More Than a Suitcase

Long before my flight to America, the airline allowed me two 50-pound suitcases in total. We all gathered together as a family, thought about what I might need, and started preparing the necessary things; between clothes, plug adapters, and towels, my first suitcase was already full. When I moved on to the second one, I didn't want to pack any more clothes. I could buy those in America. The important thing was what I wouldn't be able to find there, so I started packing packaged foods, snacks, and nuts belonging to my country. I knew I could find similar items there too, but they wouldn't taste like home. I thought if I ever felt homesick, I could just take them out and eat them, hoping it would comfort me, even just for a moment. After all, I was traveling to a country where I knew no one, and my English wasn't perfect. There was nothing waiting for me that would make me feel like I belonged. If I ran into trouble, I didn't even have a single friend or family member who could just jump on a plane to help me. I was on my own. That fear of the unknown made me overpack; I didn't know what to expect in America, and packing more things made me feel a little safer.

The first moment I arrived in America was fascinating; almost everything here was completely different. From the airport to my new accommodation, I sat by the window, staring outside with wonder. When evening came, I was hungry, and without even knowing how to order, I went into a burger restaurant thinking it would be easier to order. While in our country it is enough to just say the name of the order from the menu, the worker here was expecting me to list every single item inside the hamburger one by one. At that moment, out of stress, I was trying to understand the worker on one hand, and on the other hand, trying to remember the English names of the items that could be in the hamburger. It must have been out of excitement that none of them came to my mind, and I could only say cheese. The employee realized something was going wrong, and when he asked me, "What, so you just want meat and cheese between bread, are you sure?" it occurred to me to say "make me your favorite burger." He

laughed at me, and thus I was able to eat my burger without experiencing any more stress. However, during my New York trip a few weeks later, I wouldn't be this lucky, and I would order an "everything bagel," thinking it would be filled with all kinds of ingredients, instead, I received a bagel covered in seasoning but with nothing inside.

As time passed, I started to get used to the city and built a circle of friends. I found myself flying to California with friends to watch a World Cup match; eventually, we explored over 10 cities together. I remember the Friday nights spent playing table tennis at the Perkins Student Center. I made friends from Japan, South Korea, Colombia, Peru, and beyond. We shared so many laughs and unforgettable moments. After a while, I got so used to it that I started to feel sad that the time to return would come and I would have to go back home. I began sleeping less just so I could experience more. Every day, I met up with a different friend. I would take them to a local Turkish restaurant to introduce them to my culture, and in return, they would share their traditional cuisines with me. We became so close that even my friends' families knew me. I had never celebrated a birthday away from my family before. Before coming to the U.S., I assumed I would be alone on my special day. Instead, I spent an unforgettable birthday with a friend I met at ELI and their family. They were warm and good people, just like my own family.

But eventually, it was time to return. Just as I was terrified when I first arrived, I found myself scared to leave. But this time, I wasn't afraid of loneliness; I was afraid of saying goodbye. It broke my heart to leave the friends I had shared the last six months with. On my last night, while I was packing my suitcase, a lot of my friends from different countries came to my door; we said goodbye to all of them, and with one of them, we cried together for minutes. We were sad, but we knew this was not the end. Maybe here, maybe in another country, we would see each other again. I now had a home and a family in different countries. Likewise, they now have a home in Turkey. I knew one thing for sure: there was no room for worries or

fears in my suitcase anymore. Instead, it was filled to the brim with gifts from my friends, unforgettable memories, and beautiful friendships. As I write these lines, I am on the plane returning to my country. But this time, I am not alone. I am taking those friendships home with me.