

Samara Patel describes her family's complicated history of immigration, and what it means to carry on a legacy that you can't always be proud of.

I've been thinking a lot about my nose recently.

I have my great-grandfather's softly shaped nose, or so my mother tells me. In his youth, he boarded a whistling steamship. He traveled from a down-on-its-luck city of India to Malawi, the self-proclaimed "Warm Heart of Africa". Though he was at first quite alone in this strange country, he only needed to be patient; through decades of chain migration, his loved ones came to join him in his new homeland. The pioneer that my Nana was brought a new population of Indian immigrants into the small country.

I don't know why he picked Malawi as his destination, but I know the consequences of his choice.

He passed his legacy, as well as his nose and the particular curved shape of his jaw, off to my mother. Growing up in an isolated Indian community of Malawi, she didn't have much interaction with the culture of the British colony. She mostly interacted with her family, who was quickly building wealth compared to the native Malawians who were not given the same opportunities. Speaking any language other than English at her international school meant detention. She still managed to speak Chichewa until adulthood, when she lost the language to the soil she fled from.

My mother left the lush greenery of Malawi behind for the harsh Midwestern winters in pursuit of an education in the land of opportunity. She had to beg her parents for five years just to let her leave Malawi. Her parents wanted her to stay behind, coax her out of the independence of her youth. Women didn't just leave their homes, their responsibilities, their mothers behind.

She had to work her way out, finally getting her father to convince the rest of the family and let her leave with her brother. A valedictorian turned into a scholarship achiever, one who burst into tears at any less than an A, but never stopped working to secure her future. Though her British accent confused people at first, my mother was always good at assimilating. She rid herself of the colonial accent unconsciously, quickly, like unzipping a coat that didn't quite fit anymore.

In 2023, I left my house in the suburbs of America, one that smelled of fresh-cut grass and scattered fall leaves cushioning the sidewalk. I said goodbye to my mother on the drop-off point at the airport, red indents on the sides of her nose where reading glasses perched,

tears already shed on the glass. I tried to control the tremble in my voice as I told her that I would be okay, reminded her that she made this exact move almost twenty-five years prior.

I think she was mostly scared that I would do just what she did: flee the country and never look back.

My nose wrinkled as I stepped onto the airplane, the smell of lemon cleaner and stale air immediately overwhelming me. I had never left the country on my own before. The plane landed in Iceland first, and I was relieved to know that half of my journey was over. As soon as I reached the plane's door, I inhaled slowly, filling my lungs with the cool, fresh wind that came off of the sea. It was beautiful, the view from the top of that staircase. The world was hazy around my bleary eyes, so I couldn't quite tell if the bright lakes and fields spread out around me were a product of my imagination. I couldn't believe that I had made it out.

I wondered if this was how my mother felt, her grandfather before her, or my father's father, who gave me my sharp eyes – who worked his entire life to always be top of his class and left India as a doctor, only to arrive in the United States classified as only an immigrant. Every feature of my person is a product of all those who left their country knowing that a better life was not waiting for them, but for their children and grandchildren.

I've joined a long line of a legacy that brings me both pride and pain. Pain for the hardships of my forefathers as they tried to build a new life, whose fruit they would never see flower. I feel pride in my mother's determination in bettering her life, even if she was forced to sculpt it with her own hands.

Call the move selfish, call it courageous, or call it what it was: simply following the voice in the back of your head that just says *leave*.