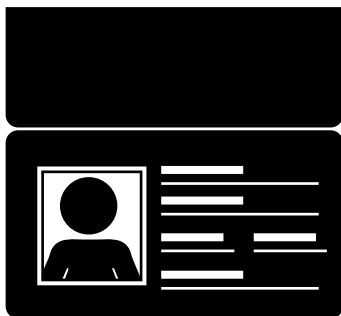


5 Green Card



Thursday, June 30

I begin my morning with a trip to Diya's cube. As she turns to face me, it looks as if she has been crying.

"I hope I'm not bothering you," I say.

"No ... I'm just debugging another server issue," Diya says.

"Are you OK?" I say, walking into her cube and sitting down in an extra chair.

"I'll be OK," Diya says unconvincingly.

"If you want to talk, I have a few minutes. Actually, I have plenty of minutes, because no one else is here yet, and I'm not positive what I should be doing. Barry's not even here to make fun of me."

Diya smiles for an instant, but then she turns back to face her screen.

"It's my green card," Diya says. "I have to start the process over because of the move."

I don't understand at all, so she explains some of the specifics.

If you think the government takes advantage of you, try coming from a different country and not being loaded with money or married to a hot-bodied citizen (at least, one without a Sean Connery accent). It used to be a snap to become part of the world's melting pot. And even though more than a million people each year become legal U.S. citizens, immigrating has become an increasingly difficult matter.

For Diya to start working at Mettle, the company had to sponsor her with a two-year work visa. By utilizing a work visa, Diya could stay in the country instead of returning to India. That window of time was supposed to allow her the opportunity to apply for and receive her United States Permanent Resident Card, better known as a green card. It's not green (although the original I-151 form, the precursor to the current I-551, was), but at least it gives immigrants some status within the country.

The problem, Diya says, is because the company is moving to Cincinnati and out of the state of Kentucky, her current green card application will be voided. Because she applied through Mettle for the green card, and the process occurs via the state program, there is no chance of carrying it over to Ohio. On top of that, her work visa will expire sometime early next year, and she does not have the ability to renew. This, of course, means that without a green card, she will have no choice but to move back to India.

I begin to understand her situation, but I can't see why it is so difficult for her to remain here in the U.S., especially if she has a good overall track record and will be working.

"That is not how it works," Diya says. "A company has to sponsor your work visa, and then for the green card, the company has to petition immigration services again. It's all tied to the company, and most companies won't sponsor you because it's just going to cost them more money."

As usual, it all comes down to money. Here's a girl who's brilliant, who apparently likes living in the States and is a great asset to the company. But because of the system and a backlog of immigrants from many nations to obtain a green card, she's stuck. And it's not as if she can bring in a note to the United States Citizen and Immigration Services office and say that her company is moving, or that the dog ate her visa. She has to move to the back of the line, which, if everyone were to actually line up, would stretch from Washington, D.C., to somewhere

just barely past Jupiter.

I am curious why she came to America in the first place, how long she has been here, how her relationships have been. I'm not sure which is more unnerving: staring at a computer screen that's filled with intriguing but foreign programming, or staring at Diya, who is intriguing in her own right. Both come with the option of pursuing, but neither will allow much time.

Luckily, I have already taken my first step toward alleviating my fear of rejection. Diya committed to doing something with me after work hours. I suspect she may use this opportunity to attempt to reschedule, with things seemingly unraveling for her.

"Are we still on for tomorrow night?" I say, assuming that maybe another day will work better for her.

"Yes, definitely," Diya says. "We could meet for dinner near my place, if that would be OK?"

"Sure, that sounds good. I should be getting back to my cube and doing some work because I don't want to have to stay late tonight."

"All right. But can I ask you a question first?"

"I suppose."

"Are you the type of guy who would be interested in moving to India?"

"India could be a cool place," I say. "And I do like to travel."

Diya smiles, and I head back to my cube.

I'm still not positive Diya is even available, yet she just indicated that there is an outside shot she may kidnap me, stuff me in her luggage, and haul me back to India. Maybe it was small talk, or maybe her comment was just a cultural thing. I am distinctly aware that this entire visa/green card issue can be resolved by a quick trip to a courthouse with an American citizen. A marriage certificate will pretty much validate her residence here.

I feel a little dirty picturing Diya and me on our

honeymoon, though it would solve her problem. Of course, there's the other side of this: me. Following through with a marriage license at the present time would be fairly insane.

Instead of dwelling on wedding bells, I return to my desk and start looking for things to do. There is another meeting coming up, but I need something to stay occupied for at least 30 minutes. I pick up the Java megabook, flip through chapters 3 and 4 and try to keep my anxiousness of the impending date Friday with Diya in the background.

Friday, July 1

We again find ourselves sitting through another fabulous PowerPoint presentation meeting. I'm falling asleep just telling you about it. Watching slides of textual information is similar to the fourth or fifth hour into one of those obnoxious endurance stunts, whether it's being sealed in a coffin, stuck in a block of ice, or submerged in water for a week or more.

For the first hour or two of the performance, there's an ecstatic crowd, and the adrenaline is pumping. And as the hours progress, especially near the end of the attempt, the ability to concentrate and sustain control over the body is mind-boggling. But during the middle hours, nothing is happening. The crowd has moved on and won't return until the stunt gets juicy.

At the present time, the buried-alive option is tantalizing. This meeting is about as mundane as it can get, but at least it won't be followed by exhaustion and malnourishment.

The meeting is described as a Northern Lineage benefits overview, which is always incredibly riveting. Combine that with the fact that I barely know anything about my current benefits, and I'd almost rather be submerged in water for the remainder of the day.

I somewhat listen to the slide reader, Ann Singleton, who has probably given enough presentations during the past week to receive her PowerPoint merit badge. The first few slides show how the benefits will impact associates leaving

the company. Most of this information revolves around the COBRA package, which is just barely less expensive than the national debt for monthly services. The life insurance coverage will end 31 days after the separation date; short- and long-term disability will end immediately upon the last day of employment; and the 401(k) funds can be paid out or rolled over, depending on the current account status. I find it mildly intriguing that, as a company that sells life insurance and annuities, Northern Lineage won't take a longer opportunity to attempt to sell its products to parting employees.

Then again, the company probably realizes that the associates leaving aren't going to fork over millions of dollars, so there's not as much of an incentive to haggle.

Before Ann continues, presumably to outline benefits for those staying with the company, she allows people who have made up their minds to leave the meeting. A handful of people exit as we continue to estimate how many are in and how many are out. There are 234 employees at Mettle. Our group has come to a relative consensus that 40 to 60 percent will move, although most agree the high end will be nearly impossible to attain.

As Ann flips to the next slide, we see the two benefits that will be different: health insurance and the retirement plan.

I assume the health insurance plan will be vaguely the same as the current one. The biggest difference I notice is that the Northern Lineage Hospital Network must be used for full benefits. While every major hospital in Cincinnati and northern Kentucky is listed, there are some minor grumblings concerning Louisville hospitals not being listed.

Then the retirement information appears. One reason people stay with this company for 342 years is that it's tough to walk away from a great retirement package. Of course, this isn't the norm everywhere; a 2004 Bureau of Labor Statistics study noted that the percentage of workers employed for 10 years or more at the same company has dropped 3 to 4

percentage points since 1998.²

According to the sample calculations, with early retirement (age 55) and 20-plus years of servitude, an associate can reasonably receive \$1,500 a month. If I stay with Northern Lineage that long, I will be close to that range, although Jeff will earn a bit more, since he's younger and has been with the company close to five years. To be eligible at all for the pension plan, you have to stay at least five years; if you don't, you lose any of the retirement funds that could await you.

There are some other terms mentioned — a pre-retirement death benefit and a deferred annuity benefit are among the slew of supposed benefits — that I glaze over. The others listen intently, except Barry, who is undoubtedly debating internally where to eat lunch. I'm content to return to my desk, eat lunch, play around on my computer for the rest of the day, and day-dream about tonight's date with Diya.

I'm not convinced yet that this is a real date, but I definitely want it to be. I walk from the parking lot and sit on a stone ledge outside. I don't see Diya's vehicle, although I can't vividly remember what it looks like. I know I've seen her in the parking garage at least once. I assume that the minute she pulls in, I will remember.

My memory doesn't fail me. The door swings open from the blue TrailBlazer, which on a normal day can be seen from at least three miles away. It's one of those SUVs that gets close to 4.25 miles per gallon and would probably crumple if it were in an accident with a tricycle. I catch up with Diya as she starts to walk inside the Thai restaurant.

"I thought maybe you were going to stand me up," I say as the hostess takes us to our seat.

"No, I would not do that," Diya says. "A friend called just as I was leaving my apartment. He asked me where I was

going, and I told him I was meeting you for dinner. He said that I hadn't told him I was going on a date."

"Ah, he's probably just jealous. He probably thought he would have dinner with you tonight."

"I don't think he's jealous at all. He likes my dog more than me."

"Your dog?"

"Yeah, he'll call and ask to speak to her. And he always asks how she's doing. I think he is my friend just to be friends with the dog."

I laugh. Not that there's anything wrong with calling someone to talk to the dog. I wonder whether the guy really likes the dog, or whether she's just a little naïve to think this. Or possibly she's just making a joke about the whole thing ... the most likely reason. It's always difficult when you meet someone to know how humorous the person is. Diya acts introverted around me 80 percent of the time, but she can also come up with a smart-ass comment at a moment's notice. While Barry can be a straightforward clown, Diya can be more subtle but just as effective at telling jokes. I wonder if my lack of distinguishing between funny and serious will get me in trouble in the future.

The restaurant is dimly lit and can pass for a romantic hide-away or an entrance to a coal mine. Diya requests that I select something without beef or pork so she can try it. She's Hindu, which forbids her from eating the aforementioned foods. I have always been curious about the mystical relationship Hindus have with cows. Because of all the things cows can give (milk in particular), they are considered a symbol of selflessness and abundance. So if cows are selfless, why does Hinduism not condone using them for meat and leather?

Maybe I'm just biased because members of my family raise cattle. It's not that I have anything against bovines — they're just not the most brilliant animals. I'm certain cows would finish mammal *Jeopardy!* with negative money. I have always

been intrigued by the religious connections in India that allow cattle to roam free, unharmed, unbranded, and uneaten. Honestly, I'm not trying to make fun of Hinduism; I'm just trying to understand it. My dating future depends on it.

"Do you believe in Santa Cow?" I regretfully ask.

She scowls at me, so I switch subjects.

"So, um, how did you end up in Louisville?" I say.

"When I first came to the United States, I lived in New Jersey for a couple of years and worked as a database admin there," she says. "Then I moved to Colorado for a year and came here after that."

I think back to our earlier conversation in the day and how she has a two-year work visa. This morning, I assumed she started in America with Mettle.

"Wait a minute ... you've been over here longer than I thought," I say. "Haven't you been here long enough to gain citizenship? Or have you been on work visas the entire time? That's at least five years now."

"It's a little more complicated than that," Diya says. She has the same sullen look on her face that she had this morning.

"I was engaged, but he broke it off at the last minute," Diya says. "I didn't know if others at work had told you this yet, so I thought I should tell you before you found out from someone else."

I feel somewhat indifferent about this information. It had not crossed my mind that she could have been married before. Regardless, I'm on a date with an amazingly beautiful girl, so unless the next thing she tells me is that she's really a guy, well...

"My fiancé was already in the U.S. when I came to New Jersey. We planned to get married over here, and I moved with him to Colorado for his job. He sent in all of the information for both of us for the green card process, which is a normal procedure. Then we moved to Louisville. But as soon as we moved here, he started seeing another woman. Then he left ...

he wouldn't contact me back, so I had to reapply for the green card. There was no choice. That's one of the reasons why I don't want to have to apply again with this move to Cincinnati. I've been through this already."

"So you moved to Colorado to be with him, and then he just left?"

"Yes, he just left. It was ..."

She trails off and tilts her head down. I start to say something, but our food arrives. We both smile at the waitress.

"I'm really sorry for bringing this up," I say. "I didn't mean to get so personal."

"It's OK," Diya says. "I don't mind telling you this, really. You should know it. It's just that ... you're the first American guy I've been on a date with. I feel really comfortable around you."

"I don't know if I'll be able to help you much, but it's good to talk about things and let them out."

"You are right. I haven't told very many people about this because I still don't understand it. I don't know what happened."

"What do you mean you don't know? You don't know why he left?"

"No ... I really don't know. He never told me."

"How could he never tell you? How did you find out?"

"From a mutual friend. We had a little fight, and he decided to return to India for a while to visit his family. When he first came back, I thought everything was fine, but I guess it wasn't. He ended up getting a separate apartment, saying he just needed some time to figure it out. I thought that was a good thing, but he never talked to me. After a couple of months, there was a knock at the door, and this guy told me about the other girl. What could I do? He lived in the same apartment complex, just down the road from me."

"But didn't he tell you later?"

"He wouldn't answer the phone. I tried to talk to him at his

apartment, and he wouldn't come out. I even went to his parents' house in India, and they wouldn't talk to me."

"And you still don't know? It has been, what, two years? Where is he?"

"He lives in Louisville still. I see him sometimes. I think his mom found a different girl for him to marry."

At this point, I have to ask the obvious.

"Your marriage ... was it arranged?"

"Yes ... but his mom never liked me. We met four times before we were married. He was a nice man, but it just didn't work out. To my friends and family back at home, it looks like my fault."

"Your fault?"

"Yes ... in India, if there's a relationship issue, it's always the woman's fault."

So it's Diya's fault that her fiancé's mother found a new woman for her son to marry? And the guy left a gorgeous woman for no reason? Holy cow! I avoid cultural embarrassment by muttering this interjection under my breath.

Apparently in India, marriage works like this: parents of two families arrange a lifetime between their children. And it is up to the woman to adjust to whatever the man and his parents wish. But this isn't applicable for an Indian woman with a job and just a small dose of independence. Unfortunately, there are still numerous people in the homeland stuck on the Old World standards.

I have to be honest: Arranged marriages intrigue me. But I don't understand how she can feel guilty, because he never explained why they split up.

Considering the topics, we have an enjoyable meal, most likely due to the excellent cuisine at the Thai restaurant. All things considered, this can lead somewhere, perhaps back to my place for a nightcap ... but then I snap out of it. I'm not putting any moves on her. Not after the story she just told. I mention that my sister has a volleyball game tonight, so we

drive over to it.

“So Jason, what is a date to you?” says Diya after we arrive at the nearby sand volleyball courts.

“My definition may differ from other people’s,” I say. “You may want to ask someone else.”

“No, I want to know your definition.”

“I guess a date would be a meeting between two unattached people who are at least remotely interested in each other’s company.”

“But does there have to be something physical between people on a date?”

“I don’t think so ... why do you ask?”

“I just thought all American guys wanted something to be physical on a first date.”

“There are guys who would expect that. But there are many who don’t. There are many different types of dates, and types of guys and girls. There are a lot of American girls who would expect that on a first date, too.”

“There are Indian girls who are like that as well ... maybe that’s why they come to America.”

Afterward, we hang out with my sister and her teammates briefly. I introduce her to various people, saying she is my “friend,” which will surely lead to more questions (especially from my sister) in the future. We then start back to the restaurant, where Diya left her vehicle. On the return, I’m curious about her other dating escapades.

“Just recently I was talking to a guy in California,” Diya says. “He lived near my brother, in Sacramento. I talked to him on the phone a couple of times and went to visit him. But when I went there, he went off to play cricket.”

“Did he know you were coming to visit?” I say.

“Yes! But he wanted me to go by his schedule. And I just sat at his place, waiting for him to come home. Finally, I left and went back to my brother’s. That was ridiculous.”

“I know cricket is the national sport of India, but does it

always take precedent over a lovely lady?”

She pinches me and laughs. I take that as a good sign. On the return trip, we pass a local jewelry shop.

“Look Jason, we should stop to pick out some diamond earrings for me!” Diya says.

This seems like a strange comment, although we’ve already touched on the physical nature of relationships ... why not discuss the material side of things?

“It appears that they’re closed,” I say, with a sigh of relief.

We make it back to Diya’s TrailBlazer. An evening like this, we decide subconsciously, is best savored before analyzing what occurs next. As coworkers, we have plenty of issues already with the relocation process. As friends, we still need to discover how to assist each other in making work-related decisions. But as lovers, coming from totally different backgrounds, under rather opposite circumstances ... that’s something that will remain unknown for the moment.

Tuesday, July 5

I barely notice the two men and one woman, wearing suits, in the elevator this morning. I initially reason they are going to another floor, for another company, but they press the “5,” which is a Mettle floor. Maybe Northern Lineage sent fashion coordinators to properly dress everyone before the move?

I think about it for six seconds, then my mind goes back to Diya. Since Friday’s date, we have talked on the phone every day. We have discussed work, but our conversations normally center on our daily activities, family members, and silly/interesting stories. Yeah, it sounds like a burgeoning friendship to me, too.

The time we have spent together has been a welcome change from many girls I’ve dated in the past. Maybe it’s because she’s older than me, and more mature, or maybe it’s because she’s much more intelligent than former female friends. I have dated girls of numerous ethnicities, yet Diya and I so far

seem to have a fair amount in common.

Despite the good vibes, there is still something not quite right about the whole thing, and this is where it comes back to work. I have had pretty bad experiences in the past with dating girls from the office, so part of me says that I should stay away from this friendship. With the turmoil at Mettle, and everyone packing their bags to head to Cincinnati or bust, forging a long-lasting relationship would be much more than a consolation prize. I still don't see Diya and me as a couple, but I could probably warm up to the idea if I were standing close to her.

Instead, I find myself snuggling with Jeff at his desk.

I want to tell Jeff something about Diya, maybe commenting (in a Sean Connery voice, obviously) that things are about to get hot and heavy. But she was adamant about not discussing "us" with people at work. It may be strenuous to hide something from Jeff, as close as we have become, but I will try to keep my word.

Jeff hangs up the phone and belts out a strange sigh.

"I can't believe this is happening," Jeff says.

"Don't tell me ... Northern Lineage will be making every Mettle employee wear two ties?" I say. Jeff smirks as if what I said is the dumbest joke in modern history.

"That was Raj on the phone," Jeff says. "Apparently, Sally found out about the conversation Raj and I had about moving teams. She's pissed because she thinks we went around her."

"I thought the move was just speculation," I say. "Why would it matter?"

"I have no clue," Jeff says. "They just told us we were freakin' moving to Cincinnati, and now she's going to get mad because I want to switch departments?"

"Don't get hostile. There's nothing they can do to you."

"Sure they can. They can make my life a living hell."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You'll figure it out sooner or later."

I haven't witnessed anything too terrible at Mettle, although

Northern Lineage could be another story. I hadn't seen this emotion from Jeff yet. He seems to be the one happy-go-lucky person who, no matter how bad it looks, would still be able to find time to make jokes. But he's so pissed right now that he can't even play on his computer. He looks a little lost, like a boy whose parents decide to ride a roller coaster while he wanders off into the nearby woods, looking for his favorite theme park character.

"So what are you going to do now?" I say, slowly moving back to my cube.

"I just don't want to be stuck doing something I hate," Jeff says.

"Hate" hasn't even entered my vocabulary at this point. My job is cool, I feel as if I belong, and I just had a date with an awesome girl who's a coworker. If hating your job has an opposite, this is it.

Cincinnati isn't that far away, either. A future with the company and the people here isn't out of the question.

But there's something, however minor, that doesn't sit right.

"Why would you hate this?" I say.

"If they are worried about me switching departments, that shows me I don't have a say in my job," Jeff says. "If I'm not happy here, why would I want to stay?"

"Why would people stay if they aren't happy?" I say.

"That's an easy answer. Once you're in for so long, you don't want to leave. It doesn't make sense. You have to stay."

I wonder what the time limit is on having to stay with the company. I don't want to be the guy trapped in the 9-to-5 job, eating the same minestrone soup and stale breadsticks from the cafeteria every day.

Diamonds earrings are forever, not my job at Northern Lineage.