Lost Where I Don’t Belong

The airplane’s wheels were heard loud and clear as they swung out to prepare the landing. The sun was up high and moving further out of view as the plane began to descend. After passing through the lowest cloud layer, I could distinctly point out the Golden Gate Bridge on the Californian coast line. The pilot’s voice roared through the speakers as he embarked on his farewell speech, wishing us all “A pleasant stay in the United States of America.” The gravity of the situation came into my realization upon hearing these words actually spoken out loud. I was going to be in America, the place where many people around the world can only dream of ever setting foot! The feeling made my stomach do a double summersault or maybe it was simply due to the decreasing altitude. I couldn’t differ; and I didn’t really have time to ponder over this feeling as the moment was too much to grasp. The seashore looked more beautiful than I ever imagined and definitely more real. The wheels touched ground and my state of mind was undeniably visible on my face as my mother worryingly asked, “Everything all right, Manraj?” I simply nodded as words would not be able to properly explain what I was going through. It was like being inside a blender filled with fresh confusion and chopped reality with a tinge of happiness. I rose up and bumped my head in the overhead compartments, still too focused on my thought to even concentrate on my surroundings and hear the hustle-bustle of the people as they hurriedly picked up their bags and caused mini stampedes in the small aisles.
The Mumbai- Munich- S.F.O. Lufthansa flight landed on the 21st of April in 2009. The warm winds warned of the dreadfully hot summer season. The International Airport in the Bay Area had a touch of Strawberry Sorbet scent as I immediately apprehended the environment around me, the lights shone brightly in various colors and the huge facility had an eerie pin-drop silence. It felt so different and out of the world. Having grown up in the country of 1.15 billion people, vacant large areas were not only hard to find but I doubt existed. We proceeded to the U.S. Customs and Border Protection area and my mother pulled me away from my instinct to join the line for the “Aliens,” “Ha ha, not there! We are permanent residents now.” I looked over to the other lines. The reality finally struck me. I was going to be living in the U.S.A. now; Away from all my friends and my childhood! The genuineness of my present state seemed to lessen in my mind as we went to stand in the line filled with pale white people. Am I one of them now? Have I lost all of my individuality as a proud Indian? Would I be able to keep this distinction of be forced to change by the power of adaptation? How much will I change? We were the center of attention for that minute. Every eye was upon us. Some were filled with amusement, “He he, stupid Indians, can’t even read the signs properly!” And others, from other Indians who were on the same plane as us, filled with jealousy, “What is this?! How are they any different? So lucky! Hope fully I, too, will someday not have to stand in huge lines and not have to return back to ‘Bharat’ within six months.”

We were picked up by my uncle, Sunny, at 3:30 P.M. on the Monday afternoon. Some clouds were beginning to appear off the coast but the hot winds still made it hard and uncomfortable to wear a single layer of clothes. Well, at least the weather was something that didn’t change drastically between the two countries. But this feeling of blending in was very short lived. Entering the downtown, I could clearly see the difference that made America so
inviting and more dreamt about than India. The streets were clean, the buildings looked tall and prosperous and very beautiful altogether. I was to figure out in the months to come, that even after all these luxuries and comforts, living isn’t made easier. People, like everyone else in the world, still face hardships and mental and physical conflicts in America. These materialistic objects are just minor first impressions that intimidate the new comer but don’t play a role in solving the hardships in life that must be surmounted alone. Leaving the crowded S.F.O. downtown, the valley proved to be very unusual scenery that seemed just too picturesque to be true. So much land left barren! America and India should exchange populations! It would make life so much simpler for everyone, with lesser population density and share of resources.

Arriving at the posh five bedroom house of my uncle in Sacramento, the authenticity sank in further. We were guests in their house just as we were guests in America. Coming from a small apartment on the 13th floor in India, a backyard seemed like the gardens of the Versailles palace. For a moment, I thought that life was going to be quite awesome! I just neglected all the differences and contrasts to live in India. I think I needed that moment. Too many bad thoughts can stop clear thinking of the mind like hair clogging water drains. The days of the summer went by quickly as every day was spent searching for houses in various neighborhoods across the valley. Each house and each greenbelt seemed more stunning than the previous and eventually lowering the fear of living in America, bit by bit.

The “D-Day” crept up on us. It was the last day of my father’s stay. His employer in India, Monsanto Co, recommended him to continue his well-paying job in India as the risk of transfer during the Recession struck world was high. I couldn’t hold back the tears. I will not be able to see him again for several months! What will life be like? Two major changes at one time? What the hell! How could anyone possibly expect me to survive in the “New World”? It’s going
to be disastrous! I ran to the bathroom, too afraid to show my father the tears; they would only make him unhappy. I turned on the lights and the exhaust, in hopes of making my crying inaudible, and stood to look my grief stricken face with tears flowing down the cheeks and pouring down into the sink. My mind went haywire. It seemed all too intense. Worse than any final exam or challenge I had ever taken on. Could I possibly get through this? Will it be possible? Am I strong enough? Do I have the will power? Will the pain surmount my ability to do well in school?

School! Education! College! I began to remember the reasons for our migration. Is schooling the way? Can I make my Dad proud and make him feel like this step was worth it? “YES!” I shouted out loud. I have found it! This is what I am here for! This is what my Dad wanted for me! I can do it! It’s the only thing. The only way! I could feel the fuel rushing through my body, I felt self-assured. It was an amazing feeling. It was The Power of One.

It was like finding the driving force that would help me get out of bed every day for the many years to come, like discovering meaning to life and actually realizing its awesome potential. If I could achieve this one goal then everything else in the world, no matter how important to subsidence, would seem trivial. The flame blazed in the deep center of my body. It was eternal. It would be with me through the many adversities I was to face in this strange world. It would be with me against every obstacle I strived to surmount, through every circumstance, though I could not imagine any being more tragic than my father’s parting. My sole purpose of existence was visible. If I was to somehow survive this complication, I would be able to endure anything the world could put against me.
With this overwhelming feeling, I wiped the tears flowing down my cheeks with a towel, turned the door knob and embarked on this journey alone. Every day my father would call to check up on us and I could see the surprised look on his face, “How is he able to stand through all this?” My confident look assured him that his decision was for the best. We all knew that this had to be done, no matter what we face; education would be an aim that would minimize the magnitude of all problems. Little did my family know of the empowering feeling that rushed through every artillery and vein of my body, through every blood vessel and nerve, through every muscle tissue and bone marrow that will help me succeed in achieving the Goal.

The days were long and drew every last bit of this power inside of me was used to simply be able to lie down on the bed at the end of the day. I sometimes wondered how long I would be able to keep this going. I began to doubt this strength. I tried to not think of it too much; of course I could not help thinking about it most of the times due to the lengthy lonely day. The thought would always creep up on me, in between of showers, while biking to school, during Biology lectures and where not? I seemed to be getting crazy. No one else seemed to notice this because it all took place deep within me.

I continuously strived to improve my grades and so well on my tests, it definitely wasn’t an easy task. Long hours were spent mastering the French language, understanding derivations of mathematical formulas, analyzing and comprehending biological functioning and developing my essay writing skills. All of this empowered by one fuel: the vigor that lied inside. My efforts with the help of this unknown power led me closer to my goal. I could see all of it coming together and could not believe what I read on my e-mail the day after I had sent a scan of my first semester report card to my father, “Well done, buddy. Proud of you and keep it up!”