

## A WHITE EID

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It was just a week away from Eid-ul-fitr and we still did not know any Muslims in Sault Ste. Marie (pronounced Soo Se Marie) located by Lake Superior in Northern Ontario. We – I, a software engineer, my wife Mili and our screaming machine, 3 feet 3 inch, 30 lbs, 2 year old menace Zakeem, traveled seven hundred kilometers from Toronto to Sault (Soo) in mid July when I landed a contract with Ontario Lottery and Gaming corporation. Not too many people we asked in Toronto knew anything about this town. Most new immigrants are so determined to live in big cities among friends and families that they often forget there's more out there. We had made the trip with apprehension and hope and were rewarded with a scenic and friendly town but almost no Indian (South East Asian) community with the exception of two very affable Srilankan families. Five months had passed by. My fasting wife had complained about the lack of other Muslims in the area but there was not a lot I could do about that.

We started to explore all our options regarding Eid. We could drive to Toronto and spend the Eid among friends. Sounded great but there was a problem. According to prior calculations the Eid would be either on Thursday or Friday, which meant I would have to take those days off and loose remuneration. That line of thinking stopped right there. Another choice was to go across the border to Michigan and visit Mili's niece who lived in Midland with her family. She had invited us earlier and we knew there were a large number of Muslims there. Midland was four hours trip on car, quite doable. But again taking a day off was unavoidable. We had to reject it too. Economy here hadn't been too good lately and loosing money was no option.

A week before Eid-ul-fitr Mili did something very clever but obvious. She looked up into the telephone book for known Muslim names. Bingo! She had a match. A quick call established association with that name to a Bangladeshi family. I saw smile in her face. This wasn't going to be a solemn Eid celebration after all! I guess after a month of fasting she could expect to celebrate. A formal visit to the other family revealed that the gentleman, Shabuj, a former lecturer of Applied Physics taught in a local college. From him we found out that though there weren't too many Muslim families around, a couple of dozen students from Bangladesh had recently come to the town to study in Algoma University and Sault (Soo) College. One of them, Sumon had rented the ground floor of their house and was living with his wife Sonia. We were very pleased to see a house full of compatriots after a seemingly long gap. The Eid celebration looked very prospective.

Owing to its location Sault Ste Marie gets more snow than its southern neighbors. It was only the beginning of December and the town was already covered with inch thick sheet of snow. The glorified appearance of green summer grass had disappeared completely, from every inch of ground that one could see, replaced by the glossy, soft, ubiquitous crystals of snow. To a mind that is open for novelty and exotic beauty this view could be overwhelming. While I enjoy every bit of short living summer here, deep inside me something also lusts for the delight of viewing a good snow fall, something that's quite rhythmic, queer and somewhat strange. No matter how much mess the piled up snow creates and how difficult it becomes to drive on slippery and sometimes icy roads I have always, in a rather weird way, loved a snowy winter. That's why I was quite excited when my journalist friend Ekram gave me the idea to write something about a white Eid. While in west a white Christmas is something expected and cherished for, a white Eid is definitely not something very usual for us, though living in this part of the world had rewarded many with that experience, more or less. I got my partly wrecked camera (thanks to screaming machine) out and loaded it with a film. It was clicking time.

It was already Wednesday and tons of things had to be done before the Eid day, which we decided to celebrate on Saturday, not Thursday, not Friday (having seen Arabs and Indian, Pakistani communities battling over Eid days several times in USA and actually celebrating it on different days sometimes in the same city, made taking my decision much easier). For me there was no taking work off. Initially I thought of arranging this party into a community center, which had to be rented. My goal was to find as many people as I could for the party, religion was not an issue. If it was a celebration, Eid or not, it had to look like one. That wasn't going to happen without the diversity. After a frank discussion with Shabuj bhai and

bhabi we all agreed that cooking for thirty-forty people could be a problem. So, it was time for plan B. Ming's Buffet – a Chinese restaurant located only minutes away from my work place had won my heart at first gulp. I love the greasy food and never forget to gorge. I greedily mentioned about Ming. To my satisfaction everybody else agreed. Ming came here from Toronto a year ago and had been battling to survive in a slow town. Since we came here another Chinese restaurant had already closed its doors due to lack of business. I didn't want the same ending to Ming. His food was good and affordable besides the pleasure of having a strange conversation with him where half the time none of us had any idea what the other one was saying. Ming had come from Hong Kong just a year ago and was yet to get proficient in English.

It was becoming difficult to get our guest lists going. The colleges were closed for Xmas vacation and many Bangladeshi students had already left Sault for Toronto. Only six stayed back. Mili and I invited our Srilankan friends and Shabuj bhai promised to bring his neighbor and an Indian friend. I had a senior friend from an American university who was working as a teacher in the Lake Superior University, just on the other side of the US bridge, a long stretch of metallic overpass that joined Sault, Canada with Sault, USA – a much smaller entity. A quick call to him revealed that he had two colleagues who were Muslims, one from Iraq another Palestine. I was quick to invite them all though none of them could make it due to their busy schedules.

Friday passed by quietly. In most places Eid was celebrated. I later heard some students had said their Eid prayer somewhere in Sault College that morning. I was at work and had no information regarding this. I wasn't too crazy about the prayer but I felt bad for missing a good photo opportunity.

Saturday morning started exactly the way I expected it to – with a flurry. Snow had been piling up for the last few days mostly due to couple of heavy snowfalls just days ago. I was happy to see more. Our party was scheduled to start around noon, so we didn't have much time to waste. Mili had been working on a few traditional Eid dishes to take with us. While she desperately tried to have them ready I was given the difficult task to get Zakeem dressed for the party. I would have preferred the cooking. It took me half an hour of chasing him around the house before I got him dressed. Shobuj bhai called us to say that they were making their move and would be picking up the boys from college. Bus system in Sault isn't that bad but it can be very time consuming. Some of the students had bikes but it is dangerous to bike on snowy pavements or roads. I heard that one of the boys had already gotten couple of police warnings for biking on the icy roads.

After packing and carrying the food to the car (took me three trips across the icy parking lot), convincing Zakeem that it was a better idea to let the house key go so that we could lock the door and get going and a brief heated argument with Mili for taking so long to get dressed we finally packed ourselves into our primitive Toyota and rolled ahead. It was already one in the afternoon.

The flurry stopped but there was still some snowflakes floating in the air. I guess this slow movement of snow gives it the rhythmic nature. The temperature had rose a little bit and the partly melted ice made the roads muddy. A six-kilometer trip to the venue took us longer than we expected. Snowy roads can be very slippery triggering most people, especially the elderly, to drive in a turtle pace.

When we finally got our smiling faces into the restaurant, most guests had already showed up. The night before the wife of one of the Srilankan families had gotten admitted in the hospital for childbirth, so they weren't coming for sure. The other family, Frank Neil and his wife were due to come. They were the first South East Asian family we met since we came here and we found them extremely friendly and helpful. Our initial sense of isolation evaporated quickly when we first met them.

A brief introduction got us all acquainted in that room. A white Canadian Christian family, neighbor of Shabuj bhai, man and wife with their blonde son and a Hindu Indian family gave us some diversity, something I personally wanted to see in this gathering very badly. Like Xmas, I thought, Eid was due to be a part of other people's culture and what better way was there to do so than to invite them into one. Frank and Sriani joined us soon, both Christians, and we attacked the food without delay. Beside the buffet the Chatpati that Mili made became an instant hit. For the next couple of hours that place got filled with talk,

laughter, scream (of course!) and the joy that I felt was overwhelming. It almost felt like being with one's family after a long lonely trip. It sometimes surprises me how one can feel isolated and distant while living among people with different cultures no matter how nice and well mannered they are. It is never half as easy to mingle with people of other races than to the one we are so familiar with, specifically South East Asian. It was also a satisfaction to see Mili smiling ear to ear and Zakeem having a great time without making my life a hell.

After the meal a quick game of draw took place where four names were randomly picked and awarded with token gifts. Two of them went to Shabuj household, one to his Caucasian neighbor and the fourth one to Frank. After a few photo sessions finally it was time for departing.

Overall, it was perhaps the most enjoyable Eid celebration that I ever had, no matter how insignificant or brief.