

Indian Diary of a Street-Smart, Worldly Traveler

By Dasha Kusá

Sunday August 21, DC School of Management and Technology, Pullikkanam, Kerala.



Rising bright and early – Nidhin comes to wake us up at 6:30 (do they ever sleep here?). Me, Jasmine, and David decided to go to the church today with the students. It sounds like a joke: A heathen, a Sikh, and a Jew head out to church... but it isn't. They all go to church here together – Christians, Muslims, Hindus... It's the same God anyway, they say. We get into a little bus that huffs

and puffs up the rocky dirt road. The church is stunning. Small simple white building perched in a monumental valley of tea plantations, palm trees, and flowers of all colors and shapes, under a turquoise sky and a kind warm sun. You can smell the colors in the air.

People here are farmers. They are much darker than Indians in the North. Jesus, however, is whitest of whites, with pale blue eyes in every single painting. Funny, if you ask me. The sermon is in Malayalam. They sing a lot, which is great. We sit on the floor, sometimes kneel, sometimes stand up. Sometimes try to stand up, wriggling about awkwardly. First twenty minutes is fun. Then it gets a bit old. Half an hour in, I start scrutinizing every single painting on the walls. And on the ceiling. And the floor...

Today is the third day of trainings at DC School. We start teaching the second batch today. These kids are even quicker and sharper, and we are getting to be even more stellar. They say they admire our teamwork, how well we work together, help each other out, are nice and polite to each other. Go team! What they don't know is that that requires training, too. We are modeling relationships for them. It rules to have a good program lined up and then see it happen as it should and better. Role plays and exercises are a part where we can observe how much the students took in. Some of them are very good. They could become mediators tomorrow.

Tonight we join the entire Shanti student group for dinner. That's a group that we helped to establish in February. They research They want to meet with us, even though they have a tough exam tomorrow. We bring in the faculty and mediate and agreement between students and faculty about the future of the Shanti program. Faculty promises to devote one month of internships to allow students to intern at non-profits. Those who will work for Shanti will receive credits towards their degree. They will get training certificates for our training and the school will send out a special letter of recommendation to participants' job placements.

Jasmine and Hillel are packing up after dinner; they are leaving early in the morning. Hillel to New Delhi where we'll join him a day later at the *Partition Revisited: Thinking Through and Beyond Violence, Trauma, and Memory* colloquium.

Suddenly we hear a yell: "Jaasmiiiine! Daaaaashaaaaaaa!" That would be David, returning into his room. We sprint over there. "There's this white thing over there. Look! I saw it crawling on the window, then it jumped on Hillel's suitcase and there it is sitting right there, on his shirt!" We look, skeptically at first. What *IS* that? It's white, it looks almost as a jelly-fish, but how would it get into the midst of a rain forest? It doesn't move, probably startled by the light. Being extremely brave, I come closer. I see six or eight legs – it is a giant spider, size of a tarantula! But white. It's an albino tarantula! We shriek and run out of the room. What do we do? Do we dare to capture it? David doesn't, I'm more than hesitant. But then if we don't, it can kill us all overnight. We look around. There is an empty wastebasket that might do the trick, provided that the albino tarantula doesn't move. We make a battle plan. It involves the wastebasket and Jasmine. She's Punjabi, and least frightened (I swear this logic made sense at the time). We all approach the tarantula cautiously. It's still there, pretending to be dead. Jasmine hurls the wastebasket over the monster. It's trapped! We're alive! Now we have to get it away from Hillel's shirt somehow. My turn. Warily I move the basket, dreading the moment

when the mini Odula starts scuttling about. It doesn't. I notice it leaves small white traces as I move it with the basket. Am I injuring it? The traces look very much like...pieces of...napkin or ...wet paper... I have a sudden flashback to this morning: three women came in to clean. They were washing windows, among other things. With white paper towels that, when damp, can look a lot like albino tarantulas. One piece must have gotten stuck on the window and fell as David entered the room, letting in a draft from outside. I take the basket off and grab it with my hand. Jasmine and David shriek. I explain what just happened. "There can be a spider *inside!*" David maintains. Well, I can't argue with that, but relief is felt all around. Not among our bravest moments, but certainly among the funniest. Mind works in mysterious ways. It's white, it's scary, it must be an albino tarantula, but of course. What could possibly be more logical?

We managed to use the experience the next day in the training: David and I played it out to demonstrate how fear, new situation, stereotypes, etc... can warp our thinking. Students got an immense kick out of it. I think it will stay in our bag of tricks for good.