

THIRD EYE EDITION

Someplace else

21 May 2013 at 22:27

I have this deep, persistent uneasiness about scientific research which shows no signs of abating. I can, of course, justify it. The mad, white-coated geniuses at the labs caused worldwide panic that cellphones will be the death of us. Now they've made this volte face that we can call and text and play games all we want, because there's no proof cancer will come calling if we do. Now I'm confused as to whether they have sold out to the cellphone companies or they had made an honest mistake. Now their next tall claim is that, within the next two decades, we would master the art of living forever. I don't know about the rest of you, but if I want to live forever, it's only because on the other side of the veil, I'm not sure there is twenty-four hour cable TV or my favourite brand of orange blossom organic tea. But Aubrey de Gray (he does sound like a seventeenth century French marquis, doesn't he?), who is, make no mistake, a biomedical gerontologist, says we would soon have the means to banish disease and extend life indefinitely. All we would have to do is to visit the doctor regularly for maintenance, which would include gene therapy, stem cell therapy, immunity-stimulating sessions and so on. Of course he is not going to let on about how much all this is going to cost. Read the fine print, silly. The truth of the matter is, and by the way, the truth really hurts, the only people who will live forever will be the rich and famous and the ones who have raised fine, decent kids who will gladly foot the bill for their parents' shot at immortality. Since I don't belong to the first club of lucky geezers and I don't have the heart to let my kids go bust just to keep me breathing, I guess I will keep away from all this tinkering with the human body. In my old fashioned way, and as a lover of literature, I would like to point out how Mary Shelley proved that messing with God's creation could make it mutate to a real hellraiser called Frankenstein. And if truth becomes stranger than fiction, duck for cover.

I am also not very convinced that doing away with diseases altogether is such a bright idea. If no one is paying you much attention, and you want a dose of good old TLC, just go ahead and catch a bug. Fever up enough to crack the thermometer, break out into scary rashes, double up in agony. Soon your family and friends will be running pell mell to plump your pillows, dab that forehead with cold compresses, call for the doctor, tenderly spoon chicken soup into your mouth, bombard you with get well cards and surround you with so many bouquets that you'll be puzzled whether you've just got married or given birth. Even though being ill is something of a nuisance, it is indeed amply compensated for by the looks of loving concern on the faces hovering over you. You have the privilege of doing absolutely nothing, being spoilt like a child and eating your meals in bed. But of course you need to have your finger on the pulse, as it were, and know exactly when to get better. If you languish in bed too long, the fuss will die down and you will be left feeling pretty foolish.

Though I have stated earlier that I harbour this deep suspicion when it comes to scientific research, I can't seem to control myself from citing just such sources. Researchers now claim that people who go on holiday are likely to have happier lives than people who don't. I am a bit flummoxed as to why this should be so. Would anyone be happy enduring the stress of making airlines and hotel reservations, packing, facing the dangers of lost luggage, stolen documents, food poisoning, missed flights and beaming for the benefit of the camcorder, when you are actually fuming inwardly about the insolent room service guy? I guess

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happiness doesn't ensue from dazzling beaches, thrilling joyrides and exotic ruins. It comes later, when you've dragged the suitcases in from the cab and your home enfolds you within its walls. It is a small piece of this vast earth but it is the only place that you can call your own. Its curtains may not match the colour scheme of the walls, there's an inch deep layer of dust on the sideboard, well-thumbed magazines are all over the couch. But then, that's exactly what puts you at ease. It is not perfect, and neither are you. Holidays help you to appreciate this and it is indeed so very restful to resume your normal, humdrum existence with its familiar rhythms and small expectations.

I have been on plenty of vacations myself, trotting up steep hillsides, being almost submerged by waves and making snowballs but somehow, there is always someplace else that beckons my wandering soul. Family lore has it that my ancestors were wanderers, endlessly on the move, carrying with them the arcane arts of meditation, unfettered by walls and fences. Perhaps the only way I have held on to this legacy is by travelling through books, boundless and free, slipping through time zones and spanning continents. When we travel, we are on a voyage to explore new sights, enjoy new experiences and create memories we will cherish for a lifetime. But when I ascend the hills and wait for the bend in the road that will reveal to me my childhood idyll-Shillong, I know I am not there to find anything new. What matters to me is the quiet assurance that the old familiar sights and sounds still exist – whether it is the luminous stained glass windows of the cathedral, the musical cadences of the Khasi language, the frisky boys in their wooden carts careening down the hill slopes, the sougling of the pines, and the silvery – orange fish leaping in the waters below the archway of the wooden bridge at the lake. When I see the schoolgirls in their long socks and blue gym-skirts, I am one of them, pine cones in my pockets and dreams in my head. There I am in my overcoat and ponytail on a freezing December evening, chomping my way through my sixth *jalebi*. There I am at the Kelvin, cowering in my seat as King Kong lumbers menacingly over the skyscrapers of New York city. In the Shillong of today, as I hurry back to the hotel in the pouring rain, I remember that long ago girl who loved to slip her shy self into her red raincoat and pretend she was invisible. How I wish today that some things about this place were invisible too.. the bumper to bumper traffic jams, the black, poisonous puffs of exhaust, the red, naked hillsides savagely stripped of their green cover. I wish the litter in the streets was invisible too, as also the tacky souvenirs displayed for the tourists. This once beautiful place is losing so many of the features that have always drawn people to her from across the country and even beyond. But maybe this is just what people would call development, and if there are those who make a decent living from running hotels, shops and taxis, perhaps I have no right to peddle this sentimental drivel.

Last weekend, we were not into boating, cave exploring or even catching a bird's eye view of Shillong. What worked for me instead were the quiet, dream-like hours spent on a cozy sofa by the glass windows of Bread Cafe in Police Bazar. Sipping my coffee (they had created a perfect white heart on the foam, don't ask me how), I looked down at the rain slicked streets now and then as I dipped into Mario Vargas Llosa's *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter*. I flitted between the worlds of eighteen year old Mario, a law student who falls scandalously in love with his Aunt Julia, the 32 year old divorced wife of his cousin in a Peruvian town and that of Shillong awakening to life on a muggy monsoon morning. Further up on the square,

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men stood with bundles of newspapers, next to the wizened women in shawls expertly splicing betel nuts for the glass bottles atop their battered packing case shops. On the other side, the mall selling Chinese shoes and Korean T-shirts was gearing for the hard sell. The staff at this cafe had still not taken down its Christmas and New Year decorations. The strands of silver confetti and tinsel balls, the plastic mistletoe was just my kind of sentimentality that outlives its time. There is more evidence of this trait in me when I drop in at a bookstore that evening. The elderly Khasi gentleman in charge recognises me from my previous visits down the years. As I browse desultorily, I realise it is getting late and he wants to close shop. I too find nothing I want to buy. But he looks hopeful and I don't seem to have the heart to walk out just like that. Then I spy a stack of books at a reduction sale. The usual winning friends and influencing people tomes. Finally I hit pay dirt – a collection of dusty, frayed at the edges letter-pads – autumn trees, soulful girls with long tresses and porcelain skins – haunting fairytale pictures in faded imprints on notepaper meant for secret missives of a lost, courtly age. These were the notepads we had fallen in love with as giddy-headed young girls, though we were never sure there existed boys sensitive and artistic enough to pen fervent epistles on such paper for us. The gentleman in charge quoted a ridiculously low price for them, wryly noting that nobody wrote letters these days. I promptly picked up no less than ten of these letter-pads. I have no real use for them but to me, they are some of the last relics of a lost age, a time impossible to imagine for the generation after mine. When I keep them fondly on my study table, I will have a feeling that there is at least something of the tenuous past I can hold on to, even though the little girl with pine cones in her pockets and dreams in her head seems as elusive as ever.