

Home	
Autumn/Winter 2011	
Summer 2010	The countryside is typically English: rolling downs and a checkerboard of fields. Oaks, elms, clumps of pine and fir. And meadows with tall grass where the cattle browse among smiling buttercups. Bulbous, pearl- white clouds rise high in the blue sky. Driving, I notice the dense greenery of Wychwood; it once served as the royal hunting grounds. Then a passing glimpse of Evenlode as it flows, like a shy country maid, half hidden in a veil of high grass and shrubbery. Golden daffodils crest the banks.
Spring 2010	
Winter 2010	
Autumn 2009	
Summer 2009	I stop at an intersection. It's Charlbury, a biggish village.
Spring 2009	"Which way to Spelsbury?" I ask a young man standing there.
Autumn 2008	He points at the road, going straight up, northwards.
Summer 2008	"How far?"
Spring/Summer 2008	"Ah, just a mile away. Go up, then turn left for Spelsbury," he says.
Winter/Spring 2008	"Is that the Spelsbury church?" I ask, looking at a Gothic structure way off.
Editor's Note	"Yes, it is. Take a little time to walk around, if you can. The countryside is quite pretty. We generally take the footpath through Dean Common to get to All Saints, the church you mentioned," he says, helpfully pointing to a winding track running through the green countryside.
Guidelines	
Contact	The fresh summer breeze makes it a pleasing drive. I go past the village; the church lies at back. The browsing, speckled white cows move away as I approach. "We have matins and prayers on Sundays, but on weekday mornings few folks turn up," the old keeper relaxing in front of the church, says. He lives in a modest hut nearby. It's a small country church, I observe, like hundreds of others that the Normans built all over the English countryside soon after their conquest of England. The façade is a simple and austere one, the rectangular tower rising high up with battlements on top, as if it was a little fortress. Only the four slender, pointed spires at four corners and a Gothic window over the arched entrance relieve the monotony of the grim stone façade that has weathered seven centuries. And here, under the shade of high firs and slim pines, lies the well known poet and rake of King Charles' court, John Wilmot, the second Earl of Rochester. There are stray tombstones in the backyard. He lies in a vault underneath, near his father Henry, who was the first Earl of Rochester, as the keeper points out. John led a frantic life, burning himself out by the age of thirty three. The good king Charles' courtiers were no saints, as everyone knows, but John took the cake in sheer profligacy. We also live in liberated times, with all inhibitions gone. So my little book on John might just provide a little historical window on

our age, I thought. Hence this visit to the north west corner of Oxfordshire.

I meet Stella in the restaurant of the Bell Hotel at Charlbury. It is a cosy little place, with a mellow, Eighteenth Century stone façade and big white-painted windows. She teaches in the local school.

It is through David, a British friend in London, that I contacted her. She sounded helpful on phone, and agreed to see me in Charlbury.

"I want to get the setting right," I tell her. "It's here in this region that the courtier-poet was born and raised; and I learn that he kept coming back to relax in this quiet country setting. Also, to enjoy the pleasures of domesticity with his beautiful wife, Elizabeth, after spells of wild, riotous living at the court in London."

"That's true," she says. "But, frankly, not many folk here feel proud of this native son."

"I guess they would hardly appreciate the kind of shenanigans he indulged in so habitually."

"Yes, he shocked many even in those times with his scandalous verse and his worse morals."

"Unfortunately, he found companions too. The Merry Gang was as bad a group of rascals as any."

"There was rot from the top down, in fact. The King himself was no model of uprightness. And the royal courtiers only went farther with impunity."

"The only redeeming factor was John's conversion at the end. That, at least, seemed to be sincere enough."

"Yes, it appears so to me too. Surprising for a self-proclaimed atheist. Thus the prodigal turned back home, at last."

"Perhaps his Puritan mother helped him along. The clergy were certainly visiting the repentant rake in his last days."

"True. Sanity sometimes dawns on those who are dying. Maybe thoughts of afterlife are too scary."

Our lunch had come, a typical British one. She had Wiltshire ham with fried eggs and chips. I had sausage, chips and beans.

"But folks here are more interested in local history," she said, tactfully changing the topic. "And through local support, I am trying to do my little bit."

"I'm glad to know I am in the company of a fellow writer."

"Hardly one," she said, blushing. "Though it's a privilege to be in the company of such a well known author. David spoke very highly of you."

"Thanks, but I'm just a small pen-pusher trying somehow to make a living."

"No, you do better than that. And I hope I can get a few tips from you on how to make my little book a readable one."

"I shall be happy to help anyway you like."

"You might be aware that this little part of Cotswolds is replete with history."

"Yes, I've read a little bit about it," I said.

I knew that the illustrious family of Winston Churchill had their origins here and that the Blenheim Palace lay nearby. And also how Queen Elizabeth I was kept in confinement at the nearby Woodstock for a year before she became the Queen. Perhaps Ditchley wasn't far away either, the family estate of Rochesters, where John was born. Nor Adderbury where John resided on his large country estate.

She told me a lot more about the region, its history and culture. She also spoke highly of the natural beauty of the Cotswolds, with its beech woods and rolling grasslands.

"I shall be obliged if you spare a little time to go through the ms. when it's done," she added hesitantly. "I know, of course, how busy you must be with your own projects."

"No," I said. "It'll be a pleasure."

Twenty eight, she was tall, nicely set up, slightly on the heavier side. A large bosom, wide hips, heavy arms. She had shoulder length auburn hair which shook often as she sought to make a point. Her bright, blue eyes and a ready smile gave her a certain charm.

"The natives would certainly find it very useful," I said encouragingly.

"Well, let me finish it first," she said, as we got up from our lunch, a filling one.

"Thanks for your time. I won't like to keep you off your family for long."

"Oh," she said smiling. "My mother is my family and she stays at Oxford. I usually visit her on weekends. So, sparing a little time for a distinguished writer isn't a problem. Indeed, I feel happy that someone has come all the way from Chicago to visit this area."

"On a dubious errand, you'd say," I said smiling.

"Oh no, you're only doing a job, like any other biographer. Maybe your publisher wanted you to do it."

"Yes, somebody there suggested it and I took it up. And by the way, the Cotswolds is really a great place to drive through, so quiet and pretty."

"It might be very different from Chicago, for sure," she said smiling. She had even, white teeth and a very charming smile.

"And as for me, I do like it here," she added after a pause. "In fact, I refused an offer from a school in London. Life is too hectic there. Charlbury is better, with its unhurried pace. And since the schools close in summer I can relax a wee bit. And do my research, meeting old folks, gathering stories and other tidbits that might make this little monograph a shade more readable."

"I guess that's the way to go about it," I said, agreeing. "I'd surely look forward to reading it once it's done."

"Ah, you may have to wait a year or two for that," she said, giggling. "Your own book may be out much before that."

"I can't say," I said. "It all depends. I'd first go back to London and work as long as needed at the British Museum, among other places. Go around London too."

"Good," she said. "But right now I'll take you to Ditchley. The Earl of Litchfield built a great country mansion there around 1722, about forty years after John died."

"Yes, I've read about it," I said. "And it'd be a pleasure to go around with such a knowledgeable person. The local historian, in fact."

"Oh, I know too little still," she said, blushing, as we got into the Honda CR-V. The Japanese companies like Toyota, Nissan and Honda had taken over the ailing auto-industry in U.K.

She wore jeans and a low cut black top. There were some freckles on the neck, but the face was nearly flawless, a healthy countryside complexion. The city girls might well envy such freshness, though she was not even aware of that, perhaps.

She had mapped out the route we'd take during lunch. We had to go to Ditchley first, just a few miles away, then go south-east to Oxford, about fifteen miles away.

I wanted to see Wadham College. John had got his M.A. at fourteen there, courtesy his uncle who was then the Chancellor.

"On the way back we'd stop at Woodstock too, where John died."

"Right."

The distances in England are small; the county is barely 50 miles across, from Reading in the south to Banbury in the north and the three places lay in between, even closer. So we were able to cover them in the remaining part of the day.

"Many thanks," I said. We were back to Charlbury, late in the evening, "Would you care to dine with me?" I said. "I'll drive back to London tomorrow. But before that, I'd like to visit Banbury and Adderbury if only you can spare a little time."

"Sorry, I won't be able to stay with you for dinner," she said. "But I'll join you

after breakfast and take you around tomorrow.”

“That’ll be great,” I said. “See you tomorrow at nine then. And thanks, once again.”

Banbury is an old medieval town, dating back to the fifth century. And Adderbury was close by, too. The Adderbury House where John had once resided was an imposing country mansion flanked by trees and with spacious lawns around. The pediment on top gave it a Greek look; there were large white painted windows and high ceilings inside. A beautiful country place, where one might really relax: John had chosen a good place, indeed.

“You might be disappointed to learn that this is not the actual house where John lived.” Stella said, even as I was taking a video of the place. “Remodeled and enlarged during 1722-31 and modified again in 1808, it was rebuilt in 1891. The spirit of the original has been preserved, of course.”

I thanked her for giving me so much time.

“It’s my pleasure,” she said, as dropping her at Charlbury, I moved on to London. Overall, it had been a very satisfying visit. I could now visualize better the lifestyle of 17th century aristocracy in England.

And driving, I pondered over my own life. It had been a series of mistakes, one bigger than the other. Why weren’t any of those girls I was thrown with, more like Stella?

Of course, I knew so little about this British girl from an Oxfordshire village. But from what I could make out after spending a day with her, she came through as the right sort.

She’d chosen to stay single, till now at least. All she wanted was to keep teaching in her village school. Obviously, she loved her job. And to write a little book about local history. That didn’t amount to much in a way.

But her fresh, smiling face spoke of an inner satisfaction of some kind. She seemed to be at peace with herself and with the small world around her. She was part of a community where she belonged.

I had somehow missed that kind of freshness on the faces of the Chicago girls I had come across. Nor did they have that kind of charm and buoyancy. They seemed to be pale and jaded in comparison.

And they carried too much baggage. There were often too many casual encounters, with men who came and went from their lives. Maybe they only wanted to take, but had little to give. Maybe the men they met were no better.

And I had been no different. I’d arrived as a writer, perhaps, but how did it matter if one’s life was a mess, as mine was?

A bloke like me could only connect with similar rotten apples.

Catherine, for example. I called her Katie for short, but she hated that. She thought her name was a regal one, reminding one of a famous Russian

empress. She also walked very erect and thought a world of herself. Tall, with long black hair, she was pencil thin; but fancied her figure, like any fashion model. Yet for a farm boy who'd grown up alongside country lasses with big tits, she seemed very poorly endowed. And she was no good in the sack. Proud city girls like her hardly make for good lovers. And she wasn't one, obsessed as she was with her career on the ramp.

I had no choice but to give up on her, after a year. She won't ever be a good wife or even a real companion, I feared.

She thought very differently, though. Called me a disgusting male pig for whom a woman was no more than a mere cunt. All you're looking for is a cocksucking whore, not a real friend, she screamed, when leaving. And now even if you fall at my feet, I won't come back, ever!

And remember one thing more, you lout! A fuck is not what most women fall for. A woman has a life inside. She lives in her heart, not between the legs. But you never got there! And you never would, gross as you are. You never made me feel happy, but only lonelier than ever, curse you!

And she rushed away, never to come back.

I didn't miss her too much either.

Then there was Esmeralda Ibanez. She worked in the huge Chicago Public Library in the downtown which I visited often. Indeed, all the preliminary research on John was done there.

She was short and plump with a round face and sparkling brown eyes. She preferred bright colors: red and yellow and purple. The idea was to appear striking and different. Her retrousse nose and sweet little mouth gave her a very innocent girlish look, but appearances often deceive. For she had a sharp tongue and a crisp way of dealing with people. She didn't suffer fools gladly, for sure.

We were so different, in fact. I am an easygoing sort, trusting and friendly with folks. Nor do I lose temper often. But she was of the tense, excitable kind and very moody and impulsive. And while I generally find little to gab about, she was a non-stop talker. And at 6'3" I am nearly a foot taller.

But opposites attract, at times, and she led me on, making the first moves in the game.

"We got it for you from Chicago University Library" she said, handing me Adlard's collection of critical essays on Rochester. "And please, can you spare me a little time? I want to show you my verses, my first ones, in fact. I write off and on and would like to see them in print."

"Where are they?"

"Here," she said, bringing them out from her drawer. There were half a dozen pieces, about Guatemala, the country from where her parents had migrated in the Nineties.

"Right," I said. "I'll be here the day after. I hope I'll be able to bring them back

by then.”

“Thanks,” she said smiling. “It’s so kind of you.”

“Oh, don’t mention it,” I said and went away, thanking her. I’d already gone through Greene’s biography of Rochester and another one by Goldsworthy.

The poems, as I saw after reading them, were very amateurish. She didn’t seem to be very familiar with modern poetry. Of course, they were in the typical confessional mode, yet both language and imagery were very thin. She would have to learn a lot, obviously, before taking up a difficult enterprise like writing verse. But being in the library was a big plus: it gave her easy access to all the verse she must read. And she did need that very much.

Yet she had a sharp eye and the landscape of her native land came off strongly in the verse. Maybe you cannot ignore it either in that small rugged land where mountains rise sheer and high and thick forests cover half the area.

I told her frankly how I felt about her poetry. Luckily, she didn’t mind. “Thanks a lot,” she said smiling. “I’ll do just as you say. There’s no way I’ll give it up.”

“That’s good,” I said encouragingly. We started dining out, something that she seemed to be very fond of. And we kept experimenting, for variety in menu was important for her. Sometimes it was Signature Room at the 95, with its stunning night views of the city, atop the John Hancock. Or else Brazzaz on North Dearborn with its sizzling Brazilian cuisine. My personal choice was McCormick and Schmick’s Seafood Restaurant on One East Wacker Drive, always with great new dishes.

And she was great in bed. Not many women are, I guess, but she was one. She knew how to give and to take fun. The body became really a subtle instrument in her delicate hands, to play music with: now loud and clear, then soft and gentle like a whisper. She went slowly at it, then increased the tempo till it pulsated to a crescendo. “It should be like watching the sun explode in red and gold in the early morning from up the Tajumulco,” she once said

“And what’s that?” I asked.

“Oh, it’s our highest peak, back in Guatemala. It’s nearly fourteen thousand feet up and you really feel like a god once you get there, as I once did.”

“I see.”

“And with you I do rocket up and up!”

“Really?” I asked.

“Really,” she said, lying on top of me, bare, her high breasts cushioning against my chest and her dark hair weaving a soft silken net around my face.

But nothing gold stays as they say and in less than a year she’d ditched me for Enrico, a muscular young man from Honduras who ran a Mexican food joint at Downers Grove. I didn’t blame her: he was more her age, they shared

the same language and culture, the one in which she felt more at home. Besides, he had an air of virility about him that a sexy woman like her could respond to, better.

Next, there was Vittoria who worked with my publisher and used to edit my books. Naturally we were in close touch, though only through e-mails, for she worked from NY. But she liked what I wrote and so through seven years, during which the publisher brought out three books of mine, we built a good rapport. I used to go to NY off and on, usually combining it with some lectures in one of the universities there. Or else, when one of my books came out.

Interested in English language and literature, she had come from Naples to study it at NY. Bright and articulate, she'd graduated with A grades and might have taken up a teaching job at a university. But she found that too dull and chose to go into book editing. When she got an offer from Byrne and Boone, a major publishing house in NY, she took it up. She'd stayed with them since then, rising steadily up.

Thirty one, she'd acquired rather matronly looks, though single still. Of medium height, she had dark hair, a heavy bust and bright eyes typical of Italians from the sunny South. She dressed sedately, usually in black or dark blue.

I had invited her to Park View at the Boathouse in Central Park. We walked the short distance from Fifth Avenue, taking the 72nd St, though shuttles ran there every quarter of an hour. But it was a pleasant summer evening and walking was better.

We came to the deck. There was moonlight on the Lake.

"Oh, it's beautiful, isn't it? A bit like your Naples, maybe."

"I don't know," she said. "I was too busy there to think of these things."

"So what will you have for an appetizer?" I said, passing the menu to her.

"Boathouse Salad will do," she said. "We have tomatoes, cucumber, shallots, feta and black olive. Is that okay?"

"Perfect," I said.

"You've done a good job undoubtedly, yet I am not entirely happy," she said, crisp and businesslike, as usual. It was a weekday and not many people out on the deck. That was better in a way, more relaxing.

"Why, what's wrong?" I asked. I had submitted her a draft of what I had done after returning from UK.

She had on a stylish blue blouse and a light gray skirt. It set off her face well, with its sharp, clean cut profile, dark chocolate hair. I saw the city lights shimmering in the Lake nearby. It was a good view.

"It's too repetitive, frankly speaking," she said. "There are a few new facts, but

just too few. That won't help. The critics will tear you up. The book is redundant, they'd say."

"What'd you suggest then?" I asked.

"I've given it some thought," she said. "I hope you don't mind my saying it."

"Shoot."

"I know that means starting again, but it might be worth it. Can you write it like a piece of fiction? That makes it totally different from what has been done so far."

"I can try," I said, not very sure of myself.

"Do. That is one sure way of giving the whole thing a new angle," she said. "That way we're presenting the Earl from inside out and the picture at once becomes alive, three dimensional."

I was silent, listening.

"There's a lot of empathy even in your three previous books. I think you can do it, if you try," she added.

"I'll do my best," I said. She was right, perhaps. I was not too sure myself that the way I was going, was the correct one. I certainly didn't wish to appear stale. Fiction might just give me the kind of freedom I needed to give more depth and resonance to the subject.

"See, our job is to bring out exciting new books. Yours might be one, still. So think over it," she said, while the dinner she ordered, came. It was grilled shrimp with Provencal cream, polenta with olives, tomatoes and parsley

Our professional relations apart, she might prove to be a good spouse, I thought. There was a reassuring poise about her. Perhaps my rocking boat might find an anchor with a sturdy, self-reliant woman like her, who'd stayed single so far.

I told her as much

She set me right though, without taking offense.

"Let's stay good friends the way we are," she said, smilingly touching my arm. "You are great at your job and would surely go up as I see it."

"Thanks," I said, touched by her compliment. I'd never bothered to think how good or bad I was, had just gone on doing the best I could. One was never a good judge of one's own work, perhaps. And I didn't know how sincere she was in her praise.

"But coming back to ourselves, from the little I know about you, it may not work out," she said. We sat in a corner, close to the water. The moon seemed to glow brighter overhead. It was near ten.

"Let's be very frank, Mark," she added. "Some folks are very restless and find it too hard to resist a pretty, new face. So they keep flitting from one woman to

the next. May be they look for some Ideal Woman. But that's like chasing a rainbow, for there was no one like that, ever."

"And I happen to be one of those?" I asked smiling.

"Maybe," she said, smiling. I sensed what she was hinting at. My life was getting too messy. It had to be sorted out, on one level

She quietly served me a portion of the dessert: sautéed plums in red wine with Mascarpone cream and crunchy streusel topping.

"And I hope your new book is a big success!"

It was past ten thirty and time to go.

I walked her to her Volvo and then drove out in my own BMW, thinking over what she had said. There was much traffic still on the street. A light breeze blew from across the East River and the high rise blocks of Fifth Avenue stood bathed in light.

Yet I was caught up in a pool of darkness. I was groping for a way out, but didn't know how. Maybe she was right and if I wanted her, I'll have to try harder, as she'd hinted.

You have to pay a price for the best things in life.

Yes, you have to try very hard and I was found wanting. I had to dig myself out of the hole I'd thrown myself in. Maybe she could still be in my arms one day if only I became the sort of guy she wanted me to be; a steady, responsible sort.

I looked up at the stars burning brightly in the heavens. Maybe they would show me the way.

A retired professor of English (M.A., Ph.D.), **Raj Sharma** have worked at universities in India, Iraq and U.S. Publications include a collection of short stories (*In My Arms and Other Stories*, 2000). In addition, twenty short stories have been published in leading Indian magazines and one in U.S (*The Sun*). Moreover, a dozen poems have been published or accepted for publication in magazines like *Ascent Aspirations* (Canada), *The Fine Line*, *Exercise Bowler*, and *Folly*. Earlier, 30 poems had also been published in Indian magazines.

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