

Prologue

The Morning Report

Asok is a software engineer in one of the showcase companies in Silicon Valley, a gleaming edifice of glass and tile. He and his wife were born in India. Like many in his network of friends, he went to Stanford University to pursue a graduate degree and found work in a large company. He stayed in that company for three years, coding, learning American ways, and discovering that political hierarchies in American workplaces are very different from those he had known in India. Eager and enthusiastic, he put his heart and soul into his first project. His teammates were like family. They worked long hours together, eighty to a hundred hours per week in the crunch times. They went to Burgess Park for picnics, and loaned each other money. It was a heady experience. Suddenly, the product on which his project was based was canceled. His group was broken up and his teammates were distributed among a number of other projects. It was a character-building experience and Asok struggled with his grief.

His next project was less glamorous, and ultimately less satisfying: writing code for an upgrade to a widely available graphics program. Meanwhile, he married, bought a condo, and kept up his ties with classmates from India and Stanford, and with his old project team. Almost as in an apprenticeship, he stayed with the company until he had “upgraded his skill set.” Then, leaping into the furnace, he joined an old classmate in a start-up. They were determined to make it but found it difficult to develop their many ideas into a product a client would be willing to buy. After two years of not quite making it to the Initial Public Offering stage that would make them wealthy, Asok began to rethink whether he should continue to work more than a hundred hours a week at a failing enterprise. He then heard about another position, via a buddy from his old institute in Haryana, India, who also worked in Silicon Valley. He took the job, and found both the work and the organization congenial and challenging. At the moment, his situation is relatively stable, but he

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knows that at any time a management decision in the now vast organization could jeopardize his status. Oh well, there are many more jobs out there.

Priyesh and his wife, Sima, old friends of Asok's, are having breakfast. Sima tells Priyesh that her relatives are asking if they will go back to India soon. They shake their heads, wondering why they would want to go back. She says, "I do not miss India . . . anything Indian I want I have it right here—grocery stores, temples, cultural programs, Hindu magazines. There are three movie theaters in the Bay Area showing Hindi movies seven days a week. I only miss my family." Priyesh reflects that here in Silicon Valley he can have all the good parts of India—the people and culture—without having to put up with a decaying bureaucracy and failing infrastructure. They argue gently about whether they really live in an Indian world. She points out that while many of their friends are Indian, including a recently immigrated cousin, Priyesh still has to work with many non-Indians.

Sima adds that she has to interact with very different cultures in their son's preschool—where they celebrate Chinese New Year and Cinco de Mayo. She pauses and then notes that it isn't really too different from interacting with all the different religions and cultures back in India. Priyesh scoffs at the whole problem. All these cultural differences don't matter to him. When he is at work, it is the technology that matters. Whether you are Irish, Chinese, or from New York just isn't important. Well, maybe a bit. The Irish speak better English and he can understand them more easily. What he really doesn't understand are the locally born folks who act as if Silicon Valley was their own invention. Maybe in the beginning this was true, but now it just isn't so simple. Sima responds enthusiastically, noting, "All the different engineers from different countries . . . that is why the brain power is there. If it was just Indians I don't think it would have happened. If it was just Taiwanese, just Chinese, it would not have happened. It's all the different ethnic groups that come together. All these engineers come from different countries and that's why it's making Silicon Valley successful today!"

Priyesh goes back into his home office. He makes a practice of telecommuting every day from about six to nine o'clock in the morning, to avoid the worst freeway traffic. His computer at home is nearly an exact duplicate of his computer at work. The computer is his, but the company provides the infrastructure that allows him to connect to the network. He

can, at the very least, spend those hours reviewing his e-mail. He gets from fifty to one hundred e-mails each day. Many are work-related, but others connect him to mailing lists of people who are interested in technology stock investment, or people who like to play Indian music or tennis. They will send each other quick messages to set up meeting times or to announce the arrival of a particular artist. He also stays in touch with his family in India with e-mail, since that is the most convenient way to communicate across time zones. In addition to communication, Priyesh uses the morning “chunk” to get the information he needs in order to “set up” his software tests remotely. The network allows him to “work” in the computer laboratory from the convenience of his home or cubicle. When he is in his cubicle, he does use his phone from time to time to talk to his wife, but within his company, life is lived on the computer.

Across the street from the home where Priyesh telecommutes from, Heidi, one of those “locally born people,” begins her day. She is almost twenty and Silicon Valley is her heritage. Her father has worked for a large technical company for most of her conscious life. She loves God and photography, and works with her friends on a magazine covering alternative music and extreme sports. It is a great job for her while she is a student at De Anza Community College. She learned her sophisticated computer skills at her father’s knee. She watched him work his network, a broad spectrum of friends, to find whatever bit of technical information he needed. In addition to producing the graphics for the magazine, she markets it, never really needing to go beyond her network of church and family friends, school mates, fellow musicians and kin. She doesn’t think there is anything revolutionary about Silicon Valley. Naturally, she will use technical skills to develop her own business. If this gig doesn’t work, something else will come up. It always does. She wishes it were cheaper to live here—she would like to have her own apartment—but that is just impossible. But living with her parents is okay. Dad gave her his old computer when he upgraded and when she needs more RAM, he lets her use his new one. She stretches and goes out to get her morning paper, the *San Jose Mercury News*, from the lawn.

Norman, working on his car, waves to Heidi. He is a purchaser and planner for a major company, and lives at home with his parents. His car is his pride and joy, the ultimate object of his salary and his stock options. It is in mint condition and “fully loaded.” It has an expensive stereo—complete with cassette, CD and DVD players. The latter device is in-

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stalled in the dashboard, fully retractable when not in use. When it slides out he can and does watch movies while he's driving. He also has a play station hooked up to the DVD player so he can play games. In the center console Norman keeps some cigarettes, some CDs, a bit of candy and some cologne. In the door tray he has a remote for his DVD and stereo players and a cell phone. In spite of San Jose's low crime rate, he has a spray can of Mace as well. He enjoys using the TV to entertain his friends, or to amuse himself while he commutes. He recognizes that it is a bit addicting, though. He told Heidi that he once took his friend to the mall to buy something, but rather than accompanying him inside, Norman stayed in his car and played games on his play station. Yet he considers himself a bit old-fashioned. He doesn't use a PalmPilot, but instead writes actual notes with pen and paper to keep himself organized throughout his day.

Norman and Heidi hold different values, but they are friends. Norman is Chinese—a fact Heidi hardly thinks about. His father is from Taiwan. Norman's "auntie" Lily, a friend of his parents', drives by. Lily is an interior designer. She considers herself an amateur ethnographer, as she studies her clients and gets to know their passions. Do they love the American Southwest? Have they traveled to India? Do they love to ski? She helps them decorate their homes with the appropriate "artifacts." She understands that objects can transport her clients to their "dream space" where they can relax, heal and be whole. Her clients, often overstressed managers, need to have an environment that can bring a bit of serenity into their lives on demand. Lately, being Chinese has actually added to her skill set, since feng shui is all the rage. Her network of fellow designers often discuss their problems. They must transform industrial park offices and suburban homes, however sterile and uninspiring on the outside, by providing interiors that have "a Silicon Valley look." The image is ultra-modern with bold colors and chrome, softened by artifacts drawn from global traditions and tailored to the expectations and experiences of each client.

The Silicon Valley aesthetic is like a photo mosaic, a composite image consisting of many tiny photographs—such as a portrait of Abraham Lincoln made from hundreds of tiny Civil War photographs. While the broad outline conveys an impression of high technology and California living, the details of life reflect snapshots of people who come from everywhere, from Bangalore to Berkeley.