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“Could you tell where me where Grand River is ?”, asked a voice behind me. I turned around and looked about me, making sure that I was the person that the girl was asking the question to. Realizing there was no one else there, but me, I smiled and confidently pointed her in the right direction, and as she walked away in that direction, I stood marveling at what had just happened.

For anyone else, it would’ve been an ordinary run-of-the-mill experience. But for me, it was the realization that East Lansing was finally beginning to become a second home. For days now, I was the one asking questions like that. “Where is this ?”, “Where is that ?”, “How can I get here ?” etc etc. It felt quite amazing to realize that I was finally settling down and finding my way—after all the weird experiences of getting lost, frantic phone calls to friends, and long walks home at night after having missed the bus.

Coming to the United States to pursue a PhD had been a long held dream of mine, but the manner of my coming certainly wasn’t. After being held up due to bureaucratic hassles, I managed to arrive in the U.S a week after classes had already started. Starting afresh in a new place, in a new country, with different people, with a different culture was bad enough, but having missed the orientation, I felt more lost than ever. Everywhere I went, people seemed to know what they were doing, while I was lost, and bumbling from here to there. To top it all off, I came to the US leaving behind an ailing mother, who would not hear of me waiting or post-postponing my departure for her. And while I admired that trait in her, every time she got sicker, I would be wrecked with guilt at having left her in that situation. I often contemplated leaving
everything, returning home, and only coming back, when she was better, healthier. It was a hard situation to leave home in, and since I did not have any one to help me get ready and pack stuff or get ready for the journey, I ended up leaving a lot of stuff at home, and that resulted in feeling kind of handicapped at the new apartment, since I did not have a lot of the basic things that one require in the first couple days. I often wondered then—how was I going to manage to live alone if I was having a hard time just packing my suitcases? That in turn entailed shopping trips, expenses... and still stuck in the rut of converting currency, I often hesitated from buying things thinking it was too expensive—even essentials like milk and sugar!

Looking back, the first couple of weeks were the worst—not only was I completely not used to the cold weather, but I was also ill-prepared for it. It seemed to me that the weather reflected my mood totally that week—dull and gloomy. A few days, I even wondered whether I had made the right choice in choosing MSU—I always claimed that weather and external situations wouldn’t affect me too much, but is this how it was really going to be like all the way here?

In the weeks that followed though, things certainly started looking up. The weather took a turn for the better, and so did I—which was not surprising since I was meeting new people, everyday, wherever I went. That’s one of the first things I realized, and helped me immensely. You have to go out and meet and talk to people! Back home, I was not the most extroverted person. In fact, I preferred to keep to myself, and even though I had friends, I never really completely opened up and talked. I never took the first step to initiate a conversation, a friendship. Living by myself in the US though, I started to talk to people, open up—even made friends with random strangers I met in the bus! You may say that it was out of loneliness, or the
human need for company or for just one enriching conversation in a day, but it has made me into a much more open person, something I had never imagined myself as before.

What amazed me most in the first couple of weeks was how friendly and open the people here were. I found myself being greeted by people I didn’t know in the street, by the bus driver, even by the waitress and the cashiers. This would never have happened in India. The most that you would get back home was a weird stare and upturned eyebrows if you ever wished the bus driver on your way in! It also amazed me as to the amount of space there seemed to be around here. Coming from an extremely populous country, I was always accustomed to seeing crowds everywhere, and buildings and houses stacked closely next to each other, with barely any open spaces. And the roads! And the drivers! It seemed against all my instincts, how could the cars stop at a red signal even when the entire road was empty, there was no traffic, and the only thing stopping the car from moving ahead was a stupid red light?

It wasn’t all pure amazement though. It was tough in the first couple of weeks till I got used to living by myself to having to cook, shop, go to school, finish homework all by myself. All I used to want to do by when I got home was sleep—perhaps it was just the strain of living by myself that was tiring me out everyday. It also took me a long time to figure out how much “stuff” I need every week, and how much I didn’t. Often, I would have to throw out a lot of food packets, just because they were past their expiry date, from having not been finished in time. I also missed the convenience of having stores and shop close by to where I lived. Getting used to the America scheme of things in terms of weekly grocery shopping and laundry, was something that was another routine to get used to. Then there were the oddities and the tons
of new things to be learnt every day. Self scanning at the super market, crossing only at the crosswalk, credit cards, debit card, getting used to cashless transactions, internet banking and most importantly, being independent.

The best parts of the experience so far, have certainly been the lab work and the coursework. Despite having the confidence in my skills and education, I often wondered whether what I had learned in my education in India would be enough and whether I would be capable to deal with everything. I learned one of the things that I had only heard about: “The language of science is universal”, a professor in my college back home had intoned at the start of a lecture. At that time I had brushed it off as a very dusty old cliché, but once here, I realized the truth of it. Science really is universal, and once we started talking about science, I realized, we were all equal—no matter where we came from—India, China, Vietnam, Korea or the United States.

Am I satisfied and happy with the experience so far? Most certainly yes! It’s not just about starting afresh in a completely different place that I find exciting—its about living independently, being able to live the life that you want and study and do a job that you love, apart from being able to interact with some truly fantastic people—and all of this is has contributed to an extremely rewarding experience so far. The image that I had in my mind about the US from watching Bollywood movies, is now slowly being “Photoshopped”, embellished and edited with my own experiences. There were so many things that I had heard, or read about this country, from friends, family, books and television. But to experience it all is another story altogether. As they say, seeing, truly is believing.