

Aliens in America

Before I left for America, my father had told me that things would be different here. We had laughed loudly at his stories of his first time in this faraway land. He had told us of being invited to an ice-cream party. "I had never seen so many flavors. There were huge buckets of ice-cream and bowls laden with sprinkles and toppings", he said. "You kids are lucky. Back in the day, you could only find ice-cream in the best hotel in Nepal. You could choose two flavors-chocolate and vanilla." My father had probably only tasted ice-cream once before. But here he was, in America, surrounded by the sweet decadent desserts-the likes of which he'd never seen before....and he didn't have a single scoop of it. You see, in Nepal, it isn't polite to serve yourself food. It is customary to refuse food profusely until the host wears you down. This tango of "No, I'm good. Thank you" and "Please, you have to have a little." ends in the guest finally eating the food they'd initially wanted. It may seem strange, but it is what it is.

Before I left for America, my father told me that I should be careful cooking curry. They may not like the strong smell. Try to not make your Asian food when your American roommates are around, he had advised.

Before I left for America, my father told me that when visa officers interviewed me, no matter how or what they asked me, I should answer politely. Remember, he had said. They can refuse your visa; they're a bigger country and they don't even need to give you a valid reason. They have more power than us. Some days they refuse people just because they woke up on the wrong side of the bed, he joked. I laughed nervously.

But I made it here. Eight thousand or so miles and I made it. The first time I got here, I joined a group of sixteen other students for a gap year. Having won a full ride, I felt extremely privileged that for someone whose parents had never even graduated formal high school, I had the opportunity to learn all over the world. So, we set off for a leadership trek in Colorado then to Central America, Europe and Asia for the next eight months. We came back through Boston for

the final leg of the journey We landed tired, a bunch of eighteen-year-olds ready to get out of the airport and sleep off the jet lag.

We separated and unlike my American and Canadian friends, I joined the long line of mostly brown faces for non-resident immigration. There, I experienced the same trepidation I had faced every time we had traveled. Holding my green passport, I waited as a long line of weary travelers were vetted.

“Get your hands off my desk. You’re not in your own country”, the immigration officer behind the counter sneered at the old man leaning forward, and his voice ricocheted fear along the whole queue. So far, I had made through several immigration checkpoints with my fluent English and polite answers. This time around, everything felt different. I murmured a small prayer when it was my turn, but with ill-fated luck, I ended up staring at the same cold eyes as the old man. The stern man barraged me with questions. “Who do you work for?”, “How can you afford this?”, “How much money are you making?”. I tried to explain as I had countless times, that I had gotten a full scholarship from a GAP year program, and I didn’t work for anyone. But the next thing I knew, I was being escorted to a room to be interrogated alongside a man from Sudan, who I later found out had come to attend a lecture at Harvard.

Shivering with fear, I rolled my suitcase while I clutched at my passport. I remember thinking of how even at eighteen, I felt as lost as small child. As they took me to a small room at the other side of the airport, my team leader scrambled after us. “I am the field advisor responsible for her and the other students. Where are you taking her?”, he shouted. “She’s eighteen. So, she’s an adult. She’ll have to do this alone” They’d answered. As he fought to stay with me, I stopped as the doors were closing and said, “Nick, you have to stop doing this. You’re making this harder for me. I’ll answer their questions and I’ll see you outside, okay?”

You see, I have known where my country stands when it comes to the hierarchy of the world. Even at eighteen, I understood how much rights and power I had better than my naïve American

team leader would in his thirty-two. I knew that if they wanted, they could put me on the next flight out, no explanation required. Thankfully they let me go after several hours. “Thanks a lot. We’ve been waiting for four hours”, my American friend said sarcastically. I got on the bus still shaking, only wanting to go home and cry.

And yet here I am in America, again. Many people will tell you that if you are educated, you pay your taxes and you have something to contribute to America, you’re welcome here. That’s not always true. No matter what I do, no matter how fluently I speak English or how many years I’ve been here, truth is, I will always be considered an Alien. “Legal aliens” that’s what they call you on your tax forms. It makes me laugh. How is it that my American friends who live in Nepal are called ‘Expats’ but I’m called an ‘Alien’?

I wish I could tell you everything; what it feels like to see your family every two years, to spend Christmas with strangers instead of loved ones, to be thought of as people who get everything for free when you work hard and your family sacrifice immensely to pay for your tuition. How it felt after a difficult semester with mismatched roommates, to finally leave the housing when a girl scrunched up her nose at the “weird smell” of the curry I was cooking. “They’re missing out. I would have loved to come home to the smell of curry.”, the housing director said sympathetically, as I requested to get a single room in Alwood, please. I cried as I packed my two suitcases and swore as I rolled them past the Birkenstocks of the girls who’d made my life a misery. My friends all came to help pack my large boxes of kitchenware I had been so excited to use to cook food I’d missed eating. They would sit untouched under my bed the rest of the school year. My dad was right after all.

I could tell you how hard it is to love your country and still leave because fighting a corrupt education system feels impossible. I’d explain that it feels like saying goodbye to a sinking ship that you still love. How it is choosing between the comfort of home and getting a degree that gives you independence and purpose. How despite the numerous times I complain about the

homework and the “stupid” projects, my nerdy heart soars with every A I earn. How I’m tired but happy with the three years I’ve put in. How it is all worth it.

I find that for every person I meet for whom I am a “they” to their “us”, I meet a hundred who show me friendship and genuine kindness. For every person who sees me just as an international student, I meet more that see me as a person with passion for learning, and give me courage to leave everything familiar to pursue something difficult but ultimately worth it.

Before I came to America, I never imagined that my friends would become family and this school in the middle of nowhere Indiana, a home. But here I am.

I don’t want your sympathy. But I do want you to know that we, the ones who are considered aliens, are just like everyone else. We are also trying our best to forge our paths in the world as we experience the joys and sorrows of being human. Because we aren’t aliens, not really.