

Agawa Canyon

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Several years ago, I went to Sue St. Marie with a yearlong contract job. About seven hundred kilometers away from Toronto this town has two parts, the larger section is part of Canada and the smaller of USA. They are separated by a body of water with a giant suspended bridge connecting the two. There is a lock here which connects Lake Superior with Lake Huron. At both ends there are several tour boats offering water rides for a hefty fee. The major attraction in the Canadian side, however, is the Agawa Canyon train trip. Tourists come from all around the world to take this trip, especially during fall season.

Since we came to Sue St. Marie we had been looking for an opportunity to take this trip. It finally happened in the middle of June. The posted fares for such trips are understandably high, for adults it was close to \$60 and for kids something like \$25. In June the tour organizers suddenly dropped the fares to half of the posted rates for the locals only. The offer was valid for only two days. As a result the lines in front of the usually barren counters turned kilometer long. With the exception of summer and fall these counters rarely see any visitors. Especially during September and October - official fall season – a healthy crowd of visitors, mostly Americans, take this trip to enjoy the beautiful fall color of the Northern Ontario. No wonder, that is also the time when showing due diligence, the Canadian tour operators hikes the fair up.

The platform to board the tour train is near the river called St. Mary's Rapid that flows along the town. The train was scheduled to leave at 8 AM in the morning. We woke up early, got ready in a flash, packed up some food and showed up in the

station by 7 AM – a little too determined not to miss the train. A large crowd was expected hence going early also meant convenient parking. To our surprise, despite such early arrival, we found the platform overflowing with people. Any doubts about effectiveness of price cuts can be thrown into oblivion.

In this town of almost eighty thousand inhabitants we were only two families from Bangladesh – us and Rajib family. Rajib bhai (brother), a senior friend of mine from the same educational institution in Bangladesh, had been living in the town with his wife and a daughter for almost four years. He was a lecturer in the local Sue College. After immigrating to Canada from England he had gone through some difficult times and ended up in this distant town in the north-western Ontario landing this teaching job. He eventually made up his mind to make it his home. The series of events that got us together were quite unique.

Since coming to Sue about four months ago we met many people but none from South East Asia – a particular interest of Mili. Approaching Eid-ul-fitr, the celebration that Muslims perform after Ramadan – a month for fasting, in her quest to have a customary celebration with other fellow Muslims Mili took a desperate measure. She picked up the Telephone guide and compiled a list of Muslim names focusing primarily on anything that sounded Bangladeshi. The name Rajib sounded familiar – prompting her to pick up the phone. Bull’s eye! It turned out that not only he was from Bangladesh but he also had the misfortune to lecture my class during my University years – though very briefly. Due to my scarce presence in classes my recollection of him was practically nothing. I learned that he had secured a commonwealth scholarship and flew to England to pursue higher studies. Curious, I inquired with two of my class mates who lived in Toronto. Both knew Rajib bhai like the back of their hands and subtly cast doubt about my sanity for not remembering him.

Rajib bhai and his family – wife Nusrat and daughter Lota

- made it to the station just before five minutes to eight. To their relief the start time had already been pushed back indefinitely as additional cars were being added to accommodate all the people who convened. Rajib bhai's elderly parents lived with him who were not accompanying them in this trip. Since we met them we sensed some sort of ongoing trouble. Nusrat bhabi (sister-in-law) did not want to live here in social isolation and was eager to move back to Toronto. However, Rajib bhai had no interest in leaving his current job. We found them engaging into heated arguments quite often.

Lota was six and highly restless. At every opportunity she would zoom away in random direction. It was quite difficult to manage her. When in her company Zaki acted the same way. He was couple of years younger than Lota but was equally troublesome. Their combined disturbances could annoy the most patient.

After plenty of dilly-dallying finally when the long, well built train left the station it was already nine in the morning. The cars were specious with large high back seats that could be swivelled to seat face to face or back to back. We occupied couple of rows of these chairs and set them up to allow us to seat facing each other.

It was a beautiful day. The bright sun had risen in the eastern sky lighting up the earth with its beautiful and warm rays. Unfortunately, the heat from the rays might have been a little too much for comfort as they shone right on our faces. Little distracted but not discouraged by any means we soon found the natural beauty that surrounded us as we advanced through the woods was more than enough to filter out the mild discomfort.

Agawa Canyon is a name given by the native Indians, which meant hidden port. It isn't difficult to figure out the reason for such naming. There are literally very few routes to visit this area. In the year 1899 Algoma Central Railway had connected the mining towns in the North Central Ontario to the towns near Great lakes like Sault St. Marie and Michipicoten

Harbor. The 516-kilometer railway ended in Herst. In 1997 Algoma Steel Company announced the closure of their mining activities in Wawa, as a result since 1998 that specific part of the railway remained unused. Recently only the tour train was operating.

Agawa Canyon is 180 kilometers north of Sault St. Marie. It would take the train to reach there about four hours, arriving around 1 in the afternoon. We would be given couple of hours to hike around in the canyon. With another four-hour return trip, we would reach Sault by 7 PM. There would still be some daylight left. Everything looked just perfect. The environment inside the train was quite festive, as one might imagine. Lota and Zaki had packed up and were running up and down the car adding up to the commotion that was already ongoing. Half the passengers were kids, mostly young and understandably noisy, hence nobody really cared. Shili had tried to stop the two with a few scolding but the impact of that was too short living to claim any success. Rajib bhai and Nusrat bhabi sat side by side but from their heavy posture it was clear that they were not in talking terms. They looked in opposite directions.

Our train advanced in a slow pace, through the greeneries of the densely grown woods and startling groups of birds, leaving behind the city limits of Sault Ste. Marie. Lakes of all sizes and shapes ran past us with their glittering blue water. The bright sun blinded us every now and then as the train meandered through the land that rose and dropped in random intervals with the view changing frequently.

Things had been very joyous inside the train, filled with dreamy appreciations. The adults leaned against their seats and enjoyed leisurely the beautiful views while the kids ran around with pure excitement. I had tagged along both the still and video cameras with me and kept myself busy taking images of both kinds. Left, right, up, down. "How many pictures are you going to take of the same stuff?" Shili snapped.

I gave her a crooked look. What a foolish girl! How could

two views be same? Click! Click! Click!

Later the train rolled over an embankment on the Montreal River. There is a wooden bridge over the river. This is one of the most anticipated parts of the trip that is advertised heavily with its image popping up in many places. Everybody wait for this particular part of the trip with their cameras ready. We were no exception to that rule. As soon as we saw the train approaching the bridge everybody stood up and crowded against the windows. The train slowed down to allow the passengers to enjoy that extremely beautiful view to its entirety. Click! Click! Click! The train rumbled slowly toward the foot of the bridge as we looked out with bursting eyes determined not to let go this most remarkable view of water, forest and sky smoothly merging into each other. I noticed Rajib bhai and Nusrat bhabi glanced at each other quickly before looking out through the windows. This was good sign. There's little doubt that we all are the children of nature and it can do magic in our lives. To make things groovier I took two quick snapshots of Shili at the backdrop of this natural wonder. She gave me a hard look. "Why are you wasting the films? There's still a long way to go."

I laughed out loudly, for no apparent reason. My mind sung away – *I am so crazy for you my love!* I had the habit of writing sound-alike songs of Tagor and Nazrul – two legendary songwriters of Bengali language.

Almost four hours later, causing a major commotion in the peaceful mountainside, our train moved from the last glimpse of the Highway seven and Lake Superior, and started to climb down the canyon face. *Chug chug, chug chug, choooo choooooooo*. Moments later we were rewarded with the most amazing view that I have ever seen as the train slowed down into a valley with lush greeneries, several midsize waterfalls and a creek flowing right through it. Everybody seemed to be mesmerized with the sheer beauty of that sudden discovery. As soon as the train stopped everybody raced to climb out of the train. It had a planned stoppage here for couple of hours only.

There were a lot to do and nobody wanted to waste time.

Shili, Zaki and I rushed out of the train as well. Rajib bhai along with Nusrat bhabi and Lota was right behind us. There was no shortage of smiles in their faces. Nusrat bhabi's gloomy face had turned bright in joy. She even tried to hold Rajib bhai's hand avoiding our eyes. Rajib bhai was a shy man. He got out of the hand lock and put his hands inside his pockets. Finding Zaki and Lota sprinting toward the creek I ran after them. Both of them had severe likeness for water bodies. Once grabbing them I made my way to the washrooms where there were already pretty long line ups. Men and women had separate facilities. There was a souvenir store and several food shops next to the washrooms. I am the owner of a very active bladder. Sight of a washroom was sure to excite it. This time it was no exception.

Once all of us had taken care of our bladders we started for the Canyon walk. This place was created almost 1 billion years ago. There are three waterfalls in close proximity of varying sizes and a lookout point about 250 feet above. For the convenience of the visitors several trails have been created that go in loops touching various attraction points. We started in one direction, Rajib bhai and family started on the opposite direction. Once we were done with our sightseeing we'd meet back in the train.

We checked out Beaver falls (175 feet), Bridal Veil falls (225 feet) and a third one located at the end of the Otter creek trail. Bridal Veil was the most beautiful out of the three. Shili was so taken by its beauty that she did something very unusual. "Take a snapshot of me here." She demanded. "Zaki, please come here. Stand with me." Mother and son stood in a terrific pose, all ready for the snapshot. As I picked up the camera I noticed there were no more films left. Talk about trouble! I bought two reels of 24 films but brought only one reel which I already used up on our way to the canyon. I forgot the second reel at home.

"No film, right?" Shili snapped. "When I want to take a

snapshot you run out of films? The moment I ask for something you have issues. Last time when we went to Montreal....”

In the next half an hour as we walked back I was forced to remember many forgotten facts. A simple mistake opened up the door to a deluge of troublesome memories. Zaki had covered his ears with his palms. Every few moments he would ask anxiously, “Mom, who are you scolding? Dad, right? Not me.”

Leaving them behind I started to climb up the wooden stairs of the lookout trail all the way up to 250 feet. Shili stayed back at the ground level with Zaki. The beautiful view that extended up to the horizon was spectacular. Time was short. Train would leave in as little as twenty minutes. We would have to walk considerable length to return to the train. I quickly climbed down. Rajib family had completed their sightseeing and joined Milli and Zaki at the bottom of the stairs. They smiled at me as I came rushing down.

“Why didn’t you tell me that you ran out of films?” Rajib bhai said. “I still have many left.”

“A total nut!” Shili said. “He wasted all the films in the train taking useless snapshots.”

Very objectionable remark. I acted as if I did not hear that. On our way back to the train we lined up on the green fields by the creek as Rajib bhai took several snapshots of us with his camera. There was a small wooden bridge over the creek. We took several group photos standing over it. Click! Click!

Many old folks had brought food with them. They sat by the creek leisurely and ate their packed lunches. Clearly it wasn’t their first time in this trip. We were all very hungry. Once returned into the train we attacked our own food supplies – things that we had packed in bags.

Train started back soon. Another four hours of journey ahead. All the eyes were glued outside through the windows with many ready with their cameras. The train climbed up the canyon wall very slowly leaving behind the beautiful dreamy valley and ran through dense forest. Slowly, everybody gave a

rest to the cameras and relaxed back into their seats in attempts to get a sleep. The trip went quite well with sightseeing, pictures and the nice hike in the valley. Now it was time to return home. Most were tired, some sleepy.

The ending of this trip didn't go very well though. After about half way down we were told that there was some kind of problem with the line. Our train could advance but would have to go in a very slow pace. And slow it was! The kids took a long nap and once awake asked the inevitable question, "Are we home yet?"

Nobody answered.

"I knew something like this was going to happen." Shili eventually lost her cool and said in deep resentment. "After all we are in the company of the inauspicious man." Of course, that would be me. I was quite hurt. *I am so crazy for you my love, how could you hurt me in such a way?* I sung in my mind. I wasn't still sure whether I would sing it in Tagor's tune or Nazrul's tune.

The four-hour return trip ended in seven hours. When we finally reached Sault St. Marie it was 10 PM. Tired, bitter and sleepy passengers lethargically climbed down the train to the platform. Who thought such a wonderful experience would end in this nightmare. The Tour authority apologized for the inconvenience and offered rain checks to anybody who wanted to take the trip again, for no charge.

We did not return for the trip but when one of my friends had visited us with his family we gave them the tickets. They took the trip and were equally amazed. The feeling was very satisfying.