

## Spartan Seasons

8472. Numbers that appeared clearly on the shiny dell monitor at the union. Years of being a net-junkie had taught me one thing. When all else fails, trust in Google. A week in Lansing and I was counting both the minutes and the miles. I'd never been away from home this long, and needless to say, I was still in a state of, well...slight bewilderment. 8472 miles away from home and everyone looked, sounded and dressed differently. My mind wondered into the scientific past. Darwin declaring to a shocked society, details of our origin. Surely some playful researcher would've asked, "When all the monkeys seemed to look alike, what made all of us so different?"

Past the statue of John Hannah I walked, a flock of ducks coming into view. The red cedar and its rapids didn't seem to quiet the tape loop in my head. These days the only message it seemed to play was "When will I get my assistantship?" Being an international student without monetary help from the university wasn't easy. I was counting my cents. Every day, Indian students crowded around me...eager to make me feel 'at home', but the tape loop played on, like a thorn in the side of my happiness. I still remember the day all this changed. To me, football was a wrestling match with 22 fighters and a ball thrown in for good measure. Tail-gating they called it; football crazy families enjoying quality time on a Saturday. Beer, barbecues and bean-bag throwing seemed like a weird combination, but there was genuine happiness on everyone's face. All this seemed to lift my spirits as I walked to the union. The building was a buzz of activity as football fans crowded the main lobby. I brushed past them to my favorite spot in the computer lab downstairs. The drill would begin – mail, youtube, mail and then youtube again. I didn't see it at first, but there surely was a mail from DECS (The division of Engineering Computing Services). I had begun working for them part time a couple of weeks ago. They never usually contacted me on a weekend. Sigh...maybe it was something I goofed up on my last assignment. As I skimmed through the mail, my

eyes widened. I raced up the stairs to the main lobby, to that lone pay phone in the corner. As I entered, there was silence. And then...everyone in the lobby erupted into cheers, applause and pandemonium. The Spartans had won by a handsome margin. I screamed too. My spirits rose and the tape loop changed. "This was my new home and I would make my every minute here memorable." The assistantship was just the beginning. My spartan summer had a lot more to offer.

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It was one of those crazy Monday mornings. I raced toward the bus stop, cursing myself for having watched anime online till 4 am. My roommate, Varun gave me his usual grin as I stumbled, almost flying through the air as I made it just in time. I managed a sheepish smile, swiped my bus pass and collapsed into an empty seat in the bus. I thought of my mother back at home giving me one of her 'morning lectures' telling me to leave early. While I still got the occasional lecture from her, it was screened through a matrix of satellites and enough cables to make a round trip to Timbuktu. Thanks to these marvels of telecommunication and some really good friends I'd made, I wasn't missing home too much.

Post class, the growls in my stomach grew louder during my walk to the food court. I needed some food and I needed it fast. My Olympian effort to beat the bus that morning had made me forget my sandwich on the dining table. Trying hard to not think how it would smell that evening, I strolled into the food court. A small boy, barely up to my knee suddenly walked up to me and said something, pointing to my head. I didn't quite catch what he said, but my hand instinctively went to my hair. It took me a while to realize it, but soon, it was in my palm. A golden brown leaf...and it had been stuck to my hair like some weird head dress. Looking out of the window, a smile crept up to my lips. The leaves had begun to fall and the trees were turning red, brown and several shades of yellow. There was an old fairy tale I had read once. Every falling leaf that you caught before it hit the ground would give you another happy day. I walked home that evening, trying to grab as many leaves as I could. I managed six, before peals of laughter from passers by made me stop out of embarrassment.

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“They surely didn’t mention anything about this chilly weather in the student handbook”, I thought to myself as Jesal, Anchita, Sameera and I walked back home. Anchita wasn’t pleased. She hadn’t liked the movie and it was my bright idea. Well, how was I to know that every line in the script would have an expletive, or that body parts would fly around in every scene. The ‘action’ genre sure had come a long way since the days I watched movies with my dad in India. My thoughts drifted home as I thought of my ‘movie nights’ with him. Sitting up on a Saturday night ...watching a movie in our home theatre system... making enough noise to rouse the entire locality, until a stern glare from ‘mom and sis’ sent both of us scurrying to bed. I had certainly come a long way too. A few months had passed and I had made friends, done well in my courses and zeroed in on a theme for my research. My professor was pleased with what I was doing so far and the folks at DECS were happy too. Everything was going right. We walked on, kicking the piles of fallen leaves. The colors of fall had been beautiful beyond comparison. One day the campus was green and the next it was as if someone let slip a crate full of paints from above.

My wandering thoughts were interrupted by a tap on my back. Jesal signaled to me that there were stairs up ahead. We approached the Cherry Lane apartment that had long since become our favorite haunt. I stepped in; cursing a chilly wind that almost blew the hood off the sweatshirt I was wearing. I hoped to walk into the warmth of the apartment but instead...*splat!* Someone had turned out the lights, giving me a face full of something cold and soft! I could sense multiple people crowding around me. Someone had the kindness to wipe the goop off my eyes. There were ten people... maybe more, in that small living room and they all screamed in unison, “Happy Birthday!”

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Well, nothing lasts forever; not even fall. A gloomy winter had begun; cold, dark and slippery. How was a graphic designer supposed to come up with snazzy, colorful designs when the only color for miles was white? However, there was one thing that winter taught me to appreciate. A chemical called

caffeine that made coffee an essential for all those sleepy winter days. Some cubicles at work were surrounded by a miasma of caffeine fumes. I didn't even need a cup to wake myself up. All I needed to do was walk across those cubicles and voila!

Jokes apart, work was getting tedious. My boss was complaining that my designs were gloomy and dull. Jesal could sense that my day hadn't gone too well. He stopped to tie his shoe and I walked on, not wanting to freeze before we reached the apartment.

A few scores of yards ahead I thought out aloud, "What the hell is this guy doing", I thought as I looked back. He wasn't there...and then something landed near my foot. It was a nicely rounded snowball. *Smack!* The second one hit me squarely on the cheek. "Stop it!" I screamed, but he wouldn't. A barrage of our Indian friends who had just gotten off another bus joined in. They were flying all around now. Two had already hit me. I tried running away from the crowd but a nice big one landed on my back. "All right! Strike Three. You're out!" I set my backpack down and pulled back my sleeves. As the screams grew louder I finally saw them again; the colors. A green bit of moss here, a bright pink winter jacket there, a shiny red station wagon half covered by snow...the colors had returned and so had my spirits! Winter was going to be fun after all.

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The leaves on the trees returned in late march. It was finally time for me to return home. For a short while, yes...but I was looking forward to seeing the people I held so dear to me again. A short ride on the Michigan flyer and I had reached the airport at Detroit. The excitement inside me was building as the plane began to taxi. My eyes began to close and I wondered if I would miss anything at good ol' MSU when I was away at home. I could think of several. My Spartan seasons had come a full circle and another one was to follow. I grimaced as I thought of the long journey and the multiple flights that lay ahead. The number 8472 flashed through my mind. It was going to be a long flight, but as they always said, *'The journey home is never too long.'*

- Raghav Prashant Sundar