



HOW I CAME TO LIVE IN MORGAN HILL: SERENDIPITY AND DESTINY

by Suman Ganapathy



I was always destined to put down roots in beautiful Morgan Hill, I can see that now. My first visit here was on September 23, 2000, but the story really started fifteen months before.

Ever since we alighted at San Francisco International Airport on June 12, 1999, our sojourn in the U.S. had been a terrific and dizzyingly winged adventure, broadening in mind, and girth too, with delectable temptations abounding. Even the concept of weekends was a novel and unexpected treasure that expanded our horizons right away. Saturdays weren't holidays in India, and Sundays were just off-days, so the phrase TGIF had always mystified me. What was so great about Fridays? Now I knew. Hurray for all-American mini holiday weekends! Right from the beginning, our family of four (husband Gautam, 34, son, 6, daughter, 4, and I, 32) put aside work, school and volunteering duties, and went on overnight trips most weekends to get to know our new country better. Through research, we discovered that California was larger than many European countries, and the infinite options for car trips were staggering. Off we set forth, with rose-tinted lenses and open hearts and minds on our wanderlust treasure hunt. Eschewing freeways whenever possible, we took the most windy, picturesque, and meanderingly convoluted Californian routes depicted on our trusty AAA maps. Plenty of time to tackle the rest of the 49 states later.

Hardly a few miles away, sublime mountains, towering redwood forests, delightful lakes, rivers, oceans, and winsome little towns near them, showcased California in all its natural glory. In India, lengthy and expensive planned trips were needed to get away to nature. So, how could we not gorge ourselves and partake of paradise so close to us, weekend after weekend! Big Basin, Santa Cruz, Big Sur, Muir Woods, Yosemite, Mono Lake, Lake Tahoe, Lake and Mount Shasta, Half Moon Bay, Solvang, Santa Barbara, Cambria, San Simeon, Carmel, Joshua Tree, mind-bending Mystery Spot in the Mountains - every enchanting place took our breath away and had its own unique piquancy, each different from Cupertino, the Silicon Valley town where we lived.

Cities were marvelous too! My first impression of San Francisco was of a lovely fog-kissed little town. I was accustomed to hot and dusty sprawling Indian cities, crawling with humanity bursting out of its seams...like Calcutta (current population: 14.3 million), Delhi (18.6 million), and Bombay (20 million). Now, here I was in the world-famous city I had read so much about and seen in movies. Stunningly beautiful by the ocean, with

the Golden Gate bridge, rolling hills, distinct architecture of painted ladies, jaw-dropping, and rivetingly curved steep roads, how extraordinary that this diminutive place with a population of less than a million, had so much history, contained so many world-class companies, diverse peoples, food, art and cultural movements. Size evidently didn't matter, to matter.

Expansive, over-populated Los Angeles felt a little like the Indian cities I was used to, but only in its size and stop-and-go traffic, which was still astoundingly disciplined. The gorgeous Malibu coastline and arresting Beverly Hills, with its exclusive houses and architecture, appealed to the nature lover and professional interior designer in me. The Hollywood sign on the hillside from endless movies and TV shows was worth seeing at least once. So, this was the city of The Doors' L.A. Woman fame that Jim Morrison had sung about!

Of course, sightseeing natural beauty and tourists' spots, and sampling local cuisine were mere whiffs and fleeting flavours of each place. Did we even interact with locals? Who constituted the locals? It was wildly thought-provoking, and more complicated than I had thought. Native Americans? Old time immigrants? Settled recent immigrants? I had thought America was an advanced forward-thinking nation that welcomed foreigners as long as they played by the rules and contributed to society. That's what we wanted too. While we were aware the US had a difficult past, our understanding was that it had all been transformed in the dawn of the 21st century. I figured that the problems portrayed in the news, movies and TV serials were bound to be exaggerations, like Indian movies and newspapers that only focused on the sensational! Reality ended up being a little more complicated. As real life is wont to be, it was sprinkled with smatterings of surprises and challenges, making us stronger and helping us build character, as the saying goes. But that's another segue.

On September 23, 2000, barely fifteen months in "The States" and a week before our tenth anniversary, my husband's work colleagues and friends decided to take us south of Cupertino to Morgan Hill and Capitola for two Art and Wine festivals on the same weekend. Run by locals, they were deemed perfect to run into people who lived there from different walks of life apart from the technology and tourism world that we had only encountered so far. "*Taste of Morgan Hill*" was an apt name for that afternoon's activity and didn't disappoint at all. The quaint downtown, surrounding lovely golden hills with pockets of brooding dark green trees and clear sapphire sky were picture-perfect. The brilliant kaleidoscope of colours, activities, tastes and sounds in charmed surroundings were so different from Cupertino or Sunnyvale! Morgan Hill felt like the America and California from the movies. A taste of this remote little town made a strong and positive impression on me.

We went wine-tasting to Guglielmo Winery, afterwards. The tasting room was rugged and rural, cosy and inviting inside. I don't remember if the Zinfandel vines surrounding the winery were covered with grapes that September, or had already been harvested. What I have imprinted within is the dazzling beauty of the surroundings. It was California and Tuscany, all rolled into one. The people from the winery were welcoming and friendly, and kept our kids busy with generous helpings of chocolates and salami, while we sampled their myriad wines free of cost. We learned about the history of the winery, varietals, Prohibition, and the city, and eagerly lapped it up. This was the famed hospitality of local Californians we had been missing all along. Of course, we felt compelled to buy a case of their 1997 Petite Sirah, and became wine club members instantly. It would ensure a regular visit to this little out-of-the-way wonderland. Our visit that day was a turning point. Becoming wine club members made us feel like we had arrived at last. Not only had we encountered the quintessential California, here we were, living the American dream already, and Morgan Hill helped make that happen. I tucked it away in my mind. Who were locals? Anyone who loved living in a place, I concluded.

We remained wine-club members for the next 8 years. Though we went during the festive holiday faires, we couldn't visit Morgan Hill often like we had intended. Life got in the way, and sadly, collecting our wine gradually started to feel like an annoying chore in the midst of our busy schedules and kids' activities. Around

2008, we decided to call it a day, tightened our belts, and suspended our wine club membership as Wall Street tumbled.

Fast forward to Summer 2010. We had lived eleven years in the U.S. by then, and were tossing away \$3000 monthly on rent for our 3-bedroom 'luxury' apartment in Cupertino. After Lehmann Brothers crashed on September 15, 2008, followed by Wall Street, and the housing market was a shambles, President Obama took over at the helm, voted in by a people craving miracles. While constant congressional obstruction had dulled hopeful "Yes We Can" dreams in the recent year and half, a little glimmer still remained. It was going to get worse very soon, since the midterm elections were only a few months away, but we didn't know that yet.

Gautam had always maintained that the housing boom was unsustainable, unhealthy, and suspicious. With his MBA degree in systems and finance, he said people who made less than a third of his salary might have bought a house, but it just didn't add up. When the housing market went bust, I realized how smart, knowledgeable and cautious my husband had been all these years.

Our own circumstances had changed. We received the much coveted and celebrated green card a year before, and could breathe freely at last. All these years, unable to work on an H4 dependents' visa, volunteering was my zealous attempt to be a productive person, grateful to live in this bountiful land. Now, I was finally allowed to look for paid work. However, starting from scratch at 42+ years old in a downturn economy, with two kids in high school who needed me, wasn't the best time to upset the apple cart. So, I carried on with my 16+ hour days focused on volunteering and family.

Life was balanced with some tribulations too, but let's focus on the positives. We hadn't thought of buying a house until then. Daily living had taken up a lot of our time and energy, having started from scratch here a world away (or 6 suitcases, to be precise) on an H1B visa, after 9 years of married life with two kids. Not wanting to be house-poor like many who had bought million-dollar starter homes in Cupertino, but couldn't even afford going to movies, we continued to rent, and lived life to the fullest, with vacations, extra-curricular kids' activities, summer camps, and donations to the schools. It was our choice and we didn't regret it an iota. But suddenly, we had a bulging bank balance for the first time, by our standards, and rather than squander it away in pointless luxuries, we decided that the time was ripe to go house-hunting. After Gautam did the math and research, we could dare to dream - it was now time for us to buy. It was also our 20th anniversary in a few months, a fantastic present to ourselves, we both agreed.

The children would soon be gone from our daily lives. Our son was a senior and our daughter a sophomore at Monta Vista High in Cupertino. Nina, our realtor and friend, told us finding houses took at least year and a half, and asked us to start looking right away. By the time the kids were finished with their schooling, we'd be ready in our forever home. Our plan was to purchase a "sensible" house somewhere in Campbell or Willow Glen. We qualified for a large home loan, but decided to be prudent and not use all of it. Research has established that emotions are a critical factor in consumer behaviour, especially first-time homebuyers, but we wouldn't let emotions or "social aspirations" (per research) get in the way of logic and sense. Our home was NOT going to be representational of how we'd like to be perceived, because we weren't that easy to manipulate. Post-purchase dissonance was to be avoided at all costs.

We had a list of non-negotiable criteria. Other than those, we refused to be enticed with exquisite homes beyond our stated budget. As empty nesters, there was no need to consider school districts, which was another American feature that doesn't exist in India. Government schools are directly run by the state. Central schools are run by the Central (federal) government and meant for government and military families. They are not connected with property taxes in any way. While we lived in Cupertino, we had no idea property taxes were tied to US public schools until 2003, when the school district started sending out feelers for a parcel tax, and some from the parent community exposed their talons towards renters "gaming the system", resentful

that we wouldn't be affected, never mind the fact that our rents went up by \$200 every year. It was a shock. To counter snide remarks, we just upped our school donations and I volunteered even more to stop feeling guilty about "taking advantage" of a system we hadn't known existed... luckily, the schools needed me as much as I needed to be needed by them. Let's say, moving a little away from Cupertino at last was perfect.

Along with helping my son research universities that summer, we made extensive lists of what we were looking for in a home. Morgan Hill wasn't anywhere in our radar. It was too remote, 30 miles away from Gautam's workplace, the kids' school and our lives since moving to the U.S., and it might as well be a million miles away from San Francisco, "The City" and bastion of culture.

For me, a shelter, base, and much needed stability that the gypsy "army brat" in me always craved was all-important in a home. Without a daily maid to assist with housework, a large American style home would be a nightmare to maintain, the spoiled Indian in me thought. My idea of the perfect home was a compact, 2-3 bedroom place with high quality construction, architectural features and fixtures, surrounded by 'culture'. A back garden was unnecessary, given my (inadvertent) predilection for killing even the sturdiest indestructible spider plants. With bewitching San Francisco out of reach and unaffordable, a condominium in Santana Row was my idea of achievable perfection. Cultural events like the Summer Jazz Festival, and local museums tickled my culture bone. Jazz bars, California Theatre, Centre of Performing Arts, Hammer Theatre, Improv, impromptu art galleries, MLK Library...right there was an "artsy" bundle of all that I loved and wanted.

Gautam thought a four-bedroom place, a three-car garage with a back garden full of plants and fruit trees, and room to relax and barbecue on warm summer evenings, would be ideal. An oasis, a personal castle, a welcoming American style home right here in America. So, yes, we had differing ideas about our dream forever home. We'd have to compromise in the middle, but if there was one thing we knew about each other, it was our ability to find common ground.

After showing us potential homes up north, Nina suggested that Morgan Hill would ace the grade with all our requirements, and it wasn't that far from San Jose. I wasn't too enthusiastic. Driving is one of my least favourite activities, and the thought of freeways filled me with fear. Besides, Gautam's workplace was 30 miles away, and our friends too. We hadn't yet looked at a single house near Santana Row - there weren't any available just yet, but there was no hurry. What was she thinking? Being known as agreeable and reasonable, I resolved to have an open mind and not suddenly turn into an irritable "Homezilla" (like Bridezilla, is there such a thing?). So, I gritted my teeth and politely agreed to look at houses in Morgan Hill though I had no interest in them.

It was the best serendipitous decision I've ever made! The minute we entered Morgan Hill, it felt magical. I had forgotten it was so exquisitely beautiful. The August/September air, though hot, was golden, clear and life-affirming. Every house we saw seemed full of possibilities. We didn't know anyone who lived in Morgan Hill, and couldn't talk to anyone about life here. So, I researched the web inside out. The description of the bedroom community for Silicon Valley poised for dramatic growth and well known for volunteering sounded like a surreally accurate description of what we wanted in a town. I trusted in my love of people and ability to adapt and make new friends in a new place. It was small enough that we'd be able to contribute in a meaningful way. I would find ways to keep in touch with our friends in Cupertino.

I did a dramatic turn-around. I knew there was no other place I wanted to live. Since when was a larger house a problem? We could make this work, with a beautiful home, complete with front and back garden in an ethereally glorious town, and have the best of both worlds. Houses near downtown were only half an hour away from Cupertino and Sunnyvale, twenty minutes from Santana Row and downtown San Jose. I would get used to the drive, learn gardening or hire a gardener and a cleaner. The kids were grown and not litter bugs anymore, and in any case, they would soon be gone. Just looking at the striking hills in the distance filled me

with quiet and calming joy. (Three years later, to my utter delight, I realized the hills and Anderson lake are part of our unbelievably lovely city - we had only looked at homes closest to Cupertino then. What a jackpot!)

We observed houses in Morgan Hill to discern a pattern and configure how long each house stayed on the market. To our chagrin, we noticed that houses were being snapped up and were gone barely a week later! We were heading towards owning a house in days, not a year and a half. It was time for another momentous decision. *Carpe diem*, we thought! We decided to go with the flow, continue this process, see where it took us and be “Zen” with it. The time was now, we weren’t going to halt this house-finding process.

We dipped our feet in and made offers for two stunning houses, but lost them almost immediately. It was disconcerting and upsetting to see my new dream slipping away almost as soon as it had begun. Since Morgan Hill was immensely popular, Nina took us to see a few houses at Eagle Ridge in Gilroy. The houses were lovely there and within budget, but that was further south, and the town lacked that *je ne sais quoi* element since we didn’t have a personal connection with it. Somewhere, a nagging voice said that I had been seduced and was letting emotions colour my thinking, after all. Gilroy was more practical in terms of options and availability. But Morgan Hill had the perfect makeup of practicality and dreaminess. I’m so glad we decided to be human. After tasting magic, I was determined not to give up on Morgan Hill this quickly! Luckily, Gautam felt the same.

We continued to look for Morgan Hill homes. Then in early September 2010, a house lit in natural sunlight, a cathedral on a cul-de-sac with scores of windows and the perfect floor plan and size, beckoned alluringly. It had a lovely backyard and was within walking distance from the charming downtown. Eighteen others had come and seen it recently, and if the house was still on the market, surely it was because of the outdated kitchen and master bathroom. We didn’t mind that. It was an opportunity for us to renovate, in time, and put our own stamp on it. We drove all around. It was close to Guglielmo Winery - that lovely, welcoming friendly place that had given us our first real taste of California and Americana! This was meant to be.

We excitedly brought the kids over, and they were all praise too. We had lunch at “Rosy’s at the Beach” and dreamt aloud of living in this pretty idyllic town. Then we went back to our apartment in Cupertino and strategized about how to make this our last and successful bid for our forever home. We upped our down payment to make our offer irresistible (of course, my brilliant husband thought of that) ... and on October 13, 2010, that auspicious, glorious, earth-shattering day when 33 Chilean miners trapped underground for 69 days were freed, my husband and I kissed and celebrated becoming home owners and Morgan Hillians.

The next few hectic months and nearly two years after that, until Sunday, June 10, 2012, when we finally bid Cupertino goodbye and moved to Morgan Hill permanently, is fodder for another piece. My daughter received senior privilege and drove to Cupertino each day, as did I, with responsibilities for her final school year. It took around 3 years of living here, before I finally felt that I didn’t needn’t be burdened with giving back elsewhere anymore. It was time to invest heart, soul and time in Morgan Hill, my wonderful new hometown. That was the secret to finding happiness at last in this incredible city where we were destined to settle down. Attaining U.S. citizenship and then, discovering and joining AAUW- MH, with all the welcoming, incredible, dedicated and smart women of Morgan Hill, steeped in history and the tradition of giving back, has made me feel more loved, welcome and American than I could have ever dreamed, and I am so grateful.

(I wrote this piece in 2017. Thanks to AAUW, being part of Leadership Morgan Hill, Class of 2018 last year, has opened the doors to even more areas to contribute and volunteer, making my life ever more meaningful. I truly love our city. I’m a local now, and hope to live here till the end of my life.)