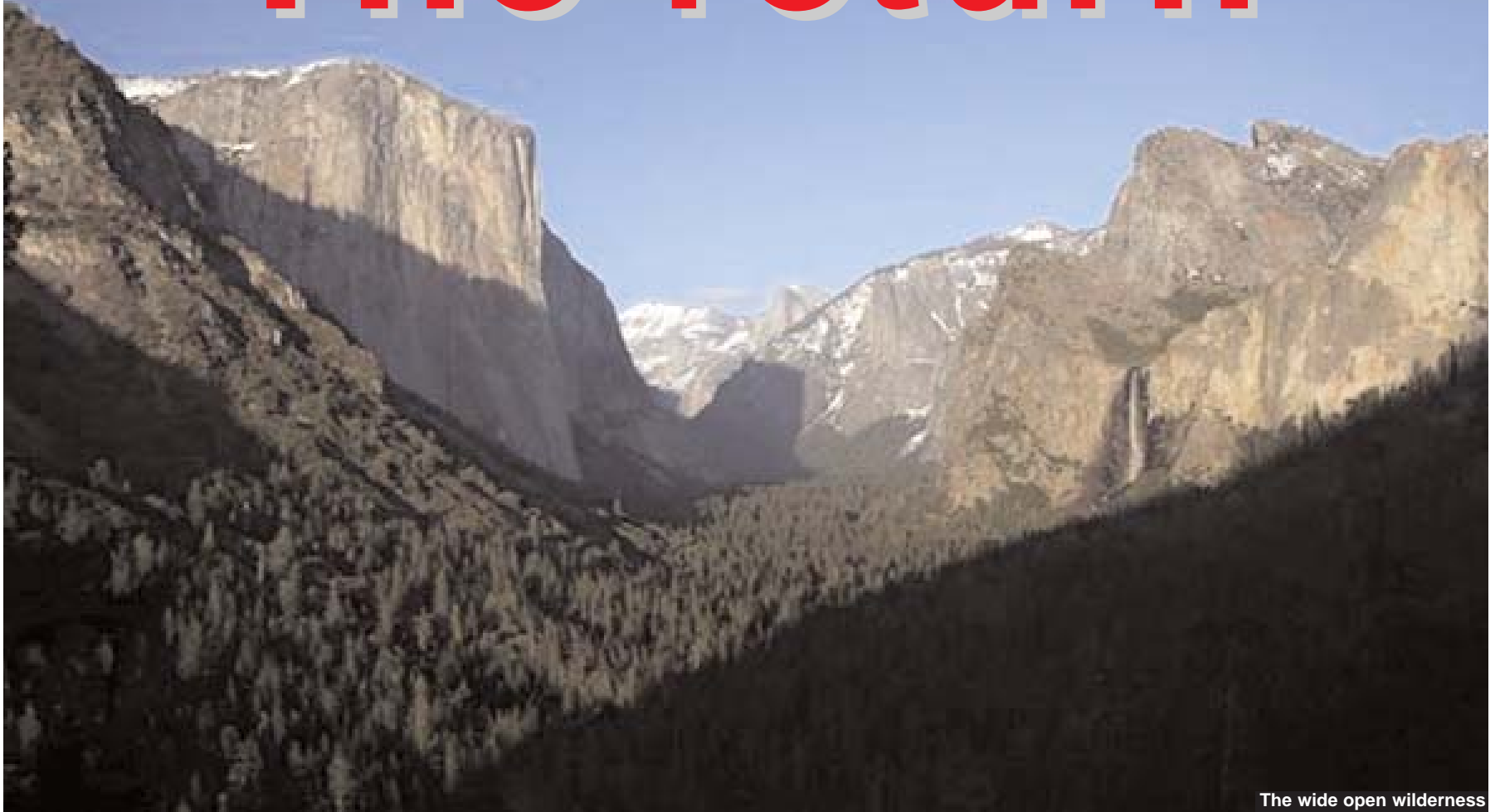
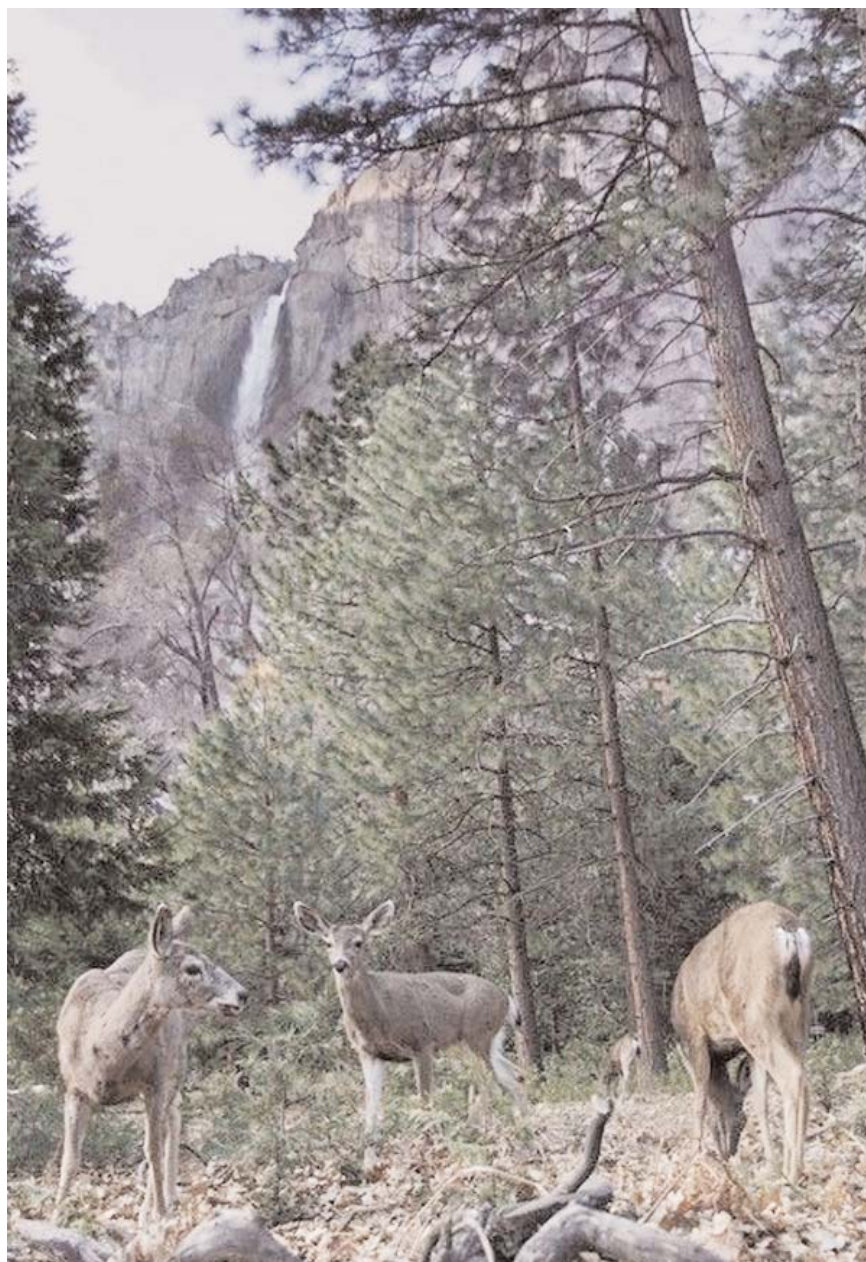


The return



The wide open wilderness



Taimur Ali Ahmed *contemplates eternity in California's Yosemite National Park*

I'm finally out there!

I write this sitting on a bench in Yosemite National Park on my laptop. The spectacular Yosemite Falls is directly in front of me, lit by a full moon. The glacier that carved these perpendicular walls some 300,000 years ago, and the spectacular waterfalls that now dive off these granite cliffs, have created a place of unparalleled, otherworldly beauty. I'm sure I have seen a similar vista on some episode of Star Trek when Captain Kirk lands on some far off alien planet.

For me this is a return of sort. The last time I actually camped – not lived in a cabin in the wilderness, but actually put up a tent and pulled into a sleeping bag – was more than a decade ago in the Naran Valley in Pakistan. I was a teenager then, recklessly going off on an adventure in my summer vacations. All I had then was a Lonely Planet book as my guide, its pages describing the seven day trek from Naran to Babusar Pass, folded and underlined. There were no pictures – the words alone were sufficient to inspire me to undertake the arduous journey. I rode in cramped and pungent buses for two days to get to Naran from where I continued on foot. The tent was from the Swiss Army, courtesy of a friend's dad who was in the (Pakistan) Army. The sleeping bag proved insufficient for the cold nights of the Karakorum. I remember shivering and sleeping wearing all the clothes I had. It was a challenging journey, one that brought me face to face with desolate, harsh Nature for the first time.

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Tonight, I am out in the open once again. As I type this without gloves, I sense the tips of my fingers going numb. The hum of falling waters echoes once again through the valley. The moon and stars form a shimmering blanket over me, a tiny speck in the vastness of the universe. Where have I been all this time? How come this long hiatus from where there is nothing but you and God. What has kept me away from this peace? Has it been worth it?

Certainly, from the time I left Pakistan, my life has changed. Instead of Naran, I am sitting in Yosemite on the other side of the planet. Instead of a Lonely Planet guide, I found Yosemite on the internet. There were lots of

pictures which convinced me that it would be worth it. I don't have time, money or the inclination to go somewhere new, sight unseen!

I no longer travel alone. Synthia, an omniscient being in her own right, travels with me. She can see where all roads lead. I tell her, Synthia, guide me to Yosemite and she does. I ask her, Synthia, guide me to the nearest gas station, or, Synthia, is there a nice vista somewhere

where I can stop and take a snack? And she responds, in a somewhat synthetic voice — but respond she does, promptly and accurately. She even speaks the street names. I'm in awe of Synthia. Never again will I be lost. Never again will I have to miss another exit on the highway, wander aimlessly looking for a sign or try and figure out a Google Maps print-out. Synthia, aka my GPS unit, has made road trips a breeze.

Actually, there is another fellow traveller who I must give credit to as well, for making



the journey fun. Let's just call him Mr XM. He is what you would call a man of many talents. Over two hundred and twenty to be exact. XM has all genres of music - pop, rock, jazz, classical and trance - as well as talk radio, news and sports. My favourites are the four channels of comedy. There is never a dull moment with Mr XM in the car.

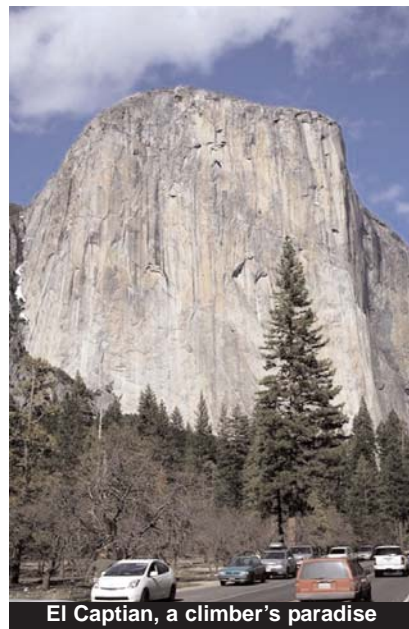
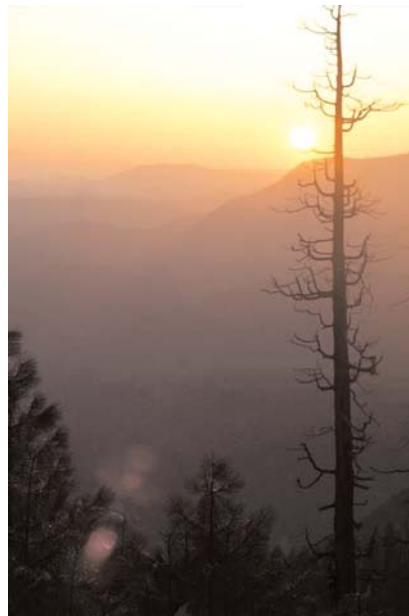
In the decade that has elapsed since Naran, what has changed most is that I can now afford some more comfort. Instead of buses, I drove up in an SUV, leather seats and all. The tent I bought at Mountain Equipment Co. took me five minutes to set up. The camp ground in Yosemite has washroom facilities. In Naran, I went behind a boulder.

The essential experience remains the same, however. I still travel alone - my metaphorical friends Synthia and XM notwithstanding - and enjoy it tremendously. In this solitude, the same unsettling peace descends. It is as though I have returned home. Home, where we all will return one day. From Living into Being.

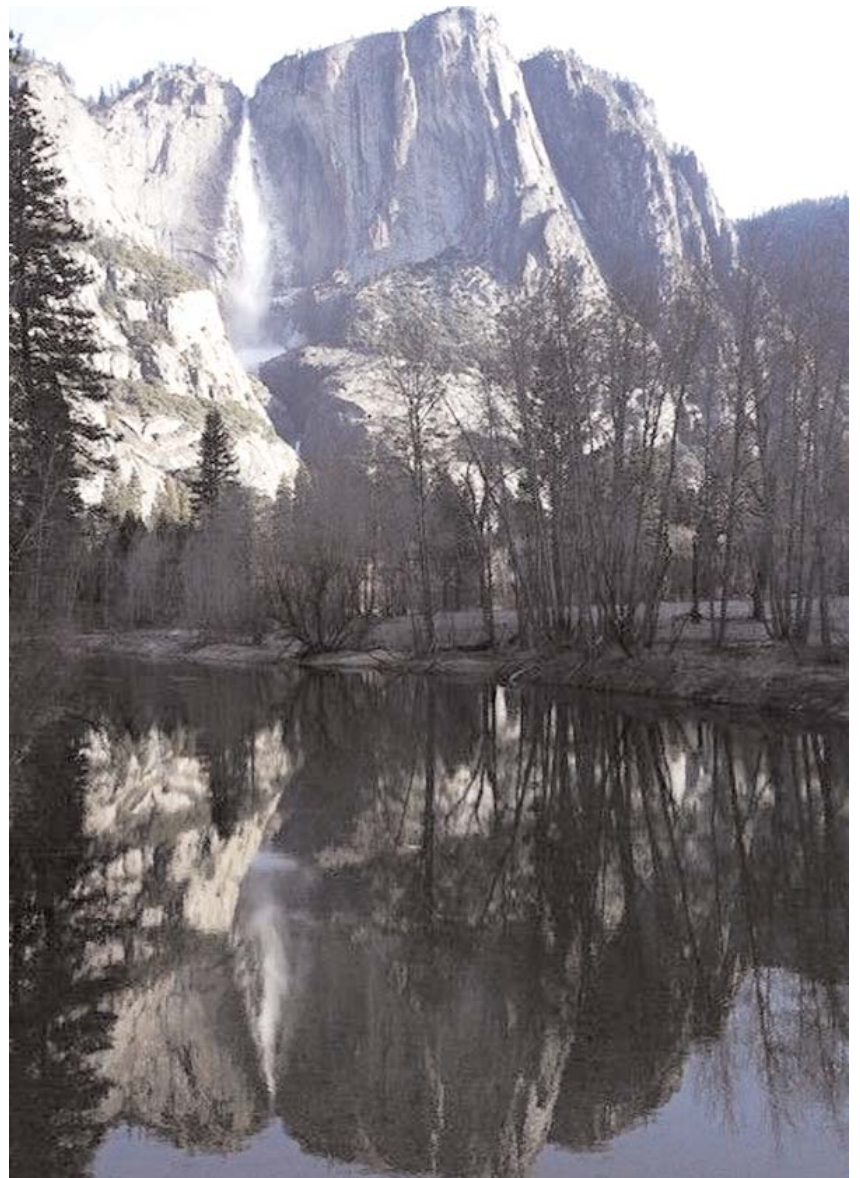
These giant vertical peaks, which have stood here in Yosemite for thousands of years, stare down wordlessly at me as I write this. I wonder, what they are thinking? Do they see me - my blink-of-an-eye existence? I stop myself. What is this urge to be seen, to be known? Pride, in such a place, is unthinkable. Even these Goliaths live in silent humility. You see, they too are mortal. As surely as I will turn to dust, the wind and rain, will slowly chip away at these peaks too, until they too are nothing more than dust at the bottom of the ocean. And it is this realisation, of being transitory, that makes them open their eyes and look at me. They marvel, just as I do, seeing them. We are both here in this moment, alive. Not happy, nor sad, nor indifferent. Just being. Just existing in awe and humility at the wonders of this universe.

One in Nature. For a brief moment, I'm finally home. ■

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