



Chasing the Embers of Desire

From breathless memories of Istanbul to an Isfahan mired in textures of blue, longing came to be a faithful companion in author SIDDHARTH DASGUPTA'S travel suitcase.

The Cihangir neighbourhood bristles beneath the weight of the evening and its anticipations, sensual little creatures as they are. Filled with the cumulative buzz of bookstores frayed at the edges, tiny cafés seemingly crafted for conversation, and hip art galleries where postmodern meets post-Depression, the address lies dappled with the kiss of dusk and the hushed whispers of an intoxicated, intoxicating Istanbul. In a cordoned-off alleyway where vine leaves droop from wrought-iron balconies like lovers wrapped in sad memories of the past, draped in the throes of a brief,

tumultuous affair, I know that everything I see, everything I touch, and everything I taste, will, one day, end up in a book.

The mind wrestles with the past and shifts gears. It's nearing the end of my decade-plus existence in the Middle East. This has been an exile that has stirred my senses and revitalised my notions of home. As always, the centuries-old provenance of the Bastakiya Quarter, richly redolent with the smell of limestone and age, is my antidote to Dubai's

clamour for 'Bigger, Better, Higher, More!' I've spent an entire afternoon in the courtyard café of the XVA Art Hotel, drinking cups of tea and glasses of mint lemonade, nibbling on cucumber and cheese sandwiches. I've tried to summon poetry from the three wind towers staring at me with solemn grace; I've tried to fade time away by lazing in the hotel gallery's sumptuous lounge space; I've embraced the shade afforded by a billowing courtyard tree and the art populating the corridors and rooms of the gallery space with equal warmth.

It's only when I step out in the evening, do I see him. He's across the road from me. His light grey *pathani* suit flutters lightly in the twilight breeze. His greyish beard and the marks on his face seem like reservoirs of fables. His eyes stare at me with the lucidity of a recently birthed wave. As he trudges away, his old body and weary soul appear fixed in another place—in an Afghanistan of his dreams. I know then, with equal certainty that this man will, some day, end up in a story too.

And so it is, that these and several other faces, encounters, experiences, and sensory stimulations gather and fashion themselves in my stories. Without manipulation, coercion, or agenda, it is the pull of a fresh horizon that instigates the most crucial pieces.

When it comes to fiction, there is a strange, soulful alchemy between my wanderlust and my words, the truth often merging into ink, my characters turning out to be fragments and fractals of those I've known, the experiences on paper often mirroring my encounters across this world. I've come to understand and accept that much of this relationship has to do with longing; ephemeral on the surface, but perhaps more lifelong than even I might've given it credit for. It's a longing for Cihangir and the fragrance of a woman; it's a longing for a forsaken quarter of Dubai and some of its equally forsaken characters; it's a longing for kiss and touch and embrace and let go. It's a longing dependent neither on distance nor frequency, even perhaps a yearning for a local library visited only the day before.

I'd visited Iran many moons ago, and fallen in love. But a full decade later, it was the yet unseen Isfahan that manifested itself into a story—coerced through conversations with Iranian friends, flights of imagination, and the poetic pull of chosen photographs. It was only when I went there last winter did the exhilarating realisation take place that the Isfahan of my mind was the Isfahan of flesh



It's wanderlust that ends up embedding an image into my mind, refusing to let go until a story has duly emerged from the embers.

and blood; the journey was words being shaped, with mystic providence, into centuries-old bazaars I could wade through, saffron I could smell, textures I could trace, Iranian tea I could savour, blue mosaicked tiles I could caress, sorrowful bridges I could ponder, and a sense of Persian bygone that existed in the then and there.

I suspect that this most delicious, most poignant of longings will end up becoming an enduring part of my life as a writer—marrying my words and my journeys in a sacred union; keeping the enigma and the eroticism of foreign lands alive; deepening this full-bloodied attraction to my own land; eliciting both hope and heartbreak over episodes from cities of the past. Cihangir, Bastakiya, and Isfahan's bazaars all lie within me, and through this longing, within my words. ■

Siddharth Dasgupta is the author of two books, *Letters from An Indian Summer* and *The Sacred Sorrow of Sparrows*.

Illustrations by Namrata Singh