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MAKING MY PATH IN CANADA: MY MEMOIR

As a child, the best part of moving from one place to another was the flight experience, the toys I used to get on the plane and the hotels we stayed in. I was only three years old when we first left our homeland and migrated to Baghdad, Iraq. After living for a few years in Baghdad, we moved to different parts of the country and lived in three other cities in Iraq. Our migration continued until we came to Canada in 2000. It was such a common thing for our family that after a few years of living in one place, we, the children, would start wondering where we would be going next, which school we would be going to, the language we would learn, and the culture we would embrace! For all of my father's life, his job was such that every 2-3 years he would move to a new place with a new job. As a structural and civil engineer specialising in bridge design, he worked in many countries on a contract basis, and thus after completing work on one bridge design, he would look for another contract elsewhere.

We got so used to the travel that soon after settling in one place we would start looking forward to the next adventure, and would wait for our father to tell us the name of the place we would be going to next. We have lived in four cities in Bangladesh and three in Iraq, and then spent a few years living in Zimbabwe, Zambia, Botswana, and South Africa. After travelling to and living in so many different places and migrating so often, I realised that travelling naturally robs you of all the façade and ego of the materialistic world. When you travel so much, you can only take a couple of things with you that are the most precious things of all, and you learn to let go of the rest, which in return makes your journey more enjoyable as you feel light in your mind. By displacing yourself from the attraction of the weight of the material world, you feel weightless both literally and mentally, and this helps in purifying your mind and soul; only then are you able to immerse yourself in the adventure of exploring new places, meeting new people, and accepting a new life with an open mind and heart. Every place we travelled enriched our knowledge about the people, culture, and customs of the place. These experiences helped us learn to live for the moment and enjoy the present life, concentrating on our surroundings and exploring the unknown without any inhibition, fear, or prejudice. This helped us channel our minds to focus solely on the new culture we moved into, rather than on what we had left behind. This life lesson from my father is imprinted in my mind forever.

When my brother first told me that we will be leaving for Vancouver, Canada, I didn't think much about it as I didn't really understand exactly where we were going and didn't think much about the move itself. I only thought that it would be nice to be on a plane again and enjoy the hotel stay and the delicious foods, and then come back home again after some time. I didn't really believe that we would be leaving Africa permanently. At that time of my life, I was quite happy living in Gaborone. I had a job with an IT company and was running my side business of painting ostrich egg shells and supplying the finished

product to three craft stores in Gaborone. I was very busy and very content with everything in my life. I loved our little apartment, especially my room and the window through which I could see the mountains. I loved the hot summer days and thunderstorms that followed in the evening; I loved the beautiful sunrises in the morning, and the vibrant blend of orange and red that lit the sky as I watched the sunset from my window. I loved everything about Gaborone – the simple life, the simple, innocent people, the local markets and flea markets on the weekends, and the mini-buses called “Combi” that would stop anywhere to pick up passengers. It was the place that I called my home. I had no desire to leave that place.

I guess my father was seeing life through a different set of eyes. As he got older, he realised he was nearing his retirement age and needed stability, which he couldn't have in Botswana or South Africa or any other country we had lived in, since we had never lived in one place long enough to apply for citizenship of that country. All the reasons for leaving again were too complicated for me to understand at the age I was then. All I knew was I really didn't want to move from Botswana at all. I had made many friends at university, and I didn't want to part with them at all. My life was so content that I didn't want to break up that rhythm again. I was very determined to stay behind in Botswana and let my parents come to Canada on their own. I soon realised, however, that my parents would need my help. It would not be nice for me to let them go on their own; I needed to be with them to take care of them. Besides, I had the option of coming back if I really didn't like the place. So, I agreed to come to Canada.

We had an interview at the Canadian embassy in Johannesburg, South Africa. I was to be interviewed in French, as I had learned French in high school as a mandatory course. I was told by my father that we were coming to Canada as skilled workers through the points system; we got points due to our qualifications and literacy in French, plus we had a relative (my sister) in Canada, which also gave us points for the immigration application. I had a degree in Computer Science, and my father was an engineer. I didn't really understand how the points system worked, but followed what I was told to do by my father and brother. I agreed to go for the interview at the Canadian embassy with a very heavy heart. Even though I had agreed to come to Canada, my heart wasn't in it. I was actually in tears, thinking, this is really serious – we will be leaving Botswana, leaving my friends. I was trying to hide my tears at the Canadian embassy office as I was waiting to be called for the interview. I was prepared to say to the interviewer that I was only going because I needed to accompany my parents. I was so depressed that I didn't want to talk to anyone, really. As I sat waiting far from my parents and brother, I looked around the office and noticed a display board stacked with various colourful brochures. Idly, I picked up some brochures on Vancouver, Calgary, and Toronto. The brochures were so attractive, showing pictures of restaurants and shopping complexes, busy streets, parks, sports, and so many things to do in Vancouver that for the first time I started feeling happy that I would be going to Canada, to these places shown in the brochures. When at last I was called into the interview room, I went in with a smile on my face. The interview went very well, and my parents and brother were very happy that I didn't say anything against their plan. Our immigration application was approved within weeks after that interview –all thanks to those brochures!

We arrived in Canada on the evening of April 22, 2000. After arriving at the Vancouver airport, we stayed for one night at a nearby hotel and then the next day we had

to fly to Prince George to stay with my sister's family in Fraser Lake – a city about one hour's drive north of Prince George. When we first came out of the Vancouver airport to take the shuttle bus to the hotel, we felt the chill air penetrating our skin. I hadn't been prepared for this kind of cold. No one had, really. The cold was different from the cold air in Botswana or South Africa. We were shivering to the bones while we were waiting outside for the shuttle bus to the hotel. It was so cold and windy! All of us were freezing to death. Since then, whenever I go to the airport to pick up or drop off someone, I remember that evening and can almost feel that cold air that we felt on our first night in Canada biting through my bones! It was a night that I will never forget – feeling exhausted from the travel, feeling lost in a new place with no one to receive us at the airport and no one to talk to.

That first night, we stayed at the Holiday Inn by the airport. I usually loved staying at hotels, but it wasn't fun that night. By the time we checked in, the restaurant was already closed, and there was no room service. We were so hungry that I ordered pizza, lasagne, and few soft drinks from a number listed on the brochures I found in our hotel room, and we paid a bill of \$80 USD.

We reached Prince George at 10pm the next evening, and my brother-in-law came to pick us up at the airport. It was -28°C that night – so cold that I thought I was going to die in the car. I saw snow for the first time in my life that night! We drove for about two hours at night, and it snowed throughout the trip. None of us had any leggings, gloves, or caps. We had jackets that seemed like they didn't do anything. It was the coldest night of my life. The next day, when I woke up and looked outside, I couldn't believe my eyes. It was white everywhere! The trees, yard, and streets were all covered with snow. It was so pretty to see it from inside the house. We couldn't go out of the house, however, as the temperature outside was -25°C!

Within a few days, my parents and I caught a severe flu. We felt horrible, and were so miserable in that house that I just wanted to buy a plane ticket and fly back home to Botswana. I was not happy in Fraser Lake, staying at my sister's place with nothing to do. My dad was also quite depressed. His diabetes was bad and his legs were hurting a lot. My father loved walking, so he went outside for a walk every day after lunch, even though he didn't have proper clothing for the winter weather. As a result, he developed arthritis pain in his legs.

We needed to get to Vancouver and start our life as soon as we could, since there wasn't much to do in Fraser Lake. We moved to Vancouver after three weeks. My brother-in-law organised a place for us to stay for two weeks, in someone's basement suite. We then moved to an apartment in Burnaby, in July 2000. We got a lot of help from someone from our community who showed us the nearby shopping malls, banks, colleges, and bus stops, and drove us around Burnaby, Coquitlam, Richmond, and Vancouver showing us many places of interest. We are forever grateful to him for his support and kindness.

When we moved to a one bedroom apartment in July of that year, we had nothing but our suitcases and a bed to sleep in. Within the first week after we moved, my father went out with our new Bangalee friend and bought everything that we needed: desks, a dining set, sofas, a TV, an extra bed, and chairs. I was so angry with my father at first for spending so much money, but later realised we needed all these things that he got for us. It was because of my father's big, caring heart that he wanted to make us feel comfortable and happy right from the beginning of our life in Canada.

My father and I both started looking for job in our professions, and while applying for professional work we also looked for any odd jobs we could do to start earning money. We both found jobs at a telemarketing agency selling lottery tickets. It wasn't work we wanted to do, but we both took the job as we needed the money. This was the first job I got in Canada, but neither my father nor I lasted long in that job; we left within a few weeks, and I took a job as a junior programmer with a company in Richmond while my dad was still looking for work. My mother wasn't looking for work at that time, as she had never worked outside the home in her entire life and didn't think she could work here in Canada.

I didn't like Canada at all when I first came here. I didn't have any friends and didn't know anyone here. Everything was so different and depressing. I felt low and homesick all the time, and missed my friends back in South Africa and Botswana. I saved up the money I earned for a plane ticket, deciding that I would return to South Africa when I had enough for the fare. In mid-2001, after just 11 months in Canada, I decided to go back to South Africa. I found a job in my field in Johannesburg and took an IT training course as well, all the time knowing I would have to leave everything and return to Canada within six months or lose my citizenship. My mother kept reminding me of this. At the end of 2001, therefore, I returned to Canada after six months of staying in South Africa. Another six months later, in mid-2002, I left for South Africa again. This time, I didn't want to come back to Canada. After hearing that both of my parents were sick, however, I knew I had to return to see my family and be there for them. I moved back to Canada at the end of 2002. The second time I came back, I realised I had to make Canada my home. I wanted to get to know people, make friends, and get to know the communities for myself and for my parents. I needed to stay here to make my path in Canada.

I wanted to meet the local Indians, and to meet the local musicians and performers as I love music and performing. I decided that organising a music program could help me connect with many people in the community. With that thought in mind (or without much thought, really), I hastily posted an ad on Craigslist in early 2003, calling for local Indian (East Asian) singers and musicians for a music show. I felt a little crazy doing this, as I didn't know anything about this place or the people or anything! I didn't really expect much from that ad, but to my surprise I got a few responses and connected with a few local Indian musicians and singers within weeks. I got various ideas from them and met many other musicians through them. I found some sponsors among the local businesses, and organised a community music show with a live band in February 2004 at the Michael J. Fox Theatre in Burnaby that attracted 350 people! That was a milestone in my life in Canada; through the show, and through the organising of the music program, I got to know many people in the community and made a lot of friends who are still in my life today.

Meanwhile, at home, nothing was different. Four years passed by, and my father still couldn't find a job in his field. He looked sad, depressed, and frail. It was so heartbreaking to see him at home every day in that state. I told my father to talk to some employment agencies, and we both went to a few agencies together. However, none of them was able to secure a job for my father. After four years of not finding a job as an engineer, he found a night job at a 7-11 which he took very reluctantly. It was the most heartbreaking thing to watch my dad, once a highly qualified engineer who had worked for so many large corporations and designed such high stature bridges, now working at 7-11 on the night shift. His duties were to work at the cash register and clean the place, including the washroom. This job didn't last more than two weeks or so, as one night while doing this

work, my father slipped and fell in the store and severely injured his leg. He was bedridden for several months due to this injury, and could never really walk normally again after that accident.

At this point, I was the sole person working to support my family financially. I had two jobs, one as a teacher at a school and one in the evening at Safeway. I could hardly see my parents, as they were at home while I was working day and night. When I left for work in the morning, I would go to my father's bedside and see my father sleeping, and when I came home, I would see him lying in bed. We hardly talked, and on the weekends he would hardly say anything to anyone. He would stay very quiet and watch TV or study at his desk. Some people from the community would visit us, but my father would show so much anger to everyone that we hardly had any visitors. My parents' relationship started falling apart. I took them to a counsellor who suggested that they should divorce and live apart, something I had not imagined even in my worst nightmares. I thought it would be best if I moved out of the one bedroom apartment to give my parents some space, so I rented another apartment next to my parents' to give some space to all of us. My parents had arguments all the time, and because I was away the whole day until late in the evening, I couldn't help them much. My mom started staying at my place most of the time, as my father was always in a bad mood and didn't want to see anyone. He couldn't walk much due to his legs, and he didn't want to socialise with anyone. I started feeling depressed seeing my parents so depressed. I wanted to help my father but I didn't know how. He wasn't getting a job, and I didn't know how to help him. It was killing me inside. I was busy with my job, and I had also registered at BCIT to gain further knowledge. I didn't know how to help my dad. Without realising it would happen or getting ready for it, I had suddenly assumed full responsibility for managing our family. I had to work two jobs and study at the same time, while my highly educated and highly experienced engineer father was suffering at home. Neither I nor nobody else knew how to help him as he shut down completely, isolating himself from everyone and succumbing to his mental and physical fragility.

I got my dad a computer and internet service at home, but my dad was used to finding work traditionally through newspapers and didn't really know how to use the internet. Since I was out all day working, I couldn't help him much. He subscribed to the *Vancouver Sun* and the *Vancouver Province* newspapers, and applied to all the jobs he found listed there. However, there weren't many jobs listed in those newspapers. Most of the jobs were on the internet. Seeing his desperation and having met a few people who were also struggling to find professional work after coming to Canada, I decided to start a newspaper for professional career listings only, which would have a website component as well. I called it the *JobLineCanada Career Paper*, and it listed jobs at various levels, particularly focusing on professional and senior level jobs. I wanted to help my dad and all the other professional skilled workers who came to Canada and were going through similar problems finding professional work. I worked day and night on the website and newspaper, collecting ads and designing, editing, proofreading, printing, and distributing the paper all over the Lower Mainland while at the same time working a full-time job to meet my family's household expenses. I hired a few people to help me with marketing and sales for the paper on a commission basis, and signed up with a distributor who would distribute the papers.

While collecting job ads for the paper from local businesses, I constantly looked for an opportunity for my father, but I couldn't find any job suitable for him. My father's health was deteriorating; he developed severe pain in his legs, and it got to the point where he could hardly walk without support and needed surgery. Doctors suggested amputation to release him from the chronic pain he was experiencing as the arteries in his legs shrank. He had the choice of amputation or waiting 10 years for surgery. My father chose to wait 10 years for the surgery.

While I was still running the newspaper and website, working, and studying at BCIT to upgrade my skills, my handsome, daring, ambitious, adventurous father continued to suffer from pain, depression, and mental illness, and he dived into writing to pass the time. He wrote thousands of pages of English words along with their meanings and synonyms. He kept to himself, and wrote four volumes of a dictionary with thousands of pages in each. I tried many times to take him out of the house, but he always told me that he was busy. I knew he was just trying to hide from the world because of depression. It was so heartbreaking to see my father, who had once upon a time been the most intelligent, confident, daring explorer who could build his own empire, not be able to work anymore at his profession. He had come to Canada with so many dreams and hopes for a better life, so many plans to design bridges and work as a structural engineer in Canada, but instead everything in his life had shattered.

In an effort to promote my newspaper as well as my IT skills to get contract work on the side, I joined the Burnaby and Vancouver business boards and attended various business networking and meet-up events. Through one of these business networking events, I met a person who needed some help with software for his company. After I helped him with his software program, he offered me a full-time job in his department, which happened to be the exploration department of a Canadian diamond mining company.

Along with managing my full-time job, maintaining the website, and producing 20,000 copies of the newspaper on a monthly basis, I started organising job fairs to promote professional career development and help connect job seekers with recruiting companies. I organised three job fairs per year – two in Burnaby and one in Vancouver. From 2004 to 2009, I maintained this hectic schedule, but I was losing heart as my father's health went from bad to worse and he was scheduled for surgeries. I closed my newspaper business in 2009 as I couldn't focus on it while my father was so ill, and my mother needed help to take care of him.

The year 2009 was a turning point for me. It was the most difficult time of my life. My father had four by-pass surgeries, which caused him multiple strokes. The diamond mining company I worked for closed down, and I decided to shut down the newspaper. My mother's health wasn't good either, and father needed constant care, so I concentrated on looking after my father and enrolled for another degree program in Computer Crime with the goal of switching my career to the field of fraud data analysis. I was helping my parents with everyday housework while taking four to six courses per term and working part-time.

One evening in February of 2010, while travelling back home from downtown Vancouver after my last class at BCIT, I saw a huge sign saying applicants were needed for jobs related to the upcoming Vancouver Olympics. I immediately called a friend who I knew was looking for a job to inform her about the opportunity. She asked me to go down to the hiring office and check it out for her. So, I got off the train and went to the office, cutting through a long line of people who were waiting to apply. As I walked up to the front desk to

ask about the job for my friend, someone came out from the inner office and, seeing me at the front desk, called me in and asked me few questions about my current status and qualifications. Right away, they offered me a job for the Olympics! It was a moment I will never forget. I accepted the part-time job on the spot. Sadly, my friend never got a chance to apply as applications closed that night. I had a great experience working for the Olympics on Cypress Mountain. I worked the night shift, as I already had work during the day and classes in the evenings.

After a few months of very little sleep or rest and so much work, my own health started to decline. It wasn't long before I ended up in hospital. While I was trying to recover from my own health issues, I sent my father to my eldest sister's place in Perth, Australia so that she could look after him while I recovered from my illness. My father didn't like Perth, and stayed for only three weeks before returning to Vancouver.

I recovered quickly, and took full charge of my life again. I found contract work as a data analyst and continued with my studies while I looked for a permanent job. I received an email regarding a job with the federal government. I didn't think much about it and went for the interview. After the initial interview, there were exams to write and further interviews and security checks. The process took almost a year, and finally I received an offer letter to join the federal government. It was a dream come true for me, as I had been looking for a permanent job for the longest time. I learned a lot about Canada's heritage and history – about the country's Indigenous people and how Canada was born – from various trainings I received as part of my new job. I also took a few law courses at BCIT as part of the degree program in Computer Crime, where I learned about Canadian law and how the country's judicial system was formed. The job and the training enriched my mind with so much knowledge about Canada that I had never had before. After working for two years at my permanent job with the government, I decided to buy a property so my family could live together in the same place, and I could look after my father more closely.

We had some land back home in Bangladesh which my parents managed to sell, and with the profits from that sale along with my savings, in 2011, I bought two condos in Burnaby so my parents and I could live together side by side. Everything seemed to go well, and my father's health was getting better. Yet I started feeling physically weak and dizzy at times after moving to the new condo that I had bought next to my parents' condo in Burnaby. My weakness, dizziness, and shortness of breath increased to the point where I couldn't do anything. I was always dizzy, and at times had no energy. I was constantly in the hospital, constantly seeing the doctor or specialists. I didn't know what was happening to me, and couldn't take care of my father anymore, so I asked my brother to take him to his place in New Jersey while I got well. I didn't want to be parted from my father, because I knew no one would take care of him like I would. Yet I had no choice, as I couldn't even take care of myself.

My illness was so strange and no doctor could give a diagnosis. At times I would feel okay, while at other times I would be unconscious and in hospital. My dizziness, fatigue, and headaches made me literally disabled and handicapped most of the time. My father returned from my brother's place after about two weeks after having a minor stroke. He never really recovered from that stroke, and within a few months of his return from New Jersey, he had first one heart attack and then another in the space of a few weeks. Within a month, his third and final heart attack put him into his eternal sleep.

My life had revolved around my father, and after losing him, I lost my grip on life. I lost my grounding and my strength. Nothing seemed to make sense in my life. I was here but my heart was constantly crying for my father. It was the hardest and most difficult thing for me to overcome and I still haven't recovered. I focused on my studies during the times I could study, and my own health issues helped me not to think too much about the loss of my father, as the feelings of extreme dizziness and fatigue would make me forget my surroundings. I was still suffering continuously from extreme dizziness, fatigue, and breathing problems, and after three years, I finally managed to discover the source of my illness. It turns out I was suffering carbon monoxide poisoning from the fireplace in the condo I had bought. Soon after discovering the root cause of my illness and addressing the problem in my home, I started feeling better and returned to work and studies.

Recovering from the carbon monoxide poisoning was like getting a second chance at life. It made me look within myself to find my calling, and to find peace after losing my father. I found this peace through music and art. I joined an art club in Burnaby and New Westminister, as well as joining a music school of which I have since become one of the directors. I also organised several music shows for local artists and participated in various art exhibitions locally. I have made many great friends now through my engagement with the music and arts community as well as through my work and studies, and I value each and every one of them for their support and the contributions they have made to my life. I live with my mother now, in a house in Panaroma Ridge in Surrey that I bought after selling my condo. Since moving to this house, I have discovered a new passion that I didn't know I had, which is gardening!

Though Canada failed my father in every way we could imagine, in return, Canada turned me from a dreamy, impractical, illogical girl to a confident, strong, responsible, and independent professional who has learned to live in the moment and doesn't fear anything. My father used to tell me, "Whenever you have to make a decision about something, think about your value first; when you know your value, you will always do the right thing and until you know your value, don't make any decision." I carry this advice from my dear father with me always.