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*Bonjour, My Dear Tovarish!*

We spotted each other right away. There is a saying stating that birds of a feather flock together, and in our case it was exactly true. Without saying a word to each other, we knew that we had something in common. After our first encounter it became clear; we both are foreign to this country, and we are both are bicultural. Although we come from different countries – France and Russia –, we fall into the same category: Immigrants. We both crossed the border carrying more luggage than we initially intended. Leaving our countries, we took not only our belongings but also a strong sense of our cultural identities, our traditions, and our own different-from-American way of thinking. The language we learned to speak, the culture we assimilated to, and the rules we now obey have molded our personalities, shaped our worlds, and split our lives into “before” and “after” immigration. After moving to this country, we had to go through different phases of becoming a part of American society: The so-called honeymoon period, culture shock, rediscovery of our own cultures, and finally, adjustment.

We both came to the United States sharing the same feeling of eager readiness to get swept into the vortex of breathtaking adventures, new exciting acquaintances, and unforgettable events. The fact that we came to this country with no intention of staying determined, to some degree, our light-hearted attitude towards every experience we had during the first months of our stay. Everything seemed rather easy and pleasant. The language barrier, cultural differences, and other difficulties appeared insignificant and

sometimes even fascinating. The feeling of adventure was in the air. We traveled every opportunity we had, spent our money carelessly, and enjoyed every moment of our stay because we thought it would come to an end one day. Because we were unfamiliar with written and unwritten rules of American society, we felt like we didn't have to follow them which gave us a sweet sense of freedom. For instance, we constantly had to be reminded by our American boyfriends of the Public Display of Affection (PDA) issue and the attitude towards it in the United States. When we were getting too romantic with our sweethearts around people, they would whisper in our ears that it is inappropriate and softly push us away. It was strange to us in the beginning since both in France and Russia people do not pay any attention to couples who are kissing or hugging in public places. Likewise, it was odd to us to find out that two girls holding hands automatically means that they are in a romantic relationship. However, in our countries it is normal for two girls to hold hands while walking down the street, or going out. Not knowing these and other nuances about American culture, we would sometimes get in awkward situations, although at that time we did not mind making little mistakes like those; we thought we would soon leave this country, and would never come back. We didn't know then that America would soon become our country of residence, our abode, our "Home Sweet Home."

We came to this country with the wrong impression that we were actually familiar with its culture and lifestyle. We had this idea because America, being so distant from our countries, indirectly influenced us our whole lives through music, movies, and even fashion. Like any American girl we listened to Beyonce and Rihanna, wore *Levis'* jeans, and watched *Friends* and *Sex and The City*. We recall today that the main force

that drove us to this country in the first place was sheer curiosity. Was the American reality something even close to the one portrayed in movies? Were the people any different from those TV show characters we knew so well? Will we find that American girls are similar to Carrie and Miranda or Rachel and Phoebe? Looking back at ourselves, we realize that mostly because of all the expectations we then had, it was not simple for us to truly assimilate in America. After making the decision to stay, we had a hard time adapting to the lifestyle, culture, and traditions. Our attitudes changed, and the first impression of this country faded away. The previously unknown aspects of our new host country started to reveal themselves gradually. Some of those aspects provoked us to resist the American way of seeing things. For instance, we were shocked to learn that in the United States, it is of vital importance to establish a good credit reputation through the bizarre practice of paying with a credit card, and basically constantly accumulating and paying the debt. This notion is odd to people from countries like ours who hardly use credit cards and then perhaps only when purchasing something as large as furniture, electronics, cars, and houses. This is the reason why our credit cards are used for nothing more than collecting dust in the drawers. Another characteristic of American culture that was difficult to get used to was the absence of distinction between formal and informal “you” in the English language. We are still not comfortable with addressing our professors or older people by simply saying “you” without using a formal version. In our native languages, there is a formal “you” that shows respect and an informal form of it that is used when talking to friends or peers. These differences between American culture and ours were rather formidable obstacles for us; however, by overcoming those obstacles we became more open-minded and tolerant of our new environment.

Immigrating to the United States gave us more than a chance to learn a foreign language and discover a new culture. By moving away from our countries, we, paradoxically, obtained an opportunity to become more aware of them. It was an eye-opening experience to be able to make a comparison between European and American realities, and, therefore, expand our knowledge about the two. After we had lived in the United States for quite a while, we noticed, for example, that many Americans feel that it is important for them to claim their religious affiliation and convert people to their religion. As people from countries with a different attitude towards religious views, we find it uncomfortable and, at times, difficult to talk about our own beliefs. Before moving to the United States, the fact that people in our native countries hardly ever talk about religion never caught our attention. Actually, there were many things we hadn't been able to notice about our own cultures before we came here; for example, how cooking at home is far more popular in our countries than in America, or how much more polite and tactful Americans are compared to our compatriots. We now believe that we were able to fully understand and appreciate our own cultures only after getting acquainted with American reality.

After living in the United States for a while now, we seem to have finally gotten to the point where we are comfortable enough to consider this country our home. We speak English well enough to understand American jokes, although sometimes we don't understand their cultural context. We have our favorite places to shop and to dine at and favorite TV shows we do not want to miss at night. However, we believe that we will never lose our cultural identities, never detach from our roots, and never forget our languages. No matter how stereotypical it sounds, a freshly baked baguette will always

arouse warm feelings in a French girl's heart, and a birch tree covered with snow will always catch a Russian girl's attention. It is like seeing a dear friend after years of separation, or finding your childhood toy covered in dust in the attic. Ironically though, every time we go back to our countries to visit our families and friends, we miss our lives in America. We became "American girls" in the eyes of our loved ones, and surprisingly enough, it doesn't bother us to hear from them that we now have a slight accent when speaking our native languages. We finally found a place in our hearts and minds for two cultures that are not in conflict any more.

We believe we both are very fortunate to go through the challenge of becoming bicultural. Immigration taught us many important life lessons. We learned how to adapt in a foreign environment, obey new written and unwritten rules, but at the same time, protect our old values and appreciate our cultures and traditions. It was essential for us to go through all the steps of this beautiful transition: The "honeymoon" phase was a time of recklessness, the painful culture shock stage hit us right between the eyes when least expected, while the rediscovery of own cultures finally led us to the point of adjustment to the American culture. When we see each other now, we can jokingly say to each other, "Hello, my dear comrade!" *Bonjour* my dear *Tovarish!*"