

Beginning Again in America



MY FEELINGS FOR AMERICA

Since my childhood, I've been fascinated with the USA; this was my dream country. In my imagination it was almost paradise. Hollywood movies and stars had reinforced my conviction. After arriving in America, I was completely disenchanted, but now I can see my future with more serenity.

When I was a child, my dream was always of America. In high school, I learned and read a lot about this country. Great Americans like George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, and Elvis Presley were my favorite heroes. My passion and admiration for this country gave me the nickname of "Americaine" meaning American in French. Although I couldn't speak a lot of English, I sang American songs and was always up to date in American news. Really, in my thoughts, it was the country of opportunities where I could easily and quickly fulfill my ambition. So when I got the opportunity to immigrate to the USA, I didn't hesitate for one second; straight away, I left my country of Togo, Africa, for the "Paradise" – my American Gold Rush.

Once in America, my first month in New York was a big disappointment. The cousin, who had promised to give me shelter in his big house, didn't own one but rented a studio. I slept on the floor and was haunted by the three bedrooms I had left behind in my country. Three months went by without finding a job, and then one of my cousin's friends found one for me – a gas station attendant. I spent my first winter outdoors selling gas with my frozen hands and runny nose. I started regretting my move and missed all I had left behind in Africa. I felt like all my valuable knowledge and experiences were nothing in America.

I considered that my poor knowledge of the English language weighed heavily on my future in this country. The fortune I was looking for would not be easy to get. I started asking myself if it was the America I had heard about. Soon I realized that the America of my dreams was different than the place I had dreamed of. I felt discouraged. I had some dark days and seriously envisioned the possibility of going back to my country, but I feared I'd be ashamed in front of friends and family members, that prompted me to reject this idea. In this darkness, God came to my rescue; a friend of mine living in Cincinnati found a job for me. Consequently, I moved to Ohio to start a new life.

Now after years of hard work, I feel that those bad days are over. Still, I'm fighting everyday to work and take care of my family; however, I have a goal, and I know I will try with all my strength to reach this goal. I firmly believe that this country is the land of opportunity and that everybody can succeed if he or she doesn't surrender. Although I like my native Africa, I prefer to live in America because life here is so exciting.

Today I remember my first steps in America, and I consider them helpful in building my personality. I learned to never give up because America has always been the land of those who overcome obstacles. With my experience, I can advise a friend who is preparing to come in this country. I know that every new immigrant must always face some problems, but I will never forget my first contact with this American land.

~ Afi Abi DeSouza

MY LONG WAY TO AMERICA OR A NEW WORLD FOR THE GIRL FROM THE DEVELOPING COUNTRY

My name is Olga Heasley, and I am 25 years old. I am from the developing country, Kazakhstan. I have lived in the U.S. a little bit over one year. I want to tell you a story about my trip to America.

First, I want to say how I got my chance to go and live in the USA. I had never even dreamt about life in America or thought about the possibility of marrying an American guy. I knew that was impossible for me. But it was exactly what happened to me. I met an American guy, we fell in love, and he proposed to me. I consented, and we started preparing papers to get a fiancé visa for me. My way to America started from this moment.

There was no way to know how difficult it would be to get an American visa. For me it took eight months. I remember I couldn't believe that this moment had come and soon I could go to America and see my fiancé. I hardly realized that my new life was starting.

So I bought my ticket. My trip went from my hometown, Pavlodar, to Astana, our capital city. I went by train, and it took twelve hours. My mom and my cousin went too. They wanted to be with me for my last hours and to see me off on the plane. I wanted to have them there too. I didn't know when I would be able to see them again. Next my trip went from Astana to Amsterdam, the Netherlands, and then from Amsterdam to Detroit. My fiancé met me there.

In the Astana airport I found out that, at first, I would fly to Frankfurt, Germany, and then to Amsterdam. They said that I would stay on the plane while we were

stopped in Frankfurt. When I bought the ticket, I knew nothing about that. I thought sarcastically: "It is a good beginning!" In my country it is always this way. Things never happen how you were told or how they should be. Friends, be careful, if you decide to visit Kazakhstan!

So I couldn't change anything. I hugged my family, said goodbye, and went to register. I was very nervous. I had flown by myself only once before. I was in Turkey. I have never been in Europe. I almost saw nothing in my life because I am from a simple, not rich family, and we never traveled. My English wasn't good. I couldn't explain what I wanted. I was scared of Europe. I asked myself: "How will I be there alone? How can I find everything? How can I make it?" With these thoughts and worries, I was leaving my country.

After I took my seat in the plane, I relaxed a little bit. After the plane took off, the stewardesses distributed a small pillow, blanket, socks, blindfold and headphones to each passenger. That was a new thing for me, compared with my flight to Turkey. When I saw socks, I didn't know what I should do. I had comfortable shoes. And these socks were a huge size! I observed people around me. What had I found? Sure not everybody, but some of them started taking off their shoes and putting on these huge ugly socks! Without thinking twice, I did the same. Oh..!!, I want to tell you, I felt much better than when I had my shoes on. During my whole flight I had these socks on. I didn't even put on my shoes when I went to the restroom. I felt strange glances at me.

I looked around one more time and found that almost everybody had their headphones on their heads, and they were clicking buttons on their armrests. I put on my headphones and started clicking too. In amazement, I discovered up to ten different music stations for any taste! That was a great discovery!

My flight to Frankfurt was good; we landed without any problems. Almost all passengers left the plane. There were only three more persons except me. I started to be nervous again. I thought that I could ask somebody on the plane to help me in the Amsterdam airport. And now I had only a Chinese couple and an old woman, who asked me to help her. As best as I could I tried to calm down.

The flight from Frankfurt to Amsterdam was horrible because of very bad weather. During the whole flight the plane was shaking. I was scared to death and kept hoping for a good future. Only these thoughts helped me.

Thank God! Finally, we landed successfully! When we were leaving the plane, I heard that Chinese man could speak Russian. What a miracle! I found a person who could help me! I couldn't believe how lucky I was! This man and his wife not only showed me the way, they even led me to the registration desk. I was able to continue myself.

The Amsterdam airport, Schiphol, is the biggest airport in the Netherlands. I knew it was big, but I couldn't imagine how big until I saw it with my eyes. Before my trip I found a lot of information about this airport and even printed a map of it. To be honest, there is a huge difference between the map and reality. For me, it was hard to find something on the map and, of course, hard to find where I was on this map. Amsterdam Schiphol is more than an airport; this is an Airport City – catering to an audience wider than the humble traveler. There is a casino, a sauna and massage service, and the massive Plaza, which includes more than 40 shops.

The first moment I was left alone, I panicked and almost started crying. But good for me, I collected my strength quickly and went to register. After that I thought, "That wasn't too hard! People could understand your

English, and you could understand them.” Without any problems I found my gate and sat down on the chair next to it, now knowing what I was going to do during seven hours till my flight. So I started looking around.

Most of all I was amazed by the quantity of foreign people. There were black, brown, dark brown, red, white, and other skin-colored people and different nationalities. I had seen only two black persons in my life before this. That was very interesting and unusual for me. I enjoyed that. Next, I noticed people’s clothes. Some of them had national clothes; others had sport clothes. Anyway, clothes were very simple. Sometimes it seemed to me that they were wearing clothes from the Soviet Union time or from the “Second Hand” in my country. Funny, isn’t it?! To observe them was very interesting. All of them were very natural and simple and seemed confident to me. Compared to Kazakhstan, there was a big difference.

Next I paid attention to the accommodations in the airport. First of all, I like all of the stuff for disabled people: special cards, doors, etc. Again compared with my country, it’s amazing, because in Kazakhstan we have nothing to make life easier for disabled people. We have only wheelchairs, but only a small percent of the disabled population in our country can have these. These lucky people can move only inside of their apartments, because our standard lifts in the buildings are narrower than these chairs. I also liked the moving belts and golf carts to transport people inside of the airport. This is very comfortable! I had never seen them before! I was really surprised at seeing all of these things; everything was for people, to make their lives and trips easier, to make them happy.

One more machine that I noticed was the floor buffer. Wonderful! What a technical progress! A worker didn’t wash the floor himself; the machine did. The worker

was in the role of the driver. These workers were only male and black persons. "Interesting. Why?" I asked myself.

So I sat there for 25 minutes and decided to walk. I was afraid to lose my gate, so I walked only straight on and backwards. Step by step I became more confident. I already remembered where my gate was. I couldn't walk and sit in the same place for seven hours. I had a chance to see a lot of new things in this airport, so I decided to have an excursion by myself. At the same time I was very hungry and needed to use a restroom.

I found the restroom first. Here I noticed that on the toilet bowl was a toilet seat. It surprised me! I am not kidding! To have a toilet seat in the public restroom for Kazakhstan is unbelievable! I kept silence about other stuff I saw, like sanitary papers for the toilet seat and spray bottle with sanitary liquid. In Kazakhstan, we can't even dream about things like this. I felt like I was in a movie! Yes, one of the American or European movies!

I still was very hungry. I couldn't find a good place to eat. I mean a place, where, first of all, I could pay in dollars and understand the name of the food, at least, a little bit. I saw bars, cafes, and cafeterias, but I couldn't understand what kind of food they had or if I could pay in U.S. money. I was afraid to ask. I continued my walk. I hoped to find something or exchange dollars for Euros and then buy food. On my way I didn't stop seeing new things like a massage, a casino with separate smoking and non-smoking areas, a room for mothers with children, and duty-free shops. Unexpectedly, I found the telephone booth. I was happy to call my fiancé or one of my friends who lived in Germany and to ask them how and where I could find a place to eat. I was excited! I started to learn the instructions for using the phone. Unfortunately, I couldn't understand and was very afraid to ask for help. I was very upset and in a bad mood, but I continued looking for

food. I looked around almost everywhere and didn't find what I needed. I decided to wait until my flight and eat on the plane. Suddenly I noticed the stairs. "It couldn't be stairs for the second floor. I am already on the second floor," I thought. This upstairs went to the balcony with a food court. I got hope. I went there, and I couldn't believe my eyes. I found McDonald's! This place I knew for sure; I had been there once in Turkey. I bought McChicken, French fries, and a cup of coffee. They gave me a gift – cookies. I remember that I paid \$9.25. I made it! I found food, ordered, and paid myself! I was very happy and proud of myself!

Until my flight, I spent my time on the balcony observing people and looking at the planes. On the plane every passenger had a TV-computer on the back side of every seat. I had the list of movies, music videos or only music, and a map of our flight. It was awesome! My flight was good. We landed without any problems. I was very excited to see my fiancé and America, too.

In the Detroit airport I didn't have any problems. I could understand the necessary signs. The airport in Detroit was much easier than the airport in Amsterdam. So I passed through passport control and went to get my baggage. I waited for a long time. I checked every suitcase and I couldn't find mine. I had hope until the end. Even then every passenger from my flight got their baggage. I still hoped that soon I would get my baggage. I waited and waited. Nothing happened. I asked for help, but I couldn't understand what they told me. With a lot of language problems I answered the questions and gave them my fiancé's information. Then I went straight out to look for my fiancé. I was very happy to see him! Only one thing makes me upset – I lost my baggage! But that is another story. Finally, I reached America!

~ Olga Heasley

MY GOALS

At the age of 19, I left my native country Yemen and came to the United States for economic reasons. I would have preferred to go to college, but the economy in my country is poor, and my father wants me to help him financially because there are five younger brothers and sisters in Yemen to raise.

I would like to learn enough English to help me pass the GED test so that I could go on to college and prepare for a better paying career.

However, learning a new language is a slow process and an average college education takes 4-5 years. When am I going to be financially ready to help my family, as well as marry my sweetheart to whom I have been promising marriage for three years?

This is my dilemma. Do I continue to work at the gas station and help my family until at least the girls are married off? Or, do I tell my father, "I'm sorry dad, but I have to make a career for myself and the love of my life"?

~ *Mahar Alwishah*

HISPANIC SUPERSTITIONS

1. Never give your love a pair of shoes as a gift. They will walk away. (I'm not sure of this!)
2. If you place a pair of open scissors under the bed when in a lot of pain, it will cut the pain. (I'm not sure about this.)
3. If you drop a spoon on the floor, a woman is coming to visit. Tap it on the floor three times for good luck.
4. If you drop a fork on the floor, a man is coming to visit. Tap it on the floor three times for good luck. (I'm not sure about this. I've dropped both forks and spoons and no one has come to visit!)
5. If you hit your parents, the hand that you hit them with will dry up. (Nobody hits a parent. I've never known anyone who has!)
6. If you watch a dog or cat poop, you'll get a sty. (I see my puppy poop, but no sty!)
7. If you cut an apple in half and place a picture of you and your love in it, tie a red string around it, and bury it under an apple tree, supposedly your love will grow. (I don't know about this.)
8. If you place your wedding picture in a jar, fill it with rice and honey, and bury it under an oak tree, your marriage will always be sweet and strong. Rice stands for abundance, honey is sweet, and an oak means strength.
9. If you take a picture of you and your love and tie red thread (the entire spool) around it, your love will always be tied to you.
10. If you take a lock of your hair and a lock of your love's hair and braid them together, you will always be entwined together. (What if you can't braid?)
11. If you are single and wear black to a wedding, you'll be a widow after yours. (Scary!)
12. If you wear one single pearl, whether it is a necklace or a ring, you will shed tears.

~ Rebecca A. Ramos

LIFE TASTING

This is the ninth month I have been in the United States. In the past months, I have learned what a real life is.

I was born in a small city in China and grew up under the aegis of my parents. From elementary school to college, then work, my parents made most important decisions for me. Every time troubles appeared, they always resolved problems right away. My life was so happy and peaceful at that time.

From the day I came to the United States, my life was totally changed. Everything was new for me. I had to face troubles alone and learn how to be independent. That was really a nightmare to me for the first two months in the United States. I recalled the first time I went shopping at Kroger alone. I took almost 10 minutes to find a bar code for each product I bought and took another two minutes to pay the bill with a credit card. I knew that must be incredible for all Americans. But for me, I really did my best to do it.

I felt so hurt when I couldn't find a kind of bread I like because I didn't understand what the ingredients showed on the package. Although I knew it was bread, I still didn't know what it tasted like. Everything is different from China. I never had trouble shopping before, but now it's a big trouble for me. I was totally lost and felt useless. After despairing for a couple weeks, I thought it was time to rally my spirits and go through it. No one could help me if I gave up first. I decided to learn something. Driving was the first thing that popped up to my mind, so I started to learn it.

I spent five months getting the driver's license. From the writing test to the driving exam, every step was difficult for me. For the writing test, I reviewed the Vehicle Laws

brochure with a dictionary. That's a boring task. I had to take a long time to read only one page and memorize keywords over and over. After one week of hard work, I passed the writing test. My confidence was increased.

Later on, I practiced for maneuverability. That's the hardest part for me because I never drove before. I can't remember how many times I crashed the poles and how many times I wanted to give up. But I remembered clearly how nervous I was the first time I drove on the highway. I didn't know how to merge with the traffic flow even though a guy sitting beside me told me what to do. That was really a moment I had to hurry, but I was unsure.

I took my first exam on December 16. I failed because I knocked down a marker during the maneuverability test. I felt frustrated and wanted to give up again. But there was a sound from the bottom of my heart to support me. "Don't give up because you are half way to getting the license." So I re-scheduled another driving exam. The date is January 06. I wanted the next exam to be my last one, so I practiced one hour a day until the date. Fortunately, I didn't disappoint myself this time. I passed finally!

I was so excited to have a driver's license in my wallet, not only because I could drive legally, but also it was the first step to being independent in the United States. Today, all nightmares about driving have passed. It becomes a good experience in my life.

The events of the past nine months are clear. They taught me to face life bravely and not to give up anything easily. I'm the only actress on my life stage. If I give up and do nothing for this stage, then who else can complete the life for me?

Every time when I am in trouble, I comfort myself that there are only two kinds of things in the world. One is good, another is bad. Don't care too much about the bad things because everything has two sides. Bad things may cause lots of troubles to me, but take it as a lesson and I will grow up quickly and maturely.

I know a lot of truths but cannot always do them. I know how to make a tiny goal to myself every morning: learn five new words or read an English newspaper. As long as I am better than yesterday, I am still the winner today. I know there must be a lot of new difficulties waiting for me. I'm not scared; I am full of confidence to face my future life.

~ Bella Yang

WHAT SEPARATES US IS ONLY THE ATLANTIC OCEAN

Every long journey begins with a first step! My journey led me to an exciting but challenging year in the United States. I'm Jasmin, and I come from Germany.

Germany is the country where I grew up; it's the country where my family lives. In the city where I grew up, I know everybody and everybody knows me. I'm familiar with every building, every street – I'm in my routine!

But that has completely changed – now I'm Jasmin, the new Au-pair, at the Ward family in Maineville, Ohio. In case you don't know what an Au-pair is, let me explain it to you. I'm not what most people think, a nanny. I finished my school in Germany, and afterwards, I decided to stay for one year with a family in the USA. I take care of their children and get paid for it – which sounds like a nanny. This is where most people have a point, but here's the difference. I also have to go to school to increase my English level! So, it's not only taking care of children; it's also a cultural exchange.

The second comment people make when they hear that I'm from Germany is, "Oh, you're from Germany. Then you must be very neat. And, I've heard that Germans are always on time, but they have no sense of humor!" Honestly, how should I react to a statement like that? I mean, excuse me! Let me make one thing clear. Yes, I'm very neat and I try always to be on time, but not all Germans are like that. I just had very strict and neat parents, and they just raised me like that.

But, let me get back to the problems I had adjusting myself to a whole new culture. I arrived at the airport in New York after a nine-hour flight – too tired and too excited to be homesick. The week in New York was great. As I said,

I wasn't homesick at all; there were so many things to see – an unbelievable city.

But, the first night in Maineville, Ohio, in my new home, alone in my room, was the loneliest night in my whole life. It finally hit me all at once. What was I thinking going to America thousands of miles away from my family, living with complete strangers? Was I out of my mind? Why did I leave my family, my friends who mean so much to me? I couldn't find answers to all of these questions, and that night I cried myself to sleep! I talked a lot to my host family and to other Au-pairs, but nothing seemed to help or comfort me! The first time I talked to my mother was awful too! I realized how much I missed her. Again, I felt terribly alone after we hung up. So, I called my grandparents. I also have a very deep connection with them. When my parents got divorced and my mother had to work all day, they took care of me and my sister. I must have sounded so desperate to them, even if I tried to be brave and sound happy. I couldn't fool them. They called me two hours after we finished our conversation. It was very late for them because Germany is six hours ahead of the American time. They told me they couldn't sleep because they were worried about me.

So, there I was in a foreign country, talking to my 78-year-old grandmother on the phone, and she gave me the most wonderful advice; I'm sure I'll never forget what she said to me. She said, "Jasmin, why are you so sad? Child, don't be sad, what separates us is only the Atlantic Ocean! That's no distance for the connection our hearts made the day you were born!"

Don't get me wrong. Every day, every minute and every second I'm separated from them, I still miss my family; but it's easier for me to handle my homesickness now that I know that I have the blessing from my family.

~ Jasmin Palasz

MAKING A SIMPLE LIFE MEANINGFUL

In our ESL class, we read a poem by W. H. Auden called "Day In, Day Out." The poem describes the life of a typical 20th century man whose life is very routine. He does everything at the same time everyday with little change. Our teacher encouraged us to discuss the poem and asked us to write about our life and compare it to the life of the man in the poem. I don't think my life is as routine as his, but I have to admit that I have a routine in my life. This routine helps me to accomplish my goals. But this routine is far from being robotic. I always take a break to relax and refresh myself, and I take the opportunity to appreciate the beauty of the world around me. I enjoy these precious moments in my life.

About a year ago when I first came to Cleveland on an H4 Visa, my weekdays were very regular and kind of dull because I spent my time alone studying English. However, my weekends were much more spontaneous and exciting. Weekends were spent relaxing, not studying.

On a typical weekday, my husband and I would leave our home at 9:00 a.m. and walk to Case Western Reserve University. Then he would go to his lab and I would go to the library to study English the whole day except for a lunch break with my husband. Finally at 7:00 in the evening, we would meet at the library, go back home, and make dinner together. After dinner, we would take a walk around Little Italy and watch TV for an hour or so before going to bed at 11 p.m.

This routine was a little boring and lonely because it was so very different from my previous life in China where I worked and had family and many friends. Sometimes I couldn't focus on learning English, so I would browse the news in Chinese on the Internet.

Now things are much better. To improve my English, I joined an ESL class at Case Western Reserve University which I attend three times a week, usually on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays from 5 to 7 p.m. This class helps me a lot. Not only do I learn English, but I also learn about American culture and have made quite a few new friends from many countries with different background and customs. With our English teacher's help and guidance, learning English has become interesting. I'm not bored and lonely any more. Also by communicating with my friends in this class, I feel I am not alone struggling to learn English. Now I feel more confident to pass the GRE and TOEFL for my further studies in the United States.

When weekends come, everything is different. I always get up very late. After going to the grocery store to buy food for the next week, my husband and I hang out with our friends. If weather permits, we go fishing. While fishing, we have a picnic by the lake. Sometimes we just drive to a park and take a walk. In the evening there is always a party. We invite friends to our home or go to their homes. We usually play cards, see a film, or sometimes just chat together. The most interesting part of our party time is making Chinese dishes together. Almost all of my friends are good chefs, and I have learned a lot about cooking from them. They can make delicious, tasty Chinese dishes that are much better than those of the Chinese restaurants in Cleveland. I am not bragging. This is true because many restaurants here have lost the original Chinese taste in order to cater to the needs of customers who are not Chinese. Usually we stay up very late on weekends, but on Sunday nights we go to bed no later than 12 p.m. in order to get back to the routine for the next week.

The description of my weekday and weekend life in Cleveland shows how I am pursuing my goal and also enjoying the precious moments in my life.

~ Cuiyu Geng

SIMPLE, BUT WONDERFUL

After reading the poem "Day In, Day Out," by W. H. Auden, most of our ESL class thought that the main character's way of life was boring, just like a robot. When we were asked to think about our lives, there was no doubt that we also have routines in our lives. But my ESL teacher pointed out that despite the routine, there is beauty in our simple lives if we just can find that beauty. She encouraged us to seek this kind of happiness in our daily lives.

According to the poem, my life could be considered boring because I have no job except for cooking everyday, and I have no official studies, even though I attend ESL classes at Case two evenings a week. Luckily, I possess eyes that are able to discover beautiful things in the simple things in my life.

When my teacher asked us to write about our life and contrast our weekdays with our weekends, I thought that there really was no obvious difference between the two. However, there is one very important change that occurs on the weekends. My wife, who during the week is a researcher at Cleveland Clinic Foundation, is home; she always brings some interesting changes that make weekends more enjoyable.

During the week, I have to prepare three meals, and I need enough time to sleep. After breakfast is done, I send my wife off to Cleveland Clinic and I go to the library at Case Western Reserve University. I spend most of my time studying English. On Tuesday and Thursday evenings, I attend my ESL class. I enjoy the class because my teacher is ebullient and good-tempered. I also enjoy meeting people from different countries and getting to know them.

On weekends, I am sure that my wife is even happier than I. She transforms from a researcher in biomedical engineering to a “shop till she drops” girl. She loves shopping. However, she is not good at driving because she always loses her way. The formidable task of driving in America belongs to me. On weekends, I become a chauffeur for my wife. Although my wife always loses her way when she drives, she never loses her way in the malls. She moves around the mall as if she were taking a walk in our neighborhood in China. In contrast, I always get lost in the mall because it is like a labyrinth for me. My job in the mall is to follow my wife and be her porter. I carry all her purchases.

We are like a symbiotic creature when shopping. If I were not a good chauffeur, my wife would lose this wonderful opportunity to shop at all the malls in the Cleveland area. On the other hand, without my wife’s love of this great American pastime, I would have to chuck the pleasure of “playing the peacock” with my wife.

These simple pleasures – cooking meals, studying English, driving and shopping – are the beauties in my life.

~ *Liyong Wang*

THE STORY OF MY LIFE

My name is Hayfa Ilayan. I lived in Palestine, but I had to move to America because of war and because my husband moved to the U.S.A. Living in Palestine got too hard, which caused our family to move to America.

In our new country, the language was very hard to speak. I had four children who did not know English. It was getting difficult teaching the children because none of us knew English.

Later on, I became very sick, and when I went to the doctor he could not understand me. Because of the lack of communication, I became very, very sick. I had three surgeries and it was really painful.

Life was moving on, so I had to move with it. I had to do something and I decided I must learn English. Going for lessons was one of my ideas, and my husband told me to go to the English Center.

From my experience, I think that living in America is even more difficult than in my country. I wish that I could go back to see my family. I miss the life in Palestine. I miss the snow in the high mountains, the fresh water in the river, the humble people everywhere, and even the narrow streets. I miss my mother, my father, and my sister. I miss the wide fields and fresh streams.

I love fresh air. I would like to go back again because life was easier. I know the language!

~ Hayfa Ilayan

CAMBODIAN WEDDING

Would you like to know about different wedding customs? I am from Cambodia, and I would like to share with you my wedding ceremony to demonstrate traditional Cambodian wedding customs. The wedding was one and one-half days, and it was at the bride's house.

In Cambodia, people usually get together the day before the wedding. For example, I had family and friends come over to help decorate the house and prepare the food for the next day. Then some played cards, some watched movies, and some sang karaoke until 1:00 a.m. I didn't stay up that late because I had to wake up early to get ready for my wedding.

The bride normally wakes up very early in the morning. For me, I woke up at 4:00 a.m. to get ready. I hired a stylist to come over to help me get ready. She brought everything that I needed for the wedding, such as dresses, flowers, and make-up supplies. She did my hair and make-up, and she helped me get dressed. I didn't have to do anything. I felt like a queen for a day. In the United States, the bride wears only one white dress, but in Cambodia, the bride could wear as many as she wants. The average bride wears about eight dresses for the whole wedding day. I wore 12 dresses the entire day. My favorite was the red one. I wore it at the end of the ceremony.

Only two or three dresses are the most important. In general, the bride wears them in the morning for the ceremony. The dresses have a similar shape. They have a shimmer sash, a golden belt, a golden crown, and a lot of gold jewelry. They are the old fashioned dresses that have been around for a long time. Traditionally, they came from the first queen of Cambodia, who wore that kind of dress on her

wedding day. Since then, the dresses have become the traditional wedding dress. The evening dresses look like an American or Chinese wedding dress. The bride just wants to feel as special as she can on that day.

In Cambodian tradition, the groom pays for the wedding. The groom wears a suit in the morning and then changes to a traditional Cambodian dress that resembles a king's robe. Later in the day, he switches back to a suit. The wedding usually starts in the morning. My wedding started at 7:00 a.m., and I wore the blue dress. The groom and his guests walked from his house to my house. Each of his guests brought a tray of fruit, vegetables, or meat for the ceremony. When the groom got to my house, I went outside to meet him, we put flowers around each other's neck, and I went back inside and changed my dress.

A couple minutes later, my sister held the groom's hand and led him into my house because the groom isn't supposed to go into the bride's house unless someone in the bride's family leads him. Next, we both bowed to our parents to thank them for letting us get married. A priest blessed us; then we exchanged the rings and became husband and wife. My husband held a sword in one hand and with the other hand held part of my dress and followed me to the bedroom. In Cambodian culture, females and males aren't supposed to sleep or live together before they are married. This part of the ceremony represents that now they can. The sword means he has become my husband and has to protect me with it. In the middle of the bedroom, there was a fruit basket for us to feed each other, which represented that from then on we were to share everything.

Later on, the reception began. The groom, the groomsmen, the bride and the bridesmaids have to stand in the front hallway and bow to the guests. This means, "Welcome and thank you for coming." A couple hours later,

the reception was over and we rested for a little bit. Around 7:00 p.m., we started to dance until 11:00 p.m.

Finally, the wedding was over. In Cambodia, the wedding ceremony is very long and a lot of work. Everybody was exhausted, but they had so much fun. As the bride, I had a great time. It was my dream come true to have a nice wedding. Even though I was very tired, I did not complain. I will never forget that day. Once in awhile, my husband and I watch the videotape. It seems like our marriage ceremony just happened yesterday. It also helps to remind me of all the friends and family that were part of my wedding day.

~ Sein Han Cozad

MY LIFE

I am Michael Drozdovsky. I am from the Ukraine. I have a wife Tatiana and two daughters. My older daughter Christina is 22. My younger daughter Oksana is 18. My parents already died. I have a brother, Peter. He is a nurse. He lives in the Ukraine. He has a son and a daughter. They have their own children.

I am a priest at St. Anne's and Holy Trinity Churches. I became a priest because I heard a voice from God. I was a teacher and an engineer. I had two degrees and went to the seminary because my heart told me to do this. I really enjoy being a priest. I studied theology for five years.

I studied at the Holy Spirit seminary. I studied many theological classes. Every day we had morning and evening mass; we prayed on the Rosary.

I had to live at the seminary away from my family. I could see them only on big religious holidays. I dedicated myself to the service of God. However, we had a lot of difficulties in the seminary. Sometimes we didn't have electricity and water because the seminary just started to function after 70 years of being forbidden during a totalitarian regime.

When I almost finished my studying, I got very sick. I got jaundice because of unsanitary conditions. I was yellow. Our dishes were not very clean because they were washed by hand. I was in treatment for a long time because there were no good medicines. The doctor let me out on the day I became a priest, but the next day I went back in the hospital.

I bless people and serve liturgies every day. I give communion and baptize children. I read saint books, preach,

and help people in their needs. I am very happy to do this work.

I came to the U.S.A. because there was a need for priests in Ukrainian Catholic churches. The bishop from the Ukraine and a bishop from the Parma Eparchy gave me their blessings to come here. I am a volunteer. I am very glad.

~ Michael Drozdovsky

MY STORY

I was born in a small town in India in the year 1938. I am the eldest male amongst my eight siblings. I was educated in a reputable public school (Dr. Annie Beasant Theosophical Society, Varanasi, India). I enjoyed my childhood with eating, singing, and playing. My favorite hobby is stamp collecting. I completed my school education in the year 1957. Science and mathematics have always been my favorite subjects.

During my school days, I received one enduring lesson, "Do good and be good" and never try to harm anyone on the earth. Since the time of my schooldays, I have received a good understanding of the idea "worldwide brotherhood." I respect all the religions and enjoy different cultures of the world.

My father died at a very early age due to complications of diabetes (1961); thus my mom was responsible for bringing up all of my eight siblings. She was a great mom and did very hard work with full devotion for all of us. I did some clerical and other jobs to help support my mom.

Later on, I was admitted to an engineering college. There I graduated in science and electrical engineering. I started my engineering career in the year 1963.

Suddenly in the year 1964, my mother arranged my marriage with my present sweetheart, Raj Gupta. She is still with me. I have enjoyed my married life with Raj for the past 43 years. I have two married sons, one married daughter, and five grandchildren.

I am very eager to learn but could not learn enough when I was younger, so I started my master's in electrical engineering and completed my degree in the year 1984. I also completed 38 years of a successful engineering career in India.

Now I am enjoying my retired life in the USA with my son's family and their daughter. Sometimes I enjoy living with my daughter's family in California. There I enjoy my granddaughter and my grandson. In the USA, I have three grandchildren.

My eldest son lives in Australia with his family. He has a wife and two sons. My great desire is to visit my eldest son's family and to enjoy them. I have been very fortunate throughout my life. Blessings of God and of my dear, sweet mother (who died in 2003) are always with me. I pray to God to impart good luck to others who live upon our home, our planet earth.

~ Ram Gupta

A COMPLETELY DIFFERENT PLACE

Can you imagine leaving your life and moving to a completely different place? I think only people who have experienced that are able to express their feelings about it. You and only you are able to remember that exact moment and feel again that deep sadness and your eyes tear up as on that day. Everyone feels the same no matter their race, color, or age.

I think my first impression wasn't good when I first arrived here because of my attitude. I am not saying that language, differences in culture, or even transportation weren't a big shock for me. But if I have to be honest, if I would arrive in a bigger city similar to Buenos Aires, I don't think I would feel any different. Because the problem wasn't the place; the problem wasn't the people; the problem wasn't even the language. The problem was me. I just couldn't feel complete. I wasn't myself. I was like a shadow of me. I know it sounds weird, but that is exactly how I felt. I had that horrible feeling of being here but wanting to be down there.

I used to talk by phone almost the whole day with my Argentinean friends. I guess I was trying to keep my place, trying to be there, trying to be just with them. Now, I know that wasn't good for me. That just made things harder. Now, I can see that. Some people thought that it was a typical teenager reaction. But in my opinion, it was a human reaction, the reaction of someone who has feelings. It was the reaction of someone who knows how it feels to be standing at the airport saying good-bye to your friends, to your family, to your place, to your life. I was hugging them as hard as I could, trying to keep them with me just another second.

For all of these reasons, I can't say I had a good impression when I first came here. But as I said at the beginning, it wasn't because of the place or anything like that. It was because of me. I strongly believe that if you don't feel good, you can rarely make others feel good. Happily, I have changed my attitude; I met a lot of nice people. I still miss some people, but I'm sure they will be waiting for me at the airport when I get back. Distance doesn't destroy feelings; it just makes them more powerful. At the beginning, two years sounded like a long time. But time goes so fast. That is why enjoying the present is the base for a great future.

~ *Luciana Salaverry*

MY ROOM

I love my room. It is my real world.

The first sight I can see in my room is the nine-foot long and three-foot wide Chinese bamboo painting on the left side of the wall. It is one of my older brother's best art works. Under the painting is a long, white dresser that has two pictures on the top. One is of my daughter and me at Beijing Airport in China, which was taken ten years ago before I left for America without her. She was three years old at that time. Every time I look at that picture, I see the tears in my eyes, but my daughter is smiling, for she does not know that I'm going away. The second one is a black and white picture, which was the first picture in my life, and I was eight years old. I always wondered why my brothers and my sister had a lot of pictures of themselves ever since they were born, but I didn't. It made me wonder, "Maybe I was adopted or neglected as a baby?" Either way, I really appreciated the fact that my older brother, who is nine years senior to me, used his first paycheck to pay for my very first picture. I have a lot of pictures of myself now, but none of them are better than this one. It is my treasure.

In the left corner is a cable TV, but I barely have time to watch it. The better way to call my TV maybe is my "weather reporter," because that is what I use it for. I want to make sure my daughter wears warm enough clothes to go to school every day.

Next to the TV are big windows on the right. White and purple curtains are opened on the side, and I can watch the beautiful view outside. Especially in the fall, it is a beautiful, colorful world.

On the right side of the room is my queen-sized bed in the middle; it's covered with light purple bed sheets and four big pillows, for purple is my favorite color. I have two night stands on each side of the bed, and two purple lamps on each of the stands; the lamps are touch-on or off, so they are very convenient. I keep my magazines or the books that I am reading on the right-side night stand, so I can read some before I go to sleep. I keep the things I need before I go to bed on the left-side night stand, and some of these things are eye drops, nasal spray, cotton swabs, and facial tissue.

Near the door are two bookshelves, one for Chinese books and the other one for English books. Between them is my big desk, which holds my calendar, computer, printer, and all my textbooks, notebooks, bills, and another picture of my daughter and me, which was taken two years ago at the Los Angeles International Airport in California. We both are smiling with tears after being apart eight years and finally being reunited.

My room is not fancy, and I don't have any expensive stuff, but I love my room. It is my eyewitness to how I overcame so many difficulties in a foreign country without my daughter and my family. Finally, I have my daughter to live with me. What a blessing! I believe my room knows how happy I am because I can smell sweetness in my room.

~ *Chengfang (Sharon) Zhao*

BUCARAMUNGA, COLOMBIA, AND ITS UNTOUCHED BEAUTY

Bucaramunga, Colombia, is one of the most beautiful cities in the world. It is near the equator and has many jungles surrounding it. Most of the roads in Bucaramunga are made of dirt and are unpaved. At night there are extremely large bugs and insects that crawl and fly all around you. The jungle is abundant with exotic plants that are unmatched in beauty in any other part of the world. The trees are as tall as skyscrapers and hang all the way to the ground.

The exotic animals are very beautiful in Bucaramunga. I have seen all kinds of monkeys, birds, reptiles, and aquatic animals. My favorites are the birds. The color, length, and shapes of the birds are what make them so beautiful. The Banana Parrot, I think, is the neatest looking bird because of its bright yellow wings and feathers.

The city is very poor. The houses are made of clay, straw, and wood. On most houses there are no doors like mine had. The stoves are open flame stoves and are made out of clay and metal. Most of the houses are only one-room huts like mine was.

In my orphanage, there was a row of coffee bean bushes all along the driveway. My brother and I would pick the coffee plants and eat the beans like grapes. We would have to walk to school from the orphanage. Our school consisted of one chalk board, no seats, and no surrounding walls. We had to sit on the ground and try to learn how to write our names.

The main reason that I want to move back is because of the memories. One memory was playing in the

dirt streets of Bucaramunga. I also went fishing with my dad, and we would cook the whole fish and eat it. We would catch iguanas and eat the reptile along with its eggs. I hope to move back and find a beautiful woman and start a family. I saw beauty in my country as a young boy, and I know that the beauty is still there.

~ *Alexander Morris*

LIVING IN THE U.S.A.

Nora is originally from Honduras. She immigrated to this country in the 1960's. She came with the ambition to prosper and never return to the manner of living in Honduras.

She worked very hard in the cotton fields and in child care and never refused to do any work that was asked of her. After a few years she became a citizen of the U.S.A. and became married. She has a daughter and a grandson. Through the years she worked several jobs and met a lot of nice and good people. But a few were not kind, and she became downcast and wanted to go back to Honduras.

One day after her husband got sick, she decided to go to school to learn to speak better English. She looked at different schools and finally decided to call the Great Oaks Career campus. The director asked her what she wanted. She answered, "I don't know. The only thing I know is that I have an empty space in my brain and need to fill it." After meeting Lew and Joann, she felt at ease. They made her feel like home. So she will continue studying until she is able to teach young children the second language, which is Spanish.

~ Nora Burger

MY LIFE

My name is Carmen Cotto, and I am from Panama City, Panama. I have two sons and three grandchildren. My husband is working for Coca Cola Company. We have been living in this country for 19 years, and we enjoy living in Cincinnati, Ohio. I am working at Pierre Foods; this company is good to me. I like my job very much, and I help other Spanish-speaking people understand the English language. I have a lot to learn.

I like music, dance, singing, and walking. I also like to watch television. I miss my family in Panama, and I call them three times a week. My hope is that they can come to the United States someday for four weeks.

I have many nice friends at work and home; I love them so much. I want to learn reading and writing for better English, but it is hard for me. I hope I will learn it sometime.

~ *Carmen Cotto*