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The long way home...

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At age five, if someone had told me that I would end up a scientist pursuing research in laboratories across the world, I would have laughed. I was aware of only two burning passions – to teach and to see the world. I was pragmatic enough to know that while my first goal was achievable for a girl from a middle-class family in recently independent India, the second seemed destined to remain a dream. Still, the gypsy in me balked at the idea of living a conventional life.

I knew I wanted to teach. But what exactly? I enjoyed all the subjects I took for my SSC, be they languages (I fancied myself an author) mathematics or sciences. While I was frantically searching for a subject to teach, my father thought that research was my calling. He argued that in India's educational set-up, choosing science left open the option of reverting to arts later. On the first-day of admissions, the queue for science admissions was much smaller than that for arts. The less conventional choice won.

College-level physics and maths were enjoyable, but biology was where my heart lay. People automatically assumed I would waltz into medicine, but a doctor's lifestyle, which left little room for hobbies and other pursuits, was not for me. Microbiology, at that time a relatively new field, offered the chance of a

college teaching position directly after a master's. Much to my parents' chagrin, although my marks would have assured me a seat in medicine, I chose microbiology.

At twenty-three, I was poised to finish my master's. To my mother's and grandmother's way of thinking, this meant a wedding was on the cards. My father, on the other hand, thought it would be a mistake for me to marry before getting a Ph.D. I was ambivalent; marriage was not an option unless it was to the right guy. As fate would have it, Sanjeev was just a common set of friends away. I chose marriage despite my father's disappointment. It was much later that I came to truly appreciate how exceptional my father's stance had been. He never confined me to a gendered role; he insisted his daughter live as an equal in a man's world.

The completion of my master's saw me lecturing. It took only a couple of years for restlessness to set in. I enjoyed teaching, but I needed another challenge. I then wrote my first book, *Notes in Microbiology*. It kept me occupied for a while, and then I started dabbling in research projects. It turned out my father was right – in research I found my calling.

At this point fate intervened. Sanjeev was transferred to the Netherlands. He was not sure how I would react to his news – I had a permanent job that I clearly loved. However, for the gypsy in me, it was a chance to see the world. Giving up my job was an easy decision because I knew myself well enough to realize I would always find something to do. Within a week of our arrival, with three-year old Gauri in tow, I approached Prof. Rob Benner at the Erasmus University's immunology department for a voluntary job. I explained that I would work only the hours that Gauri was at school. Luckily, Rob appreciated my forthrightness and passion for research. Within a month, what had started as a voluntary job was converted to a salaried position. Unbeknownst to me, my long march to a Ph.D. had begun.

A couple of years after joining Erasmus, I started on a Ph.D. track. It would not prove easy. First, Sanjeev was transferred back to Mumbai. Second, Huub, my immediate supervisor, accepted a two-year position at Stanford. I toyed with the idea of letting Sanjeev return alone, but the emotional and economic toll

was unacceptable. Rob was very supportive and understood my compulsions. Fortunately, I was not in a competitive field, so Rob suggested that I write a paper on my data while in India and then restart my research once Huub finished his stint at Stanford. While I waited to recommence my doctoral work, I began to work as an industrial research consultant and dealt with a gamut of disparate projects from acne to herbal medicines to washing powders.

When I revisited my doctoral track, I battled frustration as I worked in stretches of a few months at a time at Erasmus before returning home to analyze the data and think up new experiments. Then came the next round. My Ph.D. had morphed into a long-distance, part-time venture. I survived the seemingly interminable project only because of the support and understanding of my family and friends. I finally stood before my thesis committee defending my doctorate almost a decade after I had first started working at Erasmus.

By this time, we were in a small town, Lote-Parshuram, half-way between Mumbai and Goa. Gauri was soon to enter class ten, and I did not want any upheavals in her life. I decided to stay at Lote for the next two years. To use the time fruitfully, I teamed up with a friend and turned to a long-cherished dream of writing an immunology textbook priced for the Indian market. This was before the easy availability of information of the internet era. Library access was limited. My arms full of bound journals from the Haffkines Institute library (in Mumbai), I would trek to the corner copy-shop so that I could carry relevant references home with me. By the time I finished the book and Gauri passed class ten, fate intervened, once again in the person of Sanjeev. He was offered a position in the U.S.. I jumped at the opportunities this presented for both travel and research. After years of self-imposed discipline, returning to regular working hours as a post-doctoral fellow in immunology was a sheer joy.

After the appointed three years, Sanjeev was ready to return to India; I was not. My stint had been very fruitful and opened up the possibility of pursuing research at some of the most prestigious institutes in the U.S.. Sanjeev and Gauri knew that their lives had always taken precedence over my career; they told me

now my dreams should come first. From a long-distance career to a long-distance marriage – for a year and a half, I lived the single life in Boston, indulging my passion for research at M.I.T. and Harvard.

The year spent alone provided ample time for introspection. After the book, research projects, Ph.D., and postdoctoral stints, it was now time to do other things with my life. I have never been ambitious about my career, only about my work. When I returned to India, I worked on the second edition of the immunology book while searching for a position that would allow me room for other pursuits. I am now a post-doctoral fellow at T.I.F.R., lucky to be with a boss who understands my perspective. I also teach underprivileged children, participate actively in causes I believe in, and travel extensively. The gypsy in me is now at peace – it was a long, unconventional journey, but I would not change a thing.