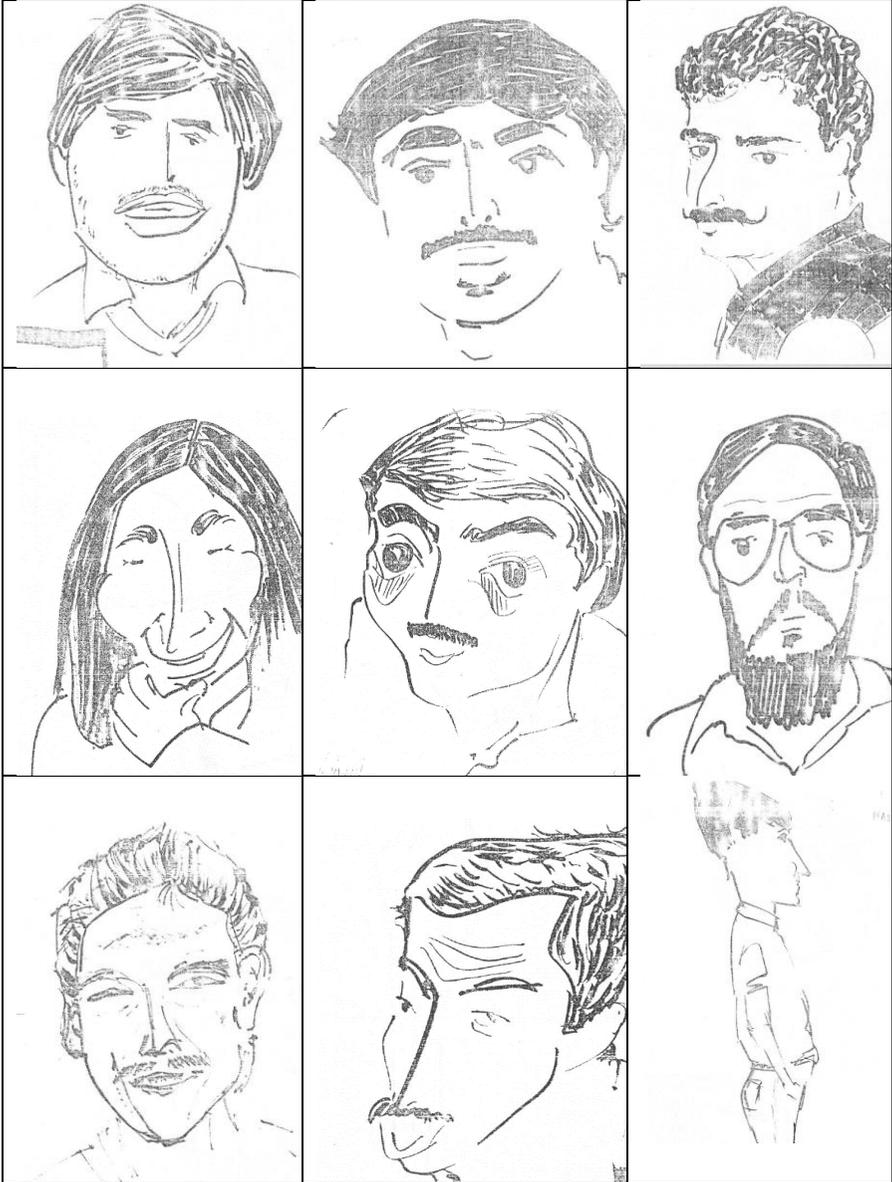
Joshi, of 107 Rolling Lane, escaped with minor injuries and was taken to University Hospital for examination. His brother, Abhay Joshi, also suffered minor injuries and was transported to St. Joseph's Hospital.

The truck driver didn't stop, police said.

That accident slowed down traffic, police said, but seconds later traffic on I-81 had to be completely rerouted to Interstate 690 for nearly 45 minutes when a car driven by Glenda McClary, 28, of 118 W. Newell St. hit the overturned Joshi car.

McClary's car was then struck by a fourth vehicle, which also fled the scene, police said.

Caricatures (courtesy Seema):



A classroom mischief:

