

You Can't Go Home: Thoughts On Returning to Canada

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Back home. That's where I am. And it's good. After I hug my family at the airport, the first thing I notice about Canada is the weather. It's raining and cloudy and cool. The sky has a temper. In these conditions, Indians would be huddled inside or around a fire wearing earmuffs and sweaters. Old mothers and mothers-in-law would be sitting in living rooms together wrapped in blankets with little knitted scarves tied on their heads, upset that the apocalypse had to happen in their time.

Here in Canada everyone is light and bouncy and skateboarding in their t-shirts, which tells me the winter I just missed was long and cold. I wiggle my toes because they aren't used to being wrapped in socks and shoes. At dinner the fork and knife feel strange in my hands.

Last January I went to live in two different children's homes in the south of India near Chennai. Chennai is the second biggest city in India with a population of about thirty million- the same as if every Canadian lived in one city together. It was, as they say, a life-changing trip. I've been on other life changing trips... but I never come home with the same questions.

Everyone warned me about coming home. They said when I started comparing the standard of life in Canada with the standard in India I would suffer from major culture shock. Truthfully, I thought them all wrong during my first few days back because I was already used to it. The poverty in India is horrible, but so is the excess. For every couple of poor farmers pushing vegetable carts, there's a shiny black SUV with tinted windows and a driver wearing shades. Each twenty-first century skyscraper has a skirt of thatched huts and beggars. For every swanky restaurant full of rich people eating chicken biryani, there's a colony of poverty under old tarps at the edge of town. I didn't think the contrast between the rich country and the poor country would hit me that hard because 'the shock' saturates each day and each life in India like the thick April heat. And yet, being a Canadian seems a little more hollow than it did before. Now that I've returned, I feel like a juice stain that has to seep back in to all this extra white space of my life.

After being submerged in India for four months, it's strange to come back to Canada and simply pick up where I left off. The day after I stepped out of the airplane, I went to a bridal shower for a close friend. In the morning as I decided what to wear, I couldn't help but compare the dresser and closet of clothes with the little cardboard box of pants and shirts my young friend Sri Davie proudly showed me during my last week. When I arrived, there were tables filled with food, and pink paper decorations covering the walls. All the women were wearing their nicest clothes and holding glasses with painted nails. It reminded me of the various wedding events I was invited to in India where they served plenty of chicken biryani to the guests and all the women slicked their black hair into long elegant braids and wore their brightest saris.

After a few games, the cake that said, "Congratulations Jen and Kurtis!" in pink icing was passed out on glass plates. Everyone sat and held their cake awkwardly because someone forgot to put the forks out. I didn't notice because I had already started eating with my right hand. It was only after my third bite that I realized I was doing something strange. I wiped my fingers with a napkin and put my plate down.

As I looked around, what struck me the most about this bridal shower was that everyone had a chair to sit on. In India, this is not the case. Chairs are used to determine class and importance. The least important sit on the ground, and the most important sit at the front of the room on the best chairs. But the interesting thing was that even though everyone at Jen's shower was nicely seated, it was quite possible that someone in the room, holding a plate of cake and a glass of champagne, was going hungry at home. In Canada, these things aren't easily spotted.

I've been back for some time, but even now I stare at the extra space in Canada. I marvel at all the green grass going to waste. Why is everything so empty? Where are all the buffalo, the cows and the dogs? Where are all the highway-side vendors selling Thumbs Up and samosas? Where are the professional beggars that roam the intersections knocking on car windows? Why is everything so empty?

So I guess 'the shock' for me is... me. My life. My big life. It doesn't quite feel normal anymore because I've lived and I've seen what 'normal' is for many people in the rest of the world. Being a Canadian doesn't feel as cozy as it once did. But maybe it shouldn't. I can't take the breathing room, or the good fortune of being Canadian for granted anymore. This is because the space constructed to keep poverty away, either the relatively hidden poverty in Canada, or the in-your-face poverty in India, isn't real. It's empty. We are all living in the same world.

Each day God sends the sun across the Pacific Ocean. It shines on Canada the same as it shines on India. It shines on the beggars of Nellore and the kids at Calvary Home the same as it shines on my friends and my family over here. I'm back in Canada, but India, and everything in it, is still there. I pray my life never feels cozy again. I pray it never fits right, that this unsettled feeling of space is a permanent reminder that we're still in the same world, we're not that far apart.