

A Trip to Belgium

You know how kindergarteners cry on their first day of school? Imagine being left in the custody of a flight attendant you don't know getting on a plane to go halfway around the world to visit relatives you've never met. I'm pretty sure I cried the whole eight hours of the flight. I was only six at the time. Where was I going? I was going to go live in Belgium for six weeks with my relatives who didn't even speak English.

The reason why they didn't speak English was because they are Chechen, and can only speak Chechen, Russian, Dutch etc. They immigrated to Belgium after the Chechen Republic was bombed in a war with Russia in 1999. During my trip I tried hard, and did manage to learn some Chechen, mostly just random objects like chocolate, or tomatoes. To this day I unfortunately still can't really speak Chechen. But at least now I can comprehend some and still communicate even with the language barrier. It was hard trying to fit in with my relatives because of our lack of shared experiences, and the language barrier.

So to recap, my parents sent me on a plane with strangers to a place I'd never been to live with a bunch of people I didn't know and couldn't talk to. And I was six. The word 'homesickness' doesn't even begin to describe it. 'Crying' on the plane doesn't quite do the job either.

Now I wasn't 100% completely alone. They sent me there with my brother, but he wasn't much help because he wasn't around most of the time. He was 12, and didn't want to babysit me, so he was always off playing with my older cousins, leaving me with my grandma to figure it out by myself. My cousins and I would always try to communicate, though it was never really very successful. Most of the time we had to basically play either picture dictionary or charades for me to get my point across.

I don't have many relatives in the U.S. My dad's side of the family is small. I have my grandparents, who I used to see a lot before Covid, and my uncle's family who we only see at Christmastime. So my only real cousins live in Belgium, and it was my first real experience hanging out with cousins. And there's a lot of them. I have 20 first cousins there, and another who knows how many second cousins. So even though I was pretty stressed, and the language barrier was a big problem, my cousins that I bonded with made it so much better. I didn't know them before that trip, and it was great to build relationships. I also got to know my aunts and uncles better, and my other grandparents.

Other problems came up because of the language barrier. One day I was having dinner with one of my uncle's family. I wasn't careful with my food allergies, because, well, I was six. We were eating dinner, and I started having an allergic reaction to the pesto on our pasta, which has pine nuts. We knew that I had an allergy to some nuts and seeds, but didn't really understand how serious it was, so I wasn't carrying Benadryl and an epi-pen like I do now. My poor aunt

and uncle were frantically rifling through their cabinets trying to find medication for me. To add to the chaos, once they finally found an allergy medication, as I rushed to get the pills down they got caught in my throat. The entire situation was a mess.

It was a huge relief to get on the plane to go home. Though I loved my new relatives, I was so homesick and glad that I finally got to see my parents. They felt bad because they saw how upset I was, but they did the same thing to my brother when he was six, and he handled it much better than I did. Anyway, although it was a challenging experience, I think I definitely learned a lot and grew a lot as a person because of it.