



[SPICE OF LIFE]

THE DISAPPOINTMENT OF
ALONE
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 ON THE ROAD

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BY CHITRA DIVAKARUNI | since February, when my first novel, "The Mistress of Spices," came out, I've been on book tours -- you know, that modern phenomenon designed by marketing people to sell a few extra volumes, but mostly to keep authors humble.

Come on, you're thinking -- book tours? Where they fly you first class to leading metropolitan centers and put you up in five-star hotels with Jacuzzi-bathtubs larger than your living room? Where you get to eat at restaurants whose entrees resemble modern sculpture and charge all the booze you want to room service and get on "Oprah" in between? Where hundreds of fans stand in line for hours for an autograph and a handshake?

Ha.

OK, so those things do happen -- sometimes. Mostly to NYTB authors. (That's New York Times Bestseller, that category we "literary" writers publicly disdain and privately covet.)

The rest of us, buffeted from coast to coast, are at the mercy of weather and changing airplane schedules that no one informed us of and radio program hosts who resemble Medusa on a bad day and TV crews who didn't show up to tape our reading, though they had absolutely positively promised our publicist they would, and community organizations made up of charming old ladies who somehow forgot to order our book for their event.

There's a riveting story by Tim O'Brien called "The Things They Carried," about what soldiers in Vietnam took with them on their recon missions. Last week, trapped at the Atlanta airport by a tornado warning, I got a brilliant idea. I would write my own version of "Things," about what authors pack when they go on tour. I think you see the situational similarities. I quickly realized that there's really no need for me to write a whole new story. Just read O'Brien's, and replace the firearms with antacid. Lots and lots of antacid.

This is a fact: As a professional group, authors have done more than anyone else in raising the stock value of Mylanta. And Tylenol. California authors have also brought out of obscurity Melatonin, those little white body-clock changing pills you take in desperation at 2 a.m. in New York. And echinacea. Seasoned book tourers buy their echinacea in bulk. At some other time I'll tell you about all the things you need echinacea for when you're a traveling author.

But there's an even worse part to book tours. I call it the Disappointment of Aloneness.

When I knew I was going on tour, I sat down with my sons Anand and Abhay, ages 5 and 2, and opened up a big map of the United States. We had a lot of fun marking my itinerary with a yellow highlighter. We taped the map to the refrigerator door and placed a happy face magnet in one corner. As I traveled, the children would move the happy face to the appropriate city.

"It'll give them a sense of being in touch and provide a geography lesson, all in one," I said cheerfully to my husband.

"Yes," he said, rather less cheerfully.

I could tell he was thinking of the coming weeks, all the diapering and bathing and feeding and disciplining and amusing and comforting he would have to do while the geography lesson was going on. I looked at his face, and then at the excited faces of the children, who hadn't quite realized the fact that Mama being in all those places meant she wouldn't be here, and I felt a big heavy lump of mother-guilt settle in my belly, like an undigested onion pakora.

But -- here is my confession -- even as I began listing for myself all the special things I would do when I returned to make it up to my family for

abandoning them, one part of me was creating a very different list. This is how it went:

1. Wake in a leisurely manner, without being jerked from sleep by "Mama, he hit (punched, kicked, pushed, bit, took my toy away from, said that nasty word again to) me."
2. Luxuriate in a bubble bath without having to jump out and run dripping through the house to locate the cause for that spine-chilling scream.
3. Eat a dignified, adult breakfast instead of leftover syrup-soggy French toast.
4. Watch a dignified, adult TV show (well, maybe just adult) instead of a rerun of Ninja Turtles.

You get the idea.

My secret list made me feel like an evil person. Still, in the days before departure, I would often catch myself smiling, adding items to it: visits to the museum, meals at elegant little French restaurants with dim lighting instead of at Chuck-E-Cheese, uninterrupted reading in bed.

I didn't know then that during a book tour you're too busy to do most of those things. Or you're too depressed because you aren't busy enough, which means media people didn't want to talk to you, which means you aren't Hot Stuff, just as you'd always feared.

I didn't know how difficult it would be to walk into an elegant restaurant (or even an inelegant one) alone and face the maitre d's raised eyebrow ("Table for UNE, madame?") while everyone turned their heads to check out the poor woman who was all by herself.

Most of all, I didn't know that the king-size beds at the hotels would be so much bigger than our king-size bed at home, where the boys often sleep with us. I didn't know what to do with so many pretty, fluffed-up pillows, so much white space.

So there I'd be, sitting cross-legged in the middle of that tundra of a bed, eating pizza or take-out Chinese and calling home. I'd ask my husband avidly for details of the children's day. How did Anand do at school? Are they missing me? What did Abhay eat for lunch? Are they missing me? Did you take them to the park? Are they missing me?

They are, he'd assure me, but I wasn't satisfied.

"Let me talk to them."

"I don't think it's such a good idea."

"Why not?"

"Well, they're playing, and ..."

"I've GOT TO talk to them." No one was going to keep me from my babies, not even a husband.

"All right. But don't tell me I didn't warn you."

"Hi sweetheart," I'd say to Abhay.

"Where are you, Mama?"

"I'm in Boston. Remember, we marked it on the map? Did you move the happy face to ..."

"Yes," he'd say excitedly. Then suddenly, with the volte-face typical of 2-year-olds, he'd start to cry. "Mama! I want Mama! I want my Mama now!"

At this point Anand, my 5-year-old, would get on the phone. "Now look what you've done, you've made little brother cry," he'd say accusingly. "When are you coming home anyway?"

"In just five days, sweetie."

"Five days! Five DAYS! Do you know how many hours that is? Daddy, how many hours is it? Did you hear that, Mom? One hundred and twenty hours. I'll be OLD by the time you get home."

"Sweetheart, I can't help it. I ..."

"What's more important?" Anand would ask acidly. "Your family or your stupid book?" Then he'd hang up.

I'd weep for hours into my pretty hotel pillow. Then I'd open the room refrigerator and eat an entire slab of overpriced Hershey's Cookies 'n' Cream, my children's favorite.

I must have left a trail of damp pillows and Hershey's wrappers all across America. As I wept and ate, I thought of all the other traveling mothers who must be weeping and eating chocolate in their desolate hotel rooms. That only made me weep and eat more.

OK, OK, you say, throwing up your hands. Being a mother on a book tour must be the worst thing on

God's green earth. Isn't there anything at all pleasant about it?

Actually, there is.

It starts when you're on your way back, that very last flight, and it's almost over, and you start recognizing what you see below you, the colors of the mountains, the shapes of the bridges, the glitter of the salt flats. Then you're on the ground, the seat belt sign goes off with a ding, you grab your carry-ons. Even your back, which has been killing you for weeks, doesn't hurt. You fly through the airport, the one airport where you know where you're supposed to be going, and there by the sidewalk is your car. You love how it looks, messy and unwashed, and your husband's standing by it, with a big goofy smile on his face, and you know your own smile is just as big and goofy.

You kiss like you haven't kissed for a long time, you kiss like in the first days, then you look through the window and there are the boys, asleep in the back, thumbs in their mouths. And they look so different, like they've gone and grown up while you were gone, and yet they're babies, really. You want to laugh and cry all at once, you want to wake them up and tell them how much you love them, but you don't. You just bend over and smell their hair, hot and damp, like creek moss on a summer afternoon. Then you sit up front and hold hands with your husband as he drives you down the familiar roads, the pine trees, the scent of eucalyptus. You think how surely this is the best moment of your life, ever, and how you wouldn't have known it, not really, if you hadn't gone on book tour.

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