

The Journeyman's Dream

by Farid Quraishi

My father came as an immigrant to the United States of America in the 1960's from India, then a developing nation. I cannot begin to imagine the inundation of new ideas and fundamental cultural differences that my father experienced entering this country at such a dynamic period of time. He had come from a respectable and large family in northern India where the family owned land and cultivated mangoes for a living. My father, Mazhar Hasan Quraishi, came into this world on a woven hemp cot that had been the same birthplace as his young mother's. The ancestral village probably looks very much the same today as it did in 1943 when my father was born with young children chasing each other barefoot over the rich red earth to play near the banks of the slow moving Betha River. The fields are filled with bright yellow mustard plants and sweet peas that attract thousands of butterflies to pollinate the flowers in the growing season. During the hottest time of the year in the dry season, the mango trees provide shade to the small, sinewy villagers as they pass the day napping or weaving, waiting for the fierce sun to finally set and bring the cool winds of the night. Life is the most peaceful in the village, and I never met a villager who did not invite me into their adobe-walled house for a glass of rich tea as they studied my face and wondered how this white-skinned man sitting before them was the kin of the landlord's son. But I was welcomed with open arms, and I loved them immensely.

Before my father came to the United States, his parents had to remember when he was born and at what time of year based on the crop rotation because his birthday was never recorded. My father left India when he was 18 years old on the advice of his father, Jamil Hasan Quraishi, who believed he foresaw religious oppression as the greatest obstacle to his children in the upcoming decades after the British relinquished power in 1947. He first went to Dhaka, in

what was then East Pakistan, then to Europe, and finally several years later my father arrived in Cambridge, Massachusetts, which is commonly known as the "People's Republic of Cambridge." America in the 1960s was an extremely dynamic place to be with the sexual revolution, the hippie movement, the Vietnam war protests, the Civil Rights movement, and an infatuation with Eastern culture influencing everything from music to religious faith. Coming from a village in India where tradition was unchanged and the pace of life was slow, my father must have been completely dumbfounded by the changes within American society that were taking place. Unfortunately, I feel like the 1960s were a time when native born Americans began to be comfortable with their own differences, not necessarily comfortable with the differences others brought to their country, particularly brown-skinned people.

I look back at old photographs that old friends took of my father when he first arrived and see a stunningly handsome, enthusiastic, and joyful man who seems undaunted by the challenges a new immigrant faces when first arriving in America, such as language mastery and work. But he worked tirelessly to build a life for himself here and used his intelligence, sharp wit, and unequalled perseverance to carve a piece for himself. He worked for one of the most prosperous computer companies during a time when the IT industry was just beginning to bud and married an Englishwoman of his own choosing, the first wedding in his family's history that was not arranged. My father made dynamic changes in his family, and he was a pioneer in many aspects.

But when his company began losing profit and began to make cutbacks, my father was among the first to be laid off despite his respectable rank within the company. I think about how unfair the company had been to my father. He was awarded promotions for his hard, precise work, and the company even moved our family temporarily to Canada so that he could continue with excellence in a region in need of a man with his skill. But when the company faced hard

times, the first person to whom it turned to take the hit was my father, and I believe that he never recovered from such a low blow. From his point of view, his color, his immigrant background, and his accent were the attributes the company chose to target in their initial decimation of the workforce. Still today, my father has not shed the stigma that has followed him since his premature departure from the company. But my father's case was foreshadowing for the trend to follow in corporate policy with regards to attitudes towards Indians. Highly trained young men and women come to America every year with H1 work visas and high expectations to reap the monetary rewards of our industrialized society, but they are ultimately exploited by the system that they wish to be part of. Underpaid, overworked, and discriminated. The story could not be more familiar for the thousands that enthusiastically come to America with the hopes to be productive workers, only to be deprived by the racism within the system. It happened to my father, and it continues to happen every day for immigrants who have hope in America.

The concept of the American Dream has been created to broadly convey the American ideal that if anybody sets their heart to a goal and works for that goal with perseverance and skill, then they will ultimately achieve it because America provides for those who sacrifice for their dreams. Unfortunately, this ideal does not accommodate for the reality that there are flaws with American-style capitalism. The American Dream has no notion that there may be something within the system that is not working or that certain individuals, like white Anglo-Saxon males, have advantages over others. According to the American Dream, the cause of self-promotion as well as self-demise lies within the individual, and there is no sympathy for those who have been disenfranchised by society. My father always tells me that there are three stages when something new is brought into society. First people will ridicule it, then they will violently reject it, and finally they will come to accept it as their own. My father arrived in America in what could be

seen as the first stage of this philosophy, and the time that we are living in now could easily represent the second stage, where violence has come to replace subtle discrimination. As for the American Dream, what we are seeing is an illusion, like a shadow of success, and no matter how hard one tries to catch that shadow, the shadow escapes through one's fingers like fine sand. In this way, the American Dream is flawed.

Back in India in the village, the sun begins to descend below the horizon, and the breeze gradually picks up dried leaves and empty packets of tobacco, blowing them across the red earth. I sit in the cemetery and listen to the breeze blow through the tall trees and gaze at the cracked earth mounds where my ancestors have been buried many generations back. I feel utter tranquility as the night blankets the sky and the stars emerge, untainted by any light pollution from electric bulbs or city lights. There is no noise. I begin to cry quietly, letting my tears penetrate the rich earth below my feet, and I think about the purpose of life and why we are compelled to be on a path of constant progress in this century. The people in this village have been living largely without change for hundreds of years, and yet there was something out there that made my father want to seek more. But did he gain a better life in America, or did he lose a way of life born to him in India? If he had stayed in India, he would have always had his mango groves and ancestral village. He would have had his family to love and care for him, his ancestors to be proud of, and his crops to worry about. But sitting in that cemetery, I realized that my father must have been seeking something different than what his ancestors wanted. He did not want to live in the same house as his great grandfather and eat the same crops that they had eaten their entire life. He did not want to marry a woman of his parents choosing who would have probably been from the next village. She would have cooked for him and cleaned for him and probably bore him many children. But he did not want that, and sitting in that cemetery I

could relate to my father but at the same time I was in paradox. Why go to America and begin a new life there giving up all that he could have had and end up with so little to show for his hard work? I began to understand that it was his hope for something different, something that might be better than what was already provided to him, that made him wish to go out and seek it for himself. His dream was not the American Dream but the Human Dream, and though he did not ultimately reach the goals he had aimed for, he did try with all his might, and life has not taken that dignity away from him. The problem with the American Dream is that it prophesizes success as the final result. The reality is that life does not always bless us with such guaranteed success, and sometimes we have no other option but to settle for second, third, or even last place. Dreams are very important, but one must remember that the inability to reach dreams does not necessarily translate as one is a failure either.