

A Trip with Kevin

“Hello, I never introduced myself. I am Scott. I hear you are the one who is going to help us with Scranton?” said Scott.

“Oh! Really? I am not aware of anything like that” I said and looked at Kevin.

“You had to spoil his surprise!” replied Kevin with a smile and in reply to my inquisitive gaze at him.

After a week, we were in a meeting discussing about the business happening in Scranton and why Kevin wanted me to come with him there. I had a little background about call centers. I had worked on them as a fresh graduate in Bombay. Kevin said he thought my background might be useful in this case. And so we were all set to leave for Scranton on the week of September 22nd.

Scranton is a small hilly town, probably as big as Manhattan or Karaikkudi. It is in Pennsylvania (PA), a historical state in the north of USA. It is surrounded by Ohio on the west and also shares borders with Maryland, New Jersey and New York. Though this country seems to be having well-established standards of living and culture, it is in reality very diverse. For example, the way of living of people in Kansas is completely different from those in Texas or those in North Carolina. Their language is also different. They all speak English, true. But, they speak differently in different places with a notable difference in accent, pronunciation and punctuation. The stress on words like *ice* or even when they say *I* is different. The northern part of this country seems to be having more stories and history to it. We had our flight booked from Jacksonville to Philadelphia, a very popular city in PA on the border with New Jersey. Scranton is around 125 miles north of Philadelphia. We were to pick up a rental car and reach Scranton. Though Scranton had an airport, it is like Manhattan; only small jets fly into the airport and it is a pain to travel on air from Philadelphia to Scranton. Car travel is more comfortable and easy for small distances here. A distance of 125 miles (approx. 200 KM) can be easily covered in 2 hours without stress, whereas it takes at least four to five hours to travel the same distance in India.

So, I met Kevin at the airport on the morning of Tuesday, September 23rd. We arrived an hour before the flight only to find that the flight was delayed by an hour due to bad weather. We had coffee at Starbucks. Kevin, being the big boss (He is Director of E-Commerce), needs to be in touch with various things. He had to make his phone calls and talk to various sets of people. He opened his laptop and I began to think that he is going to work on his documents on laptop. But then he showed me a wireless access card. I thought, how is he going to access the network using his wireless net work access card. There needs to be receiving points. But then the card he had was different from the ones I had seen. It had an antenna. It would act as a wireless modem for him to get on to the internet. I gazed in amazement. Technology. Human tryst with technology has lead us to many many great things and it will never end I guess. It was like how Louis Armstrong sang “I hear babies crying, I watch them grow. They'll learn much more than I'll never know. And I think to myself, what a wonderful world. Yes I think to myself what a wonderful world.”

Kevin did not waste any more time. He went on while I got busy reading my eWeek magazine. After discussing things about work, we boarded the plane finally at 1130 and reached Philadelphia in 2 hours. We did not waste any more time and got hold of a van that was available from the National car rental agency and started on our way to Scranton. Kevin is an expert in all kinds of beer and used to brew beer before I think he got busier as a family man. He knew of a good place in Philadelphia airport that had very good beers. But, we had to drive and so the option of having a beer got ruled out. We had decided that we will have our lunch our way to Scranton on some exit. The drive to Scranton from Philadelphia started off with lush green hills that reminded me of the trip that me and Kicha mama had from

Sengottai to Thiruvananthapuram to meet Barath. In Kerala, of course we made more stops for chai and plantain chips. We did not find any exits on the 476 North highway we took. It went on and on and on without any exits. Finally, we saw a town Landsdale in an hour. We guessed it must be a small town and so while paying toll on the entrance, Kevin asked the guy “Hey, what is your best bet for lunch around here?” “What are you looking for, a sandwich?” asked the guy. “Yeah. Something like that” said Kevin. “Take the first left and the second right on signal. There is a sandwich shop right on the corner” he said. And so, we went inside this old looking house like building with wooden floors and two middle-aged women taking orders and making sandwiches. We bought a sandwich each for ourselves. We were starving by that time. We also bought a kettle-cooked chip packet. Kettle-cooked is the normal way of cooking in India, but it is considered a special way of cooking in this country now a days, though it used to be original way of making chip here also, before the advent of chip making machines from Lays and Fritos like companies. We really liked the chips and had the wonderfully made sandwich. Kevin had the steak and cheese sandwich and told me how it is famous in this part of the country. The steak and cheese is very much like making the khima out of egg or lamb except that this is not as hot and has lot of cheese. We add lot of butter and spices which is not found in this.

So, off we went with our stomachs full and satisfied. It is surprising and thought provoking that *we really have to eat to live*. I remembered *Sabapathi*, the 1950 Tamil movie which had a song “This world really runs behind this small stomach”. I had collected some select CDs to take in this trip. *Remembering Shakthi* was one of them. It was an orchestra conducted by Ustad Zakir Hussain along with other stalwarts like Vikku Vinaykram, U Srinivas, Sankar Mahadevan, et al. This was a live recording in Bombay. I love those compositions in that CD and was parting some of my knowledge with Kevin. He was interested and listened to me carefully and was able to make immediate analogies with the beats, tones to blues, jazz and other genres of American classic songs. Now, barring a few, I would expect a typical middle-aged or old-aged American person to be pretty conservative in his thoughts and choices. But all theories have exceptions. I admired Kevin at that point for his open-mindedness and his interest in things that he gets exposure once in a while. His appreciation for music was evident. He had his choices in music, but it takes an effort to show deeper interest.

We reached Scranton finally at around 5 in the evening. We found out way to our hotel and took some rest in our rooms. Kevin had to make his phone calls. He called back after some time in my room and told our plan of action for the rest of the day. One other person, Mike from our Jacksonville office was also visiting Scranton and we were to meet him and go for dinner. It is almost customary that many Americans have a couple of beers before dinner. I also got into this habit whenever I was in the company of my American friends. Dinner is usually at approx. 7 PM. So, we met Mike at his hotel and he took us to the most famous restaurant in town. It was called the *Coopers*. There is a traditional beer called *Yingleung*. This beer, I was told was one of the oldest brands and was probably started in early 19th century. The beer tasted really good. After having that in the bar outside Coopers, we seated ourselves in the restaurant which claimed to have almost 150 varieties of beer. Kevin looked at the list and seemed to identify almost all of them, to my surprise. He selected one beer and told the waitress, who obviously did not understand what he was talking about. He had point it out in the menu.

The evening went on well and we reached back to our rooms before 9 in the evening. We then decided that we will meet early next morning and pick up Mike and go to pick up some doughnuts and get to office. We did not know how the next day went. It was very hectic and I liked it that way. The highlight of the day was when I saw Kevin going to the white board to teach a bunch of people how to do work and not just talk. When the day started off with a haze, Kevin stepped in and implied “Cut the crap. Listen to this. This is the agenda and this is what we ought to do.” I was so happy and impressed at that point and remembered my days with Cherian. The thoughts from Kevin were very collated and

crisp. The way he communicated this was even more succinct. It kind of reminded me of how my father used to handle things and mould me in my childhood. He used to listen to me very intensely and at the end of me telling him a load of things, he used to conclude our session with two simple statements. "Shut up. You will just do exactly what I am going to say to you now". I always listened to my father, because, he was always right and thought the best for me in the complete sense. Kevin's thoughts and statements were very similar to my father's. Only his statements directly implied and were not direct and chalked out clarity in me. I almost immediately knew what my purpose was. The rest of the day went very smooth. So did the evening at *Nana's pasta* and the next day.

Kevin decided to leave early on Thursday from office and drive back to Philadelphia that evening. He thought it would be better off to spend some time in Philadelphia than at Scranton and drive back early in the morning on Friday. So, that's exactly what we did. This time, at the end of the day's work at around 3 in the afternoon, I drove the van to Philadelphia. We drove back safely singing to the tunes of Jim Morrison and The Doors. We reached the outskirts of Philadelphia early evening and were on the look out of our hotel and missed our way for quite some time. Benjamin Franklin Bridge is a very famous and old bridge in Philadelphia which actually separates Pennsylvania and New Jersey. We went into New Jersey by mistake and took a small tour around Rutgers University. We came back to Pennsylvania on the bridge again and then lost our way in what Kevin put as *distinctively different part of the town*. No trip is complete without missing an exit at least once or not finding the way at least twice. Now, many big old American cities have very poor part of the city that may not be as bad as the Bombay slums, but are definitely *distinctively different* neighborhoods. These could be dangerous too sometimes because guns are almost freely used here. We anyway found our way back to Holiday Inn and checked in. We decided that we will leave the hotel at 7 in the evening and check out the Philadelphia down town.

During the beginning of the trip, Kevin had told me that he will give me some history lessons about Philadelphia. As we walked by the downtown he was telling me some stories. I was attentive in the beginning, but later could not take my eyes out of the attractive ladies and places around. I think he sensed it and I also did not want to waste his time any more. "Alright now, show me where the beer is" I said. We had a good laugh. In the following few hours Kevin proved his expertise in his field and outdid himself again. The evening was perfect. There was a cool breeze coming from the river. There were so many people around having a lot of fun. The mood was set in everyone's mind there. We went on from pub to the other. We hopped the way I used to do with my friends. For a moment, I remembered an article I read on *USA today* about how you will feel if you did not how old you were. There were some good examples that presented itself to me in the last few days. Kevin went on to show me some beers that I had never heard of in my life. Sam Adams October fest, Chimay, American Bastard, Victory Hop devil and some others that I don't even remember names now. We discussed so many things that we felt so good about. In the mean time we found out an Afghan restaurant that we could have our dinner at. I introduced him to basmati rice and explained to him how meat is marinated in that part of the world. He really liked the food and tried to remember the Pulao by asking me again and again. We came back to the hotel at around half past ten and decided to meet at quarter before six the next morning to catch our flight back to Jacksonville. We finished off some dangling thoughts about work in the flight and documented them. Back home, it is Jacksonville again and we parted our ways at the parking lot.

I came back driving in the drizzling rain, after paying the garage parking fee. The last couple of days, they just passed by. I did not know when it started and when it ended. I did not expect anything out of the trip. I did not expect it to be this way, that way. I stopped any pre-determined thoughts about it. It was a lesson that I had learned from Ambi mama "No expectations, no disappointments! Great

expectations, Great disappointments”. That was his direct reference to The Bhagwad-Gita. And so, I took it the way it came to me. I just thought positive and did my best. Energy revolves around and comes back in some form or the other. It is kind of an electromagnetic synchronization of the unconscious human minds, or something like that. Throughout our trip, we shared so many light moments like despair.com, the management jokes and some interesting moments like the fresh lush green that invited us into Pennsylvania, the bright Lehigh tunnel with Ustad Zakir Hussain’s tabla at the background, the talented Jim Thorpe’s athleticism, the sandwich at Landsdale, the ambience at the pub at Philadelphia, the fresh saffron smell from basmati rice. Like David Schwartz put it in his book “The human brain is like a bank. The memory acts like a teller and gives back the things you put inside. If you put good things inside, it will give back to you the good things”, I will remember the good ones. Yes, the good ones.