

My First Snow

By Varleen Kaur

Tring! Tring! Tring!..... It was my alarm. It was 6:15am, and time for me to get ready for work and go out in this snowy weather. It had snowed the entire night, and it was my first snow in Canada. I know some people eagerly wait for snow the whole year, and I was pretty excited about it myself. However, soon this excitement turned into pure dread.

I come from a small town called Patiala, located in the northern part of India. The temperature goes up to 40 degrees in summer, and down to a minimum of 5 degrees in winter, and no snow to be seen. In September 2021, I came to St. John's, Newfoundland, for my Master's program. Being an international student with a small budget, I didn't want to spend my tight stipend money buying good quality snow boots and parkas. Thinking back now, that may not have been such a wise decision. I went to work wearing one of my old jackets and sneakers that morning. When I stepped out of my apartment, the snow was wet and mushy, not a solid layer which is easier to walk on. My feet got wet since my shoes were not waterproof. I could feel my toes becoming frozen and hard. I was shivering for most of the walk and just praying to reach work safely. For a person like me who hates to wake up early in the morning, this harsh weather made it all the more stressful. I hated the snow already, and was also getting late for work. After waiting for 10 minutes for the bus, I checked and found out that the bus had been cancelled. There is a saying 'From frying pan to fire', and I could just feel that it was made for me. The footpaths were obscured, so I walked on the wet and snowy roads. I was worried about getting hit by a vehicle, arriving late to work, and my health in these conditions for which I was unprepared. Suddenly, a car came speeding towards me. Did the driver not see me? Or was he just being ignorant? I thought helplessly as his tires splashed ice-cold slush all over me. The car was gone again just like that, and I remained standing there watching him until he vanished away in the still-dark streets. A significant portion of my pants were wet. My vision was blurred and my thoughts were jumbled. I was regretting my life decisions for being here at this moment. I was exhausted. As a new graduate student coming from another corner of the globe, I was managing coursework and research along with feeling quite homesick, and all of this together with this unfamiliar and seemingly cruel weather was too much for me.

From that day on, my mind took over and I started to fear the snow. I checked the weather forecast on my phone every hour. I could not feel thrilled for snow-related activities like making snowmen, throwing snowballs, skiing, and sledding like some of my peers did. While in India, I had been dreaming about those things. When I think back to that day, I now realize that it was not an intense snowfall. Perhaps my mental state had just been affected from going from one extreme to another. It led me to wonder how much impact weather and natural disasters have on the psychology of a human being. I didn't have anyone to talk to or even to offer me a hot cup of tea. After returning home, I called my parents to cry. In the weeks that followed, I was busy with finals and deadlines and avoided the outdoors. Later on, I left my part-time job for fear of facing it all again. What if I got hurt? What if I got sick? I bought proper winter gear but it went unused for some time, as I was not ready to face another similar situation.

Extreme weather causes an extraordinarily different kind of stress for people who live alone, who are new to the city with few friends and no family. My family doesn't celebrate Christmas, but I have always been very excited about the decorations and music in the city and restaurants. Now I was unsure how I should celebrate Christmas here in Canada. The COVID-19 cases were rising continuously. I was skeptical about leaving home to go to a party downtown. I stayed at home with Netflix and ordered some of my favourite food. While this might sound like a perfect night for some, it was not for me. We all need comfort and company sometimes. I could hear people screaming outside from the silence of my apartment. I wanted to go out for a walk to get some fresh air, maybe to join them, but it was snowing. I couldn't go out. The cold weather, loneliness, and COVID-19 made everything a battle for me.

In January 2020, Newfoundland experienced an extreme snow event known as Snowmageddon. It was in the top 5 Environment and Climate Change Canada's (ECCC) weather stories of 2020. Environment Canada's senior climatologist David Philip called the storm a "snowpocalypse", and remarked that the town was entombed in snow. He said the people of St. John's are familiar with snow, since it is the snowiest city in Canada. It snowed more than 90 centimetres in some parts of the city, with winds gusting to 134 km/h creating snow drifts up to 15 feet high in some places. The Canadian Armed Forces had to be deployed to help shovel out snow. I thought of the people being stuck for days. Specifically for people living in basements, their windows showing simply walls of snow. The panic, the fear of these weather events. I am learning every day to survive and travel in this climate. However, I won't forget those days – my first snow in Canada.