



A Pilgrimage I Didn't Know I Was Making...

O Q. Raúf, Pause for Thought

This time last week, I was saying goodbye to the beeping, sleepless city of New York, and boarding a plane for the seven hour flight back home to London.

As I buckled myself in and got ready for the crucial safety demonstration, the pilot's voice suddenly rang out with the words: 'Good morning everyone. My name is Geoff, and I'll be your captain today. I hope you've all had a wonderful time in New York, and that you have your bags and unforgettable memories, safely stowed in your overhead lockers...'

As Geoff continued with his uniquely witty banter, I began to think on the most unforgettable moment of my trip.

Work trips, especially abroad, are often exciting and exhilarating, but also emotionally draining. This particular trip had left me reeling, having centred around how to evacuate severely injured child refugees out of war zones including Gaza and Sudan – despite all manner of blocks.

But in the midst of such heavy works, I had done something extraordinary: I had fulfilled a lifelong dream, and found a window of time to see the glorious gush of the Niagara Falls.

As I stood before seventy-five thousand gallons of water falling over glimmering green gilded edges each second, and travelled by boat into the breathless mists of the Horseshoe falls, the only word I could utter was 'Subhanallah!' – 'Glory be to God' – over and over and over again. I could find no other words except that one.

Walt Whitman, one of my favourite 19th-century poets, and a New Yorker, once wrote: 'There are divine things more beautiful than words can tell.' I hadn't realised until I reached it, that the Niagara Falls would be so divine as to leave me so speechless.

And that my journey towards it, had been a pilgrimage my soul had been hungering for, for decades, even though my head had simply pegged it as a Must-Do-Before-You-Die gig.

In the Qu'ran, I am told: 'God provides [humankind] with what is needed, from places beyond man's capacity to imagine. ...For God has set a measure for all things.'

What had started as a work trip, had transformed into a pilgrimage I hadn't even known I was making.

One that I will carry – and as Captain Geoff put it, safely stow in my overhead locker – for a lifetime.