

Daryna

Hey. Does it seem to you like this construction has been going on for ages? Remember -

The end of November, it's dark and it's raining. You've never been here before and don't really know how to get out of this industrial empty place. You see lights somewhere in the windows of the apartment blocks, in one of which you will live one day. Look at the three tall buildings. You don't yet recognize the grey block in the middle, formerly a university dormitory like the rest of them, and you don't know yet that, although the staircase there smells like communism, in your apartment it will smell like flowers. There is mud under your feet and you stumble more and more with every step you take. You also don't know that this mud will ruin your shoes by tomorrow morning. The light from the street lamps does not reach here and there is no one around. You don't know how you got here.

It's your first time living abroad, you have come for a one-year project, on a random whim. You didn't know anything about this city, you're just beginning to get to know it. You wouldn't believe me if I told you that a few weeks later you'll decide that a year won't be enough. There will be so many things that will surprise you, like it was the first time.

You will have your second first job, your second first kiss, your second first trip to the ER, you'll find your second best friend, you'll celebrate your second first Christmas, for the second first time with a family that's not yours. You'll find your first real home. You'll understand it almost immediately.

Being an immigrant is similar to being a teenager. There is a theory that in a foreign language you think more rationally, emotions don't cloud the judgement, so your understanding of things seems to change. There will come a point when you will look at your notes and realize that you are thinking in a different language. You start from scratch, as if you had really just graduated from high school.

As a teenager, you loved the aesthetics of industrial places. Remember wandering along abandoned railway tracks through the tall grass and how you wondered where that path would take you?

You move into the former dormitory and have to choose a new career, learn to deal with people who don't take you seriously, this time not because you're too young, but because you speak their language in a funny way, which makes you sound dumber than you really are. Every day you make a fool of yourself when you say something wrong, make a mistake or forget a word. At some point, you get used to it so much that it doesn't bother you at all.

You're Ukrainian, so everyone assumes you're a refugee. Yet you didn't run away from the war, you haven't even seen it, because you were already here. When they say that, they pity you, feel sorry that you can't go back. It sounds offensive. You chose to be here.

You feel more free because people make wrong assumptions about you anyway. You are no longer afraid to express yourself any way you want to. You visit new places, meet new people, find new interests, and through it come back to yourself. For the first time in years,

you put on a colorful shirt and soon stop wearing only black. For the first time, even looking at the tracks, you feel that you don't want to run away from everything.

You're not scared, it's okay. Maybe, you're here in the midst of construction and trucks are passing by, blinding you with their lights. Maybe, it's dark and rainy and you don't know exactly how to get out, but the important thing is that you are drawing a personal map in your head.

Experiences matter more and you are more aware of the world. Learning about a new place takes time and involves learning about yourself. Wherever you go, you have to accept that you might get stuck in the mud. You make sacrifices, such as shoes that get destroyed while exploring the area, or a career that you could only have in your home country.

Look around and turn back from where you've come from. You begin to recognize that the bridge in front of you will take you right to the office of the organization hosting volunteers where it all began for you. That means, the city center starts straight ahead. Behind your back is the neighborhood that will become yours.