Coming to America

A new journey can only begin at the end of another. Yet, there are hardly ever any distinct “START” and “FINISH” lines in our lives; rather, we experience transitions, during which we vacillate between the decision to lament an old life or to embrace a new one. I would say that my journey to America began before I even got here—it started at the Kuala Lumpur International Airport in Malaysia, where I sat with my family and friends, anticipating and dreading the departure of my flight, and it was here that I experienced the greatest paradox in my life; I was at once liberated by the prospect of starting a new life in a place that I had seen and heard so much about, but also fearful of leaving everything I had ever known to be a part of me behind. Nonetheless, during my 30-hour, multiple-transit flight, I slowly packed up my anguish and left it as unclaimed baggage in the various airports I landed in.

When I finally set foot in Iowa in January 2012, I did not receive the warmest welcome; I was greeted by the unrelenting, biting cold of a supposedly “mild” winter—nevertheless still an enormous contrast to the tropical weather I was used to. Dispiriting weather notwithstanding, I was excited about the different way of life this new place offered me, and I saw everything through fresh, unsuspecting eyes, taking in every detail. What struck me most when I first arrived were undoubtedly cultural and language differences; how much consumerism defined the way of life in this country, how well cared for the disabled were (everything was, for lack of a better term, “disabled-friendly”), how people referred to household items with brand names instead of the item itself (Prego, instead of spaghetti sauce; GLAD, instead of microwavable plastic containers). In the beginning, keeping up with everything was difficult, for one had to be alert at all times, making sense of street signs with unfamiliar abbreviations and figuring out how things worked (how does one hail a cab here? Or take a bus?). Even paying for things at the cash register was not as intuitive as it was before; one had to scrutinize the currency, and why was the nickel bigger than the dime? In short, there was an element of risk in every errand, and everything was a mini adventure in itself, from setting up a new bank account to getting groceries. Everything was faced with a delicate mixture of trepidation and anticipation, for there were new mistakes that could be made and new lessons to be learned, depending on how adroitly one could negotiate the new vicissitudes of an unfamiliar place.

However, those first two weeks of starry-eyed excitement and novelty slowly faded away and was replaced by a new degree of assurance and tranquility; one now had the confidence that come what may, one would be able to take on whatever future challenges that might arise, for one had successfully started a new life in a new country. Quietude followed closely behind, and now one finally had the mental space to contemplate how far away home really was; the temporarily somnolent cogs and gears of memory are awakened by the silence of the mind, and nostalgia hits the person who finds stillness. So now I began to look through the things I had acquired since my arrival, there wasn’t very much really: a new phone, some winter clothing, and some household items, among other things. While exploring the many functions of my new communicating device, I remembered how crowded my contact list used to be, and the close vicinity of my loved ones was conspicuous in its absence. While looking at my new wardrobe that was barely half-filled despite the
new clothes I had bought, I remembered all the clothes I could not bring with me, clothes that were tailored for a climate much unlike this one, and I missed the beautiful tropical weekend getaways that colored my life back home. While I sorted out my cooking utensils, I remembered how I never really needed to use such items back home, and I missed the effortlessly delicious meals my mother always prepared for the family. Thinking about what I had left behind did not make me nostalgic because of the time I had spent away from it (two weeks is really not that long), but rather because I knew that there was still a significant amount of time till I returned to all of it. But as a child is eventually weaned off its mother’s milk, I too (though in a much more “cold-turkey” manner), began to adapt quickly to the newly formed emotional and physical chasms, filling them in with new relationships and experiences.

New friends were made, new places were explored, and everything was fine and dandy once more. Most of the time, classes kept everyone on their toes, what with weekly readings and submissions, and thus the pace of life kept nostalgia at bay. In fact, it seemed like I was beginning to feel “at home” in this new environment, and I even began to scoff at the initial fears of homesickness and not being able to fit in, deeming them unfounded. Being so far away from home is infinitely liberating, for one is freed of all the shackles that protracted stays in a single place tend to form. In a new environment, there are no preconceptions about a new person (other than some racial stereotypes which are relatively easily overcome), and if you happen to be in such circumstances, you can make new friends and let them learn about you as you want them to, and you are thrilled by the possibility of redefining yourself. Yet, paradoxically, it is for these very same reasons that one becomes fatigued, for now no one around you knows you on the same level that people back home did, and everything has to be explicated; there are no more inside jokes, cultural allusions you make do not get across, and this makes you realize that there could be a lot of allusions that you might not be catching too. Such are the nuances of life. Having to always represent yourself gets tiring after a while, and it makes you realize how much you were defined by your environment. Back home, you were defined by your family, your friends, where you hung out, and you could easily blend into the background without losing a sense of significance. In a new place, however, it is easy to lose a sense of significance, for your presence is not missed very much when you fade into the background.

Also, adapting to a new culture poses some profound emotional dilemmas. As one enters a new environment, how does one define oneself? Of course, speaking in an American accent will ease communication, but then how would one be recognized as a Malaysian? There is a pain in embracing a new identity, for one has to first let go of the past before one can accept and embody the new cultural influences. But time passes, and slowly but surely, one comes to terms with such issues. Furthermore, knowing that there are people who call this foreign land home provides one with a comfort that perhaps one day, one too will come to regard this place similarly.

About a year has passed since I first arrived in America, and now I am no longer simply defined by the country I was born in; both Malaysia and America hold my different parts of my life, and to a certain extent, I will forever be divided. As much as I am truly at home in Malaysia, I have
found many things I would not be able to part with in America, and it is only by maintaining a balance between my two homes that I can feel complete.