The Wrong Decision

It was late, and the lounge of our house in Newark was dark except for one lamp. My new housemate was sitting under it, alone. He had arrived from Bangladesh a few weeks earlier to start at the University of Delaware. I had mostly seen him in passing, a polite nod in the kitchen, a door that stayed closed. That night I sat down next to him and asked how he was doing.

He didn't answer right away. Then he started talking, and it came out slowly, like he had been holding it for weeks.

He told me about his family back home. His friends, the ones he had known since he was a child. The job he had left, the one he was good at. The life he had built piece by piece until everything was finally settled.

"I had everything there," he said. "And now I'm here, starting my whole life from scratch." He looked at the floor. "I think I made the wrong decision."

I didn't say anything. I couldn't. Because I wasn't hearing him anymore. I was hearing myself.

Two years ago, I sat in a room just like that one and thought the exact same words.

Back in Lahore, my life was settled too. I had my family around me and my mother's voice calling me up to the rooftop for chai in the evenings. I had friends I didn't have to explain myself to. I had built a career and even a business of my own. People knew me there. I knew where I stood.

Then I packed it into two suitcases and flew to Delaware.

My first night in Newark, I sat on a bare mattress in an empty room and the thought arrived before I could stop it: I should not have come here. Everything I had spent years building was on the other side of the world, and here I was, a grown man who didn't know how to get a Social Security number, how to apply for a driver's license, or who to call when something went wrong. In Lahore I had been someone. Here, I had to start from scratch.

I never told anyone how I felt. I just carried it quietly, the way he had been carrying it.

Nobody tells you that starting over is not one big moment. It's a hundred small ones. For me, it was a class presentation where I stopped trying to sound like someone else and a voice from the back of the room said, "That was amazing." It was showing classmates videos of Lahore's food streets and teaching them to say "Shukriya." It was the day I said "I'm heading home" and realized I meant Newark.

So that night in the lounge, I didn't tell him it would get better. I knew he wouldn't believe it yet. Instead, I told him the truth: that I had felt exactly the same, that I had also thought I'd made the wrong decision, and that he wasn't alone in this house. I watched his shoulders drop a little.

Then I said, "Let's start with tomorrow."

The next day, we sat at the kitchen table and booked his Social Security appointment together. I showed him which documents to bring, the ones I had forgotten my first time. Then came the driver's license, the bank account, the phone plan, all the small, confusing pieces of a new life that nobody explains. I helped him with every little detail.

And somewhere in all of it, I realized something. Every step I was showing him was a step I had once taken alone, unsure, wondering if I belonged. Helping him was like walking back through my own first year, only this time I could see where it led. The boy who once sat on that bare mattress had built a whole life here without noticing. The friends, the routines, the people who say my name right. It had all grown, slowly, from scratch.

That's what I finally told him, a few nights later, when he asked again if it ever gets better. "You will make friends here. You will do things you're proud of. And one day, without planning it, you'll catch yourself calling this place home."

He smiled, a small one. Not quite believing it yet. That's okay. I didn't either, at first.

My mother makes everything from scratch. Her roti, her daal, her chai. When I was little, I asked her once why she didn't just buy it ready made. She said, "It takes longer, but then it's yours."

I think about that now. Starting your life over in a new country takes longer than anyone tells you. But what you build is yours.

To the next international student sitting alone under a lamp somewhere, wondering if you made a mistake: you didn't. You are just at the beginning. And if you've been here a while, look around. Someone in your house might be starting from scratch tonight. Sit down next to them.

AI acknowledgement: I used Claude (Anthropic) to help structure and edit the wording of this essay. The story and experiences are my own.