

A Cold Welcome in February

“Ladies and Gentlemen, we are landing in few minutes, please tighten your seat belts and Welcome to Toronto” the loud speaker in the plane announced. The kids were sleeping and I was hardly able to move on my seat as my son (Zulfiqar) was sleeping spreading his legs in my arms.

“Are we in Canada”? Tabbassum asked me, rubbing her eyes.

“Yes, my dear, we are in Canada now and landing in Toronto in few minutes,” I responded to my daughter with a drained smile.

As we were getting close to land, I shook (tense) my little boy to wake him up and get ready for landing. “Wake up Zulfi, we are landing in Toronto.” I shook him slowly and made him sit on his seat.

“Mom, I am so happy and can’t wait to see more here”, Zulfi was awake at once and started talking to me impatiently.

“We are lucky to be welcomed in Canada, but it’s going to be very cold outside, grab your jackets and follow me”, I replied to my kids.

It was Wednesday evening and we just landed in Toronto. After three and half years spending life as refugee in Indonesia, finally we got our resettlement in Canada. My daughter, Tabassum Fatima (9 years old) and my son Zulfiqar Ali (5 years old) were so happy that we finally landed after 36 hours of a long flight from Jakarta International Airport to Pearson International Airport of Canada.

Finally, after all those hard days and uncertain future, we were landing in a Country where people from the developing countries wish to resettle. But there is a significant difference in

getting resettled as a refugee where most of the people can choose their country to stay and spend the rest of their lives; we had no choice of country but had to accept where UNHCR would send our case files for resettlement.

We were with another refugee family in the plane who accompanied us from Indonesia. Their kids were my students while living in limbo as refugee in Indonesia. We all were so happy and heading towards the boarding station where a woman came and led us to the immigration counter. She greeted us with a smile and meanwhile asked us about our journey. I was so exhausted as the whole way I was sharing my seat with my kids taking turns to let them sleep well. My feet were swollen and could hardly fit my shoes in.

“Mom, I can’t walk and I am so tired”, Zulfi said.

“My dear, I have this big and heavy cart to carry, you have to walk until we get somewhere to sit”, I told Zulfi who was holding my pants, and pulling me back.

“How long it will take to reach to Immigration desk”? I asked the person who was leading us to the desk.

“Just few more steps, right over there”, the man replied and asked me to hand my luggage carts to him and I hold my son Zulfi.

Finally, we reached there and after an hour of documentation and Q and A, we have been sent to grab some winter clothing (Jackets, snow shoes, socks and gloves) from a room.

“These shoes are so heavy, I can hardly walk with these”, Tabbasum complained to me about her shoes which were given to her in the airport.

“You have to wear these, its -10 degrees outside and we are coming from a warm place, so I don’t want you guys to get sick,” I stated to both my kids.

We were taken outside towards a gate where a big white Van was waiting for us. Meanwhile I saw a little white layer of snow that brought a smile on my face because I was seeing snow almost after 4 years. Indonesia's weather was very hot compared to here. The kids were so excited when they first saw the snow outside. But their excitement faded when the big door opened, and a very cold breeze blew to us.

"Brrrrr, it is so cold here mother", my son hid behind me and grabbed me tightly.

"Yes, it is very cold, do up your jackets and get in the van quickly". I grabbed both kids and seated them inside the van.

"Oh my God, how can I survive here", I have never wished for cold place like this," I was mumbling to myself while putting the suitcases in the Van.

The driver took us to a motel which was not too far from the airport and told us that we would stay there that night. The next day we have to be ready at 9 am with our luggage, he will take us back to airport for our next flight to Saskatoon.

Yes, Saskatoon was our final destination of this long journey. Before coming to Canada, I searched Saskatoon but came to know that it is in the middle of nowhere. There was a mixed feeling: happy and sad. It is not easy to spend your life as a refugee, especially when it comes to kids with limited resources and financial support. Along with happiness, we were sad too. Because we left our good friends behind who were still waiting for their resettlement in an uncertain future. During that period, we build a good community and shared the same pain and status.

Our next and final destination was Saskatoon. As we had our seats in the little plane, the kids started to say that they were hungry.

“The kids are hungry. Do you have anything? But I don’t have any money to pay”. I asked the airhostess.

Let me check if I could find any cookies for them. She smiled and gave a humble look at the kids.

She brought some cookies for kids with a bottle of water. Both kids looked at me and grabbed the biscuit and water bottle from her.

“Please put on your seat belts as we will land soon.” As soon the kids heard they tightened their seat belts and were whispering to each other. The whole land and houses were covered with white sheet of snow, stunning and sparkling in sunshine. It was in 2011 when I last saw the beauty of snow in Afghanistan. The white snow and the freezing weather frozen everything and everywhere, even feelings and memories. I had a flashback remembering my first journey to Bamyan, a province of Afghanistan.

February, why are you so dry, why every time do you bring pain, why you are so lonely, why are you so bitter. I was asking all these questions from myself and drowned in my past. It was February when I left Bamyan (Province of Afghanistan where I was working with Aga Khan), it was February when my love left for a better and secure future, it was February, when I left my homeland forever, it was February when I landed in a safe country but without my love, my partner, my everything. All this happiness was meaningless for me. He, who showed me how to live my life happily, he who showed me how to smile, he who brought color in my life, disappeared like a ghost.

Ah, my love, my life, I wish we were together today to celebrate this moment for which you lost your life. I wish, I would have you by my side and hug me with a big smile like we accomplished our mission. I wish.....the tears rolled down on my cheeks.

Mom, let's go, we have landed. I heard my daughter who was shaking my shoulder. Both of them were so happy, I could see it from there smiling face. We grabbed our little backpacks and stepped inside the mini airport. The freezing winds were kissing my face and welcoming us in Saskatoon.

"Tabasum and Zulfi, please hold these bouquets of flowers and when I will ask you, hand it to the people meeting us". I handed two bouquets of flower to my daughter and son.

"Mom, they are dying, Zulfi said.

"It's ok dear, they have travelled 3 days and nights and I have tried my level best to keep them in good condition." I gave a smiley look to my kids.

As a good refugee, I brought those bouquets from Indonesia for the ones who would welcome us in Saskatoon. After receiving our bags from the luggage area, we headed towards main hall where my eyes were searching for our name signs.

"Ok kids, can you see in front, there is a lady and a man who is looking at us and having our name signs. One of you will give it to the man and Tabbasum, you will give it the lady in the black dress." I was trying to get them ready for a warm thank you for welcoming us. As we were getting closer, I was getting more nervous.

"Hi, I am Tahira and here are my kids, Tabasum and Zulfi". I shook hands with the lady dressed in black and standing beside the man holding our name signs. She shook hand coldly and gave a faint smile to us.

"Oh, and these flowers are for you both who are here to welcome us.

"Tabassum, please give the bouquets to them. I looked at my kids.

Before, they handed over the flower to them, the lady replied, "Keep it with yourself, its ok".

She refused to take the flowers. The kids looked at me like they were asking now what?"

I was confused and thinking what happened, why she has rejected to take our flowers, which we brought all the way from Indonesia for them.

“Let’s go inside the Taxi, and bring your luggage as well, “directed the lady.

“Ok, let’s go. Kids, I looked sadly at the kids.

“Mom, what should we do to the flowers”, asked Tabassum.

“Throw them in Garbage bin”, it’s very cold here, they are dying”, I replied to my daughter.