

Immigration story by Vatsala Menon

It was a cold snowy 1980 February, when I stepped off the plane and felt the first snap of bone chilling air which took me by complete surprise. Dressed in somewhat shabby, outsized clothes and ill-fitting boots, I remember trying to walk, holding on to my jacket, breathless, against the force of blowing snow, into the warmth of a waiting car. I don't remember acknowledging the kind friend who had volunteered to pick us up from the airport. I do vaguely recall the quiet platitudes exchanged. I was in shock! As we left the hustle and bustle of the airport, the landscape shifted to quiet roads with mountains of snow and ice on either side. The desolation and solitude outside started winding its way into my heart. "*This is where I will set up house and start my life?*", I mused with trepidation as the car sped through the suburbs of the Twin Cities!

Fast forward 40 years. Sitting in my small, warm and cozy sunroom, looking out into the snow sculptures, slowly melting and morphing into various figures. Someone requested that I write my immigration experience, so I sit with coffee in hand, the sun barely rising from the horizon, looking back at the last 40 years, trying to recall the time when I first referred to Minnesota as "home". Was it an overnight realization when my mom passed away, untying the last knot, or was it a slow and steady progression of life? I like to think I am no exception. Like so many others, who left their native homes, I worked hard to assimilate and fit in. In an unstructured natural environment, I picked up the nuances of life in the Midwest and gave back (unconsciously) to the community, that helped me raise my children. I often hear over wine or tea at book clubs and garden clubs, that they are fascinated by my culture. I couldn't help but think, "*I don't remember teaching you my culture*". They said I was welcoming and happy to have them over, that I force them to eat, drink, and feel at home.

I can almost say with certainty that many of us are guilty of that crime! it comes through osmosis watching parents and grandparents giving away the last piece of meat or fish to satisfy a guest while they went hungry. I often remember, the stoic sacrifices they made to provide a safe and happy home which more than made up for any shortcomings. It is about "the giving" with unconditional love that I would love to emulate. If I have in some form imparted that gift to this society, I will make my parents happy.

Looking around the room, my new "my personal space", I am reminded of who I am today. On one narrow wall, hangs the picture of a Garuda in red Kalamkari print framed in black. Below the picture hangs a doll from Rajasthan with a bellowing printed skirt. On the wall facing my little desk, is an oil-on-canvas in vivid orange and green of Frida Kahlo. On the desks sits an old Turkish lamp, a basket of books of all genres, Minnesota birds, Minnesota's Prairie Garden catalogues, collection of poems, unfinished history books, a few murder mysteries. And of course a plethora of plants with a dominant banana plant, firmly rooted and a constant reminder of home and family far away. Outside, signs of spring are evident, chirping of the robins, melting ice from the roofs dripping down the eaves, specks of green grass here and there. Winter has been long this year, and even the very hearty Minnesotans are beginning to grumble. Growing up at the southern tip of India, with 2 seasons (summer and rain) winter was tough and

synonymous with loneliness. I remember feeling down and depressed when I hear talk of State Fair, I hated the cool air and watched in dismay as the orange and brown leaves sailed down and piled up on the grass, and walkways. The thought of fall and winter send me on a downward spiral. However, like many other hurdles, I have jumped over this impediment quite successfully. Like my adjustment to Minnesota, I don't know when this shift happened, but I found myself enjoying the cool October breeze, promising the beginning of the winter equinox. I revel in preparing my garden for its winter sojourn (not "death" as I used to call it), and marvel at the beauty of the evening sun on the golden trees and bushes. I shift my life from toiling in the garden to collecting books, murder mysteries and robust red wines. Many a winter evening, I flash back to my early days, as I relax by the crackling fire, a good murder mystery, a glass of red wine and the quiet companionship of my husband, who is the real reason for my move to this beautiful land of space and greenery and sub-zero climates. Eternally thankful to my family for laying the foundation, and my Minnesota community, I successfully managed to set up house!

My Immigration experience