

An Immigrant's Heaven

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"Take my picture" I asked my friend.

She looked at me like I had lost my mind. And perhaps I had. Why else would I be in this hospital room? Who in their right mind would want to be photographed in this moment?

My friend did not argue for fear of upsetting me, but she rummaged in her purse and tried to hand me some lipstick. I refused. I wanted to remember how I looked in this moment, just as I was. This moment, when I looked in the mirror and saw the reflection of an ugly, broken woman. It shocked me. I turned around to see if there was anybody else there, but it was just me.

My friend took the picture. I hated the woman in that picture.

I vowed that I would never feel this way again, that I would fight for my sanity and come out of this stronger. For myself and for my children.

They had prescribed tranquilizers, but my mind was not foggy. They said: "Just go home, take the medicine, try to eat, get some sleep. That's the best thing you can do for yourself right now."

In all the scenarios I had ever envisioned for my life, this was not anything I could have foreseen.

Things were not supposed to turn out this way.

When I was 5 years old, I went to my father one day to ask for some money to buy a storybook. My father, of course, was the head of the household and the only breadwinner, so we were all dependent on him for any such request. He turned me down flat. I had many siblings and he could not afford to give away 5 rupees every time a child asked for something so trivial.

But I wouldn't take no for an answer and asked him again and again, to the point that he got really upset and slapped me across the face. "I have no money to waste on silly magazines!" he yelled, and told me never to ask him for money again. I was sent to my room, heartbroken.

The sting of the slap didn't last long, but the rancour I felt that night lingered much longer. I resolved that, as soon as I could take care of myself, I would never again ask for anything from anyone.

In my quest to become an independent woman, education was the key. It sounds so obvious in Canada to say that every child, boy or girl, deserves a good

education, but in Pakistan when I was growing up, educating girls was considered a waste of time and effort.

Among my siblings, I was always the black sheep. I didn't conform easily to the traditions of our family, our religion, our culture. When I pursued my teaching degree, my family allowed me the freedom to do so, but only with the understanding that I would eventually settle down for a conventional life.

The problem was – I would never be a conventional Pakistani woman, satisfied to be provided food and shelter, and promise in return to be her husband's servant for life.

When I married Mohsin, he knew that I always intended to go back to teaching, which I did as soon as our youngest son was in school. I loved being a teacher. Education was not only my career, it was my passion.

It was quite a shock when Mohsin announced one day, out of the blue, that we would be leaving Pakistan. He had a good job and a good salary as a government employee, but he travelled abroad quite a lot for work and had enjoyed a taste of life in the Western world. I, on the other hand, could not imagine leaving my country, my family, my comfort zone. We had three children under the age of 8 when he made this decision.

My only reassurance was that my sister lived in Toronto, and whenever she would come back to visit us in Pakistan with her family, I was so impressed with everything they had – not only material possessions, but their lifestyle, and the way they talked about Canada. And her children – so beautiful, so intelligent – were going to school with all the opportunities for higher education that I wished for my own kids.

I overcame my initial reluctance long enough to do some research on our old desktop computer. Google confirmed everything my sister had mentioned: when I entered "best place for immigrants", Canada was the top answer. Every website I checked, every search I conducted, Canada was always lauded as a land of opportunity, quite literally an immigrant's heaven.

We also considered England and America but somehow, Canada always came out on top in every comparison. Of course, knowing that my sister was already in Toronto to provide emotional support helped to seal the deal.

We were going to Canada.

The application process – the paperwork, the medical check-ups, the interviews – was long and arduous. Quite frankly, it is a blur. It's not a Pakistani woman's

place to get involved in paperwork, so my husband handled all of that, but we talked to the children together about the big move.

At first, they were not happy about leaving their friends behind, but gradually got on board, as I had, when we emphasized all that they would gain by living in Canada. Our daughter Aaliyah and older son Tehseen got excited at the thought of living like their Toronto cousins, but our youngest son Omar never warmed to the idea. We hoped that he would come around eventually.

There were times when it felt like it would never happen anyway. The process was so frustrating: fill out a form, send it, then wait. Months would go by. Another notice from the immigration office: fill out another form, do this, do that. Wait.

There were eye-opening moments along the way.

The first time we went for an interview, Mohsin did all the talking because I could barely understand the conversation with the lady at the immigration office. It made me realize that I needed to work hard on learning English.

But some connections are stronger than language barriers. At the end of the interview, as the lady ushered us out of her office, Mohsin just stepped out without looking back. In Pakistani culture, there is no concept of holding doors for others – women are not worthy of that courtesy. The lady promptly called my husband back in. She good-naturedly opened the door again and held it for me – “Please Samina, go ahead” – essentially showing him some Canadian manners. “You are going to Canada and you have to be a strong woman, but if he’s not taking care of you, let me know and I’ll cancel your papers right away.”

She was joking, of course, but I really enjoyed that. It was my first glimpse of the cultural differences that awaited me in my new country. It made it real; it made me believe that there was such a thing as a different way of life out there.

Over the 5-year application process, we tried to live a normal life. I had gone back to teaching when Omar started school and I loved my job. But it’s not easy living in limbo, always waiting for something, waiting for the next chapter in your life to begin, and then wondering if it will happen at all.

Everything I wanted was for my children’s education, and time was flying by. They were growing up fast.

So when the official letter finally arrived, I couldn’t bear to open it. I called my sister and she implored me to read it. I couldn’t – I wanted to wait for Mohsin to get home from work. He sat down, opened the letter and read it, then quietly folded it up and put it back in the envelope. He asked for a glass of water, keeping us in suspense. All of us were hanging on his every word. Finally, he said “Yes!”

The children ran outside to tell their friends: “We are going to Canada!” I called my mom and my sister. Everyone was excited. The countdown began.

We had approximately four months to prepare for our departure after receiving the letter in May. After the long wait and all the excitement, now it was time to get down to business with a lot of mixed emotions.

Several times over the years, Mohsin had pleaded with me to stop buying things for the house, never knowing when we might have to leave. But I loved my home, I loved decorating, I was a collector. I loved sewing and making things. My house was full of stuff.

One night, I started crying tears of helplessness – where to begin? After a lifetime of building a home, how do you decide what to keep, what to bring, what to sell? What is your life all about?

I kept wandering aimlessly from the kitchen to the living room to the bedroom. Every object, every trinket had sentimental value and a story attached to it. I started looking at old photo albums. Mohsin walked in and said: “Don’t even think about bringing all that!”

We had to keep things to a minimum. We were allowed two suitcases per person.

I was trading everything I had – a job, a home, a family – for two suitcases and that single piece of paper, a letter that held a promise that our entire future depended on.

During those four months, I had second thoughts so many times: Is this the right thing to do?

We gave away everything to our friends and relatives. It reminded me of my mother-in-law – when she passed away, we gave away all her stuff. On some level, I felt like a dead person. At least, dead for this house, dead for these people – not knowing if I would ever come back and live here again.

Those last three days, as my parents and siblings came to accompany us, I wasn’t thinking about Canada at all. All I could think about was those suitcases. What I could take with me, who I was leaving behind. Moving from one world to another.

Is this the right thing to do?

The big day came. I remember sitting outside my house while everybody was piling into the cars at the gate. My legs were numb. I was crying.

My husband and I couldn't even look at each other, like in our hearts I was blaming him for making us leave this life behind, or maybe he was blaming me for not stopping him.

At the airport, everybody tried to cheer us up. "When you get to Canada, don't forget to buy me this, send me that, etc."

I felt lost, totally lost.

If only I had known what was still ahead.... This was nothing, what I was going through at that moment.

When the captain spoke up, I tried to listen carefully, but my English was still not good enough to understand what he said. We had been flying for several hours already, after a long stop-over in Abu-Dhabi. Canada must be just around the corner, I thought. I told my children to fasten their seatbelts. They were so excited.

But as the captain kept talking, I sensed the urgency in everyone around us. There was some kind of emergency. We could not go to Canada. All flights were being re-directed to England, at Heathrow airport.

The announcements were weird. We couldn't comprehend what they were saying. And they weren't actually telling us anything, just to be prepared to land.

Finally, after we landed at Heathrow, they started to give us bits and pieces of vague information.

Something happened in New York.

We would have to stay at Heathrow and wait for more information.

What did this have to do with us? We were not going to America. This made no sense.

Thousands of people from international flights were stranded at Heathrow, with no idea what to do. All the TVs and phone lines were disconnected. Whoever we asked didn't know what to tell us: "Just wait, we don't know".

It was total chaos.

From noon 'til night, no one had a clue.

Something happened in New York.

We were tired and hungry, and we were told to find our luggage because we had to be responsible for it. There were mountains of suitcases and bags left unattended.

My husband had taken no part in the packing, so he didn't even know what our suitcases looked like. I was left to my own devices, running here and there and everywhere, collecting – okay, now I have 2, now I have 4, thank God, I have my 10 suitcases, plus the 5 carry-ons, 3 children and 1 very upset husband. It was all my responsibility.

Thousands of people had no place to sit, not even on the floors. The washrooms were packed. No food, no phones, no information – just waiting, fighting, crying.

Something happened in New York.

Somehow, the news trickled out. There was talk of a terrorist attack, and with it, there was this unseen fear. Muslims were involved, maybe Pakistanis. I was terrified.

Many hours passed.

After the shock, we still had no idea where to go and how to get food.

My kids were so scared. I remember Omar looking up at me saying “Mom, if this is Canada, I don't like it, let's go home”. I didn't know how to tell him – there is no home, we were nowhere, we were not supposed to be here. I tried to distract him with video games.

Later that night, airport personnel came around with big trolleys of food, juice, blankets, and pillows. I was amazed that they had arranged for so much stuff to comfort so many angry people.

A young man gave us a tray full of burgers and what I later learned were hot-dogs. I had never heard the word ‘hot-dog’. But before we had a chance to take the food off the tray, Mohsin stopped us and asked the young man: “what kind of meat is this?”

I was so impatient – “What is wrong with you?! We are starving, let us eat.”

Mohsin asked again: “Is this halal meat?” The young man and I both looked at him: “What is halal?” Mohsin shot me a look, incredulous. It was okay for the young man to ask, but how could I not know?

Mohsin took the water and juice but refused to let us take the food.

It was only the next morning that he managed to find us some coffee and cookies, and that became our first meal in nearly 24 hours.

By our third day stranded at Heathrow, British Airways managed to book us on a flight to continue our journey.

There had been more paperwork and more heartbreak. With so many travellers needing to be sorted out, the airline had imposed a very strict policy: one

suitcase per person. We could either throw out the rest of our luggage or put it in storage and try to have it shipped later.

We were too exhausted to argue, and in light of the terrorist events in New York, it was a very bad time to be a Pakistani and make a fuss in an airport.

So I got my hands on some garbage bags and sorted through our luggage to reduce it by half. I put my name on the bags and left them there in the hopes of retrieving them later on.

I had left Pakistan with one suitcase of books & photo albums and one suitcase of clothes. Now I was down to just clothes. Leaving behind the things that meant so much to me was like shedding one more skin in this never-ending journey.

Thank God, the flight to Toronto was smooth. There was time to reflect on the events of the past few days, but there were no answers.

Who can forget that date? September 11 killed something inside of me. It was the first time that I started thinking about Pakistan from an outsider's perspective, like from the point of view of a camera that captures events without judging, but reveals so much if you open your eyes and look.

As a Muslim, I couldn't comprehend what happened or what it meant for us. Could I still dream of a future for my children in Canada? September 11 forever changed the scenario between Western countries and Muslim people.

I had stepped out of my safe place, packed my life into 2 suitcases – now 1 – and moved halfway around the world, only to arrive with a label across my forehead: Muslim terrorist.

We tried to leave 9/11 behind but we didn't know it was coming with us, and for many years to come, we would pay the price for a crime that we did not commit.

When we landed in Toronto, I cannot explain the peace and comfort I felt in my heart and throughout my whole body. After so many hours of suffering, we were finally about to reach our heaven. I stood outside the airport, shivering from exhaustion.

It felt like home. It was amazing.

In the aftermath of 9/11, the paperwork and immigration process was long, but smooth. The officers were friendly and welcoming, so polite and so humble compared to the ones in England. It immediately reassured me that we had made the right decision to come here.

After several hours, we finally came out to find my sister and her family waiting for us. They took us home, where we would stay with them for a month until we could land on our feet.

Once again, I couldn't stop crying. My children were embarrassed.

There was a lot to forget in order to move on, and the first step is always difficult, so it was quite an experience to leave the hell behind and jump into heaven.

We spent several days just sleeping off the jet-lag and stress but my sister finally shook us out of the doldrums one day when she said: "Okay, enough, let's go out".

She took the children and me to a mall in the Jane & Finch area, walking distance from her place.

My kids' eyes lit up as we walked around the mall, discovering one thing after another. We bought them toys and books and I was as excited as they were, especially proud to finally tell my youngest: "You see, Omar, this is Canada. This is what we talked about."

Come lunchtime, my sister asked the children what they wanted to eat, but they didn't know what the options were. Aaliyah finally spoke up: "Mom, can we eat at McDonald's?" I could only answer: "What is that?"

I instinctively knew my husband would disapprove, but he wasn't with us, so off we went for our first lunch at McDonald's.

My sister took care of all the orders, since we had no clue what to do. The children were so proud, walking to our table with the trays. We loved it. It was beautiful. We kept talking about it afterwards. We were so impressed with the whole experience: how clean it was, and how efficient, and the way they serve the food; how the people eat and then throw away their garbage and bring back their trays. The burgers, the salads, the fries, the juices. I still remember how much I loved the apple pie. Everything was amazing to us.

The children were excited to tell their dad about it at the end of the day, and I could see Mohsin stiffen up but he didn't say anything in front of my sister and brother-in-law. He took me aside afterwards and told me that was not halal meat. "What are we supposed to do?" I asked him. "If you're not sure, don't eat meat" was his reply. "That's not going to happen", I thought to myself. But the next time we went to McDonald's, I told my kids "Let's try the fish sandwiches".

None of us liked them as much as the burgers.

Ever since I could remember, I was always a busy person. Busy with studies, tutoring after school to make some money, and then raising a family and going back to teaching. I don't like being idle.

Even though this had been the longest week ever, I was starting to feel more comfortable in my new surroundings and I was anxious to get back to a normal routine of working and contributing to the family income.

We were still living in my sister's home – 11 people in a very cramped space – and getting a job seemed like a good idea. Obviously, I could not go back to teaching with my limited language skills, but I was willing to take on any survival job that immigrants often have to start with.

When I expressed this idea, my brother-in-law immediately dismissed me. "You don't need to work, let your husband do it. Just stay home and enjoy your life." Nobody else spoke up, but I could tell my sister and Mohsin agreed with him.

I didn't insist in that moment, but my mind was already made up.

My sister was a seamstress, like me, and I had really enjoyed my first visit to Fabricland with her at the mall. I had reveled in touching all the fabrics and asking questions in my broken English to the store manager, a beautiful elegant Italian lady named Elvira.

On our second visit there, I casually enquired about job possibilities. Elvira could tell I knew a lot about fabric and found me bubbly and pleasant. She trusted that my English would improve once I had regular contact with customers and soon enough, she was showing me how to work the cash register. Until then, I had been content to let my sister handle all the transactions, so this was my first initiation to loonies, toonies, dimes, and quarters.

Elvira did make one demand, however: she wanted me to come to work dressed appropriately for a Canadian store. I was heartbroken; on my first day of getting a job, I was being told that my Shalwar Kameez clothes were unsuitable. "Don't get me wrong, Samina, your outfits are beautiful and I would love to see you wearing them but only after work." I understood her position and I was ready to jump in with both feet, so I agreed.

My sister frowned upon all this but knew that ultimately, I had to sell this idea at home. Sure enough, as soon as I brought up the subject at dinner that night, Mohsin pushed away his plate and said "How dare you think you can work there?". My brother-in-law was even more outraged: "In more than 20 years in Canada, your sister has never worked and never wore anything other than Shalwar Kameez and you think you can come here and do the opposite after one week?"

It's not like there's anything wrong with being a homemaker, but I didn't like that my sister had not worked all these years, and though her English was very good, she seemed to me like a common Pakistani woman who had just arrived

yesterday. Mohsin was okay with me working in Pakistan and I had told him to expect the same in Canada – “Don’t think I will be content to stay home just to cook and clean for you” – but I guess he was not mentally prepared for me to go work in a store.

My brother-in-law made an even bigger drama out of it by calling my mother in Pakistan to tell her that I was already spoiled and out of control, urging her to talk some sense into me. She tried to change my mind, but I told her that even if I respected her opinion, my decision was final.

That Sunday before my first day at work was very tense. Almost everybody was upset with me, but I did have one ally. I told my daughter that she had to come shopping with me for pantsuits and dresses. I promised to buy her some skirts and other clothes too. She was so excited.

It was time to change this family’s routine. Whenever I think about breaking down some walls, I always do it for Aaliyah. Because if the pain I have gone through can help my daughter in her life, then it is worth it. I was not responsible for my sister, but I was responsible for my own future and my daughter’s.

Soon after I started working at Fabricland, I was walking around the mall one day during my break and struck up a conversation with the manager of the Dollarama. Rita was perky and blonde and wore lots of bangles and jewelry. She was like a Hollywood character, as glamorous and sparkly as Elvira was understated and elegant.

I could hardly believe that she was the manager, so busy was she stocking shelves and fixing things. In my country, managers never move from their chair. They just call over their peons to take their coat, bring them water, etc.

Elvira had the same work ethic, cleaning bathrooms and sweeping floors or doing whatever needed to be done. I was so impressed with both of them.

When Rita found out that I only worked at Fabricland from 9 to 3:30, she asked: “What do you do the rest of the day?” One of her cashiers was leaving and she was looking for extra help in the evening.

And that’s how I landed my second job in Canada.

My family was really going to kick me out of the house this time, I thought. But I guess they just gave up on me. Even my brother-in-law knew I would not listen to him. So I just started cramming more and more into each day.

I would wake up every morning, take care of the kids, go to work at Fabricland from 9 to 3:30, then rush home for an hour as the kids came back from school, prepare the meal, feed them, then go back to the mall to work at Dollarama from 4:40 until 9.

And that was my routine every day, practically 7 days a week for the next 3 years. Thank God for statutory holidays or I might have killed myself in the process!

I never did it for the money, although the extra money was important for an immigrant family trying to get established in their new life.

I did it because this was the real change I had been looking for; I had dreamed to be an independent individual, to work, to make decisions, to raise my children and change their life and provide them with every opportunity they deserve in a country like Canada.

If I wasn't able to do these things, what was the point of being in Canada?

After all the trauma of moving to Canada, living through the tragedy of 9/11, and finally settling in to a new routine, I thought it would be smooth sailing from there. Nothing is free in life, and I knew I had to work hard to earn everything I wanted for my family. I was prepared to do that and I made decisions accordingly.

Unfortunately, sometimes I forgot that there were other people around me who were affected by those decisions, and they were not happy with me.

Mohsin wasn't able to adjust to life in Canada as I had, and though he was well educated, he never found a suitable job. He worked at two or three different factories but manual labour was too much for him and he couldn't endure the physical toll.

He would complain and give up, and then take it out on me. Like somehow, I was responsible for the fact that he couldn't deal with the system. He was upset with me for staying out all day, not knowing where I was or what I was doing. In fact, he knew exactly where I was. I don't know if it was my brother-in-law rubbing off on him, but he just didn't trust me.

A few times, Mohsin ventured out to Fabricland or Dollarama, telling me "Come home, I'm hungry", which angered my manager. She knew perfectly well that all he had to do was take the food I had prepared and left in the fridge and re-heat it in the microwave. That was all the heavy lifting he needed to do at home.

She had several harsh arguments with him, warning him he could not disrupt her workplace. He yelled at her – "Why do I even have a wife?" – and things escalated to the point that she threatened to call the police if he came back. "I am not a Pakistani woman", she said.

This broke my heart. What image did the world have of Pakistani women? That we are lazy, staying home, making babies and doing dishes. I know my manager was standing up for me, but that made me feel even more shameful.

Just as he had many years before, Mohsin announced one day that we were moving. He had enough of struggling in Canada and wanted to go back to Pakistan. Whereas I had quit my teaching position for good, he had only taken a leave of absence from his job, and he knew he could go back to it any time.

We had an argument and I tried to convince him that we could make things work in Canada together. I tried to control my anger – he had brought us here and, as a man, he should take responsibility for his family. But here I was, working 10 hours a day to support the family and not complaining, and instead of being thankful for that, Mohsin was treating me like I was a bad woman, and certainly a bad wife.

I talked to my sister and my mother, and of course, being Pakistani women, they sided with Mohsin. “Your life is with your husband”, they said. “Whatever he is telling you to do, just listen to him. Pack your stuff and go back to Pakistan”.

I was crying on the phone one day after such a conversation and my daughter overheard me. By then, Aaliyah and Tehseen were teenagers and had their own strong opinions. Aaliyah tried to comfort me and said “Mom, whatever you decide is fine with me, but I’m not going back.” Tehseen echoed his sister’s thoughts: “If Dad wants to go back, let him go. Why do you have to go with him?”

That was eye-opening for me. My heaven, my dreams, and all the efforts and hard work I had put in, were built around my children – to provide them with the best life I could as a mother. To have their support in this moment meant everything to me.

I told Mohsin I was not going anywhere.

One night, I came home from work and he was nowhere to be found. After a sleepless night, I went back to work the next day but my manager noticed I was crying and called me into her office. I told her what was going on and she let me go home early. Naïvely, I thought Mohsin might turn up; perhaps he was so angry that he went to stay with friends until he calmed down.

But when my manager called me at home that night to check up on me, she told me to check if my official papers were still there. I couldn’t comprehend what she was implying – why was she worried about documents while I was distraught over an argument with my husband?

She was way ahead of me. I went searching in the closet for my passport and immigration papers. They were intact, along with the children’s, but sure enough – Mohsin’s documents were missing, along with his suitcases and many of his belongings.

I called some of his friends and acquaintances. Nobody talked, until one of them finally admitted he had taken Mohsin to the airport the night before. He had gone back to Pakistan.

I was stunned and devastated. How could a man with three children just abandon his family like that?

My manager insisted that I file a missing persons report. After all, Mohsin had left without saying good-bye and we had no proof that he was gone. If anything should happen, I would be responsible. I was still in shock, but my manager called the police on my behalf and officers showed up at my door.

I never thought in my lifetime I would be in a situation like this – having to explain to the police that my husband was missing. The lady officer and the gentleman were both so friendly and supportive. I had told myself that I wouldn't cry, that I couldn't cry, but I was overwhelmed as I told them the story.

They phoned me up a couple of times over the next few days, to see if I had heard from Mohsin and to reassure me that I could call on them if I needed anything. In spite of my growing anxiety, I was amazed to find that there was a whole support system behind me.

A week passed before I heard from Mohsin. He had indeed gone back to Pakistan. He presented me with yet another ultimatum. "Come back right away, because I need a wife, or else I will get married again within a week."

I didn't give him a yes-or-no answer right away, because the repercussions were unimaginable: for generations, nobody had ever considered that divorce could happen in this family.

I tried to reason with him that I wanted to upgrade my skills and go back to teaching; that we would be fine if he just gave Canada another try.

He cursed at me, called me arrogant and stubborn, and made threats. "I will take your daughter and you will never see her face again!" He knew how much I loved Aaliyah but I knew that if I seemed weak, he would use that to blackmail me. So I replied "Okay, but you also have two sons. Why don't you take them too? Let me pack their stuff." I held my breath.

Mohsin hung up on me.

He called me again two days later to say that he was about to divorce me and gave me one last chance before he had to sign the papers. "There's nothing more to talk about" I replied.

He ordered me to write a letter stating that I had no objection to him re-marrying. In a foolish burst of defiance, I told him that I would write the letter but that he

had to write one in return, stating that he had no objection to me having a boyfriend in Canada.

It was a stupid thing for me to do, but it was the act of a desperate person with nothing to lose – what else could happen?

I knew he was gone and that I was not going back.

I knew my children were safe with me, and that Canada would at least take care of them if something happened to me.

I felt strong. I thought I was.

“Take my picture” I insisted.

My friend looked at me like I was crazy and tried to offer me some lipstick before snapping the photo in the middle of my room at Brampton Civic Hospital.

I hated the woman in that picture.

The woman in that picture was not strong.

The woman in that picture was not as prepared as she thought she was.

The woman in that picture had envisioned all kinds of scenarios for her life in Canada – that we might not have enough money, or live in a big house, or have a new car; that we would have to work day and night.

That was the worst I had imagined. I had never envisioned the scenario of a broken family; or being a single mother abruptly left alone to raise three children in a foreign country; or being shunned by my parents and siblings for refusing to follow my husband back to Pakistan.

My nervous breakdown was the culmination of all that.

I thanked God that Aaliyah was mature enough to look after her brothers at home while I lay in this hospital bed trying to keep a grasp on life.

After a month of living in this fog – going home and sleeping and taking the medicine – I found the energy one day to go buy groceries, only to have my debit card declined. I tried my PIN number again and again.

I went to the bank and asked what was wrong with my card. The one thing I had not worried about for the past month was money. I had lost both my jobs, of course – they were not able to hold them for me for so long – but I was confident that my savings would help us stay afloat until I got back on my feet.

The bank teller investigated and found that a big money transfer had happened a month ago out of my joint account with Mohsin.

There was nothing left.

I had three children and nothing in my fridge. I didn't even have five dollars to buy them milk and bread.

I went to a place in a park nearby that I call Weeping Hill, to gather my thoughts. Because at home, in front of the children, I could not cry. I didn't want them to see that I was weak. I didn't want to expose my fears and insecurity.

I cried for a couple of hours and then called my manager, begging for my job back. "Samina, you don't sound really healthy and ready to work again, but you definitely need help". She provided me with some phone numbers and urged me to call for support.

I couldn't believe my life was reduced to this. I wanted to call my sister, but I was mad at her. She knew what had happened and didn't contact me. None of my family members reached out to me.

So I called 2-3 numbers and somebody from the child welfare agency called me back. They did all the paperwork on the phone; I never even met anyone or had to go to an office. I don't know who those angels were, but I remember the lady's voice, so soothing and calming, urging me to take one day at a time, telling me how sorry she was for what had happened to me, and that she understood as a mother what I was going through.

Within a few hours, there was a knock on my door and boxes of groceries were delivered to us.

The next day, another knock on the door: it was the superintendent of our building asking for the rent, which was overdue. He had received a letter from Mohsin stating that he was no longer responsible for the children and me.

My head was spinning – what else could happen?

Another round of calls and telephone interviews where I spoke to more angels. Within a couple of weeks, the Toronto housing agency arranged for a 3-bedroom apartment for the kids and me. They even sent a couple of people to pack everything up and helped us move to the new apartment.

I couldn't recognize myself in these scenarios – waiting for people to bring me food for my children. Depending on charity. This was not a situation that I envisioned when I was 5 years old and vowed never to need help from anyone after my father refused to buy me a storybook.

And yet, through all the hardship, I was amazed over and over again. I was lost. I couldn't understand what was happening; who these people were at the other end of the line. How did they know exactly what kind of help I needed?

That's when I came to truly appreciate what Canada stood for. This is what Pakistani girls and women imagine heaven to be. Not to get anything for free in difficult times, but to get support, to have people around who understand your needs and provide help before you have to beg for it.

They were helping because I was a mother in trouble, with children to care for; they were not judging me for being a bad woman, for not listening to my husband or following my religion. They didn't ask any questions – they simply asked what I needed.

And all I wanted was some food in the fridge and a roof over my children's head. I knew I was a fighter and all I needed was time.

I was so grateful to the system that took care of us in those difficult times. It was my rebirth. If anything like this had happened in my country, I would have been on the streets. But thank God, I was in Canada. If you are honest and determined, the system will help you land somewhere after your bumpy road.

But I didn't want my children growing up with this impression of their mother on welfare who couldn't deliver on what she promised to do in Canada. I had to get my life back together.

So I told my doctor I wanted to stop taking those anti-depressants that made me sleep all the time. Because if I am asleep, who is taking care of my dreams? She cautioned me against it, but I was ready: to get out of this pain, I had to live with it for a while, to make sure I could get through it and never come back to that place.

I kept thinking about a conversation I had with Mohsin's friend, the one who had driven him to the airport. He had snickered at me that night, telling me what I fool I was to stay behind, and predicting that I would be on the streets in no time. I had told him: "Give me 5 years. Give me 5 years and call me back, and let's compare what Mohsin has and what I have."

So in all the lowest moments, every time I went to my Weeping Hill, whenever I wanted to dig a hole and die, I kept hanging on and telling myself: "5 years, Samina. You cannot die."

In an effort to turn my life around, I really wanted to get back to teaching, but my qualifications and experience from back home were not enough. So I started volunteering at an elementary school. I loved my kindergarten kids and the whole school environment. Hearing the kids address their teachers made me realize how much I was dying to be called Teacher Samina once again.

Even now that my English was better, I decided to take some ESL classes and that opened up a brand new avenue for me. I loved the way that organization

took care of newcomers and helped them not only with language classes, but also with settlement services, housing, job search.

Having been helped through difficult times, I decided that I now wanted to be a part of the system to help others. It felt like such an honourable thing to do.

I still needed to upgrade my skills, though, so I sold some jewelry to pay part of my tuition fees. I was also lucky to have a good friend who helped me financially, and I remembered fondly that Elvira had always encouraged me to go back to school. I was the sum of everyone's belief in me and I worked very hard to prove them right.

For the past nine years, I've been working at the Muslim Community Services in Brampton. I'm so proud of being a teacher and I'm so grateful for all the support I've received and all the people who encouraged me along the way so that my dreams could become reality.

It took many years before I went back to Pakistan for a visit.

After Mohsin had remarried, when all his family was very upset with me, several of them had threatened me that if I ever set foot there again, they would kill me, or break my legs, or send me to a mental hospital where no one would ever be able to trace me again. Even my own family tried to stop me.

But in time, I refused to live in fear after all I had survived. I took precautions and warned the Canadian embassy of my trip and gave them a detailed list of all the places I would be visiting and some contact numbers to track me down.

Nothing happened, thank God. But on that visit, and on subsequent ones, I came to realize that I could no longer live in Pakistan for more than two weeks at a time. The first week is always a whirlwind of excitement – seeing family members (the ones I had mended fences with) and visiting old friends.

But by the second week, I find myself counting the days until my return to Canada. All the things that seemed normal as I was growing up now stood out as being unacceptable. For the most part, Pakistan is a very homogeneous country – one culture, one religion, one way to live. People speak the same language, eat the same food, and know only Islam.

I truly love the diversity and multiculturalism of Canada – Toronto in particular – and cannot imagine going back to such a limited view of life, especially for women.

I have strong faith in Islam, but I see so clearly now how people misuse religion to control and oppress women. The young Malala is a perfect example of how intelligent, how productive and how great Pakistani women can be when they are provided education and opportunities. She is a beacon of hope, but that is just

the beginning of the story. All this talk of new governments still leaves me skeptical; men alone cannot change anything.

When I try to have that discussion with my family members in Pakistan, they dismiss me or laugh at me. They think I'm the oppressed one, for having to work 8 hours a day in addition to cooking and cleaning and raising my children. They don't value independence.

While I always wanted to be an independent woman, I was never exposed to the lesson of difference until I left my country. It took me some time to digest all I needed to learn about other people, other cultures, other religions. I'm still learning.

The most valuable lesson I've learned is that no religion, no colour, no culture is bad. All religions are as respectable as mine. I value people's individuality and respect their beliefs.

This is a big huge world filled with beautiful people.

I can only hope that all the people of Pakistan, especially the women, will one day get a chance to learn that lesson too.

When I look back now, I'm so grateful to be here where I dreamed to be.

In fact, whenever I return from a trip, as soon as I step out of the airport in Toronto, my first thought is always "oh thank God, I am home".

If I go through difficult moments, I pull out that photo of me taken in the hospital when I was at my lowest – I always carry it with me as a reminder. And I know that I will never again be that desperate woman who had lost everything.

I think back on those first Google searches I conducted all those years ago, telling me that Canada was an immigrant's paradise. That didn't mean you could just jump in and have fun.

You have to do good deeds, struggle and prove yourself to reach heaven in the other world.

Same thing goes for Canada: you have to work hard and plan your future. That magical passport comes with rights and responsibilities.

You have to earn it all.

And if you do, you will know heaven.
