Hello, World

Ten years ago, I first came to the United States as a middle school student with endless curiosity and enthusiasm. Even a nearly twenty-hour flight couldn't stop me from exploring this country. The skyscrapers along Fifth Avenue, the bronze bull on Wall Street, and the giant and glowing screens in Times Square were all reflected into my eyes: Ah, the United States of America.

Ten years later, I came back for a very different reason. Going through a two-year tough time and uncertainty about the future, I decided to start a new chapter in my life upon returning to the US. Unfortunately, America's welcome greeting was "Sorry, madam, we lost your luggage in Egypt." The staff spoke too fast, and I couldn't understand everything he said; I wanted to find my luggage, but I was unable to communicate. I stood there in embarrassment and wanted the floor to open up and swallow me. Even worse, my credit card didn't work. I asked myself: Would I survive in the US?

Yes, I did survive, but barely. I fumbled my way to the University of Delaware. There was no one on the street except me with the blazing sun and the noise of passing cars. During a thirty-minute wait for the DART bus, I looked around and found everything unfamiliar. An overwhelming helplessness and loneliness enveloped me. This feeling lasted for a long time even after I left that street. When I went to a restaurant, I forgot everything I had learned before, only floundering with "yes, this one, that one, thank you, and sorry." Compared to the last time I had came to the US with teachers, now I was alone, and everything was completely different.

After the first week, I started studying at ELI and braced for the worst. In class, I felt like my mouth had been sealed shut. Every time my classmates asked questions, I was frustrated with myself for being unable to open my mouth. Knowing my struggles, my tutor gave me a task:

raise my hand and speak up in the next class. However, by the time I rehearsed in my head and made sure that there were no grammar mistakes, the professor had already moved on to the next question. “Next time,” I whispered skeptically. The next came suddenly. The professor called my name and asked, “What is the difference between citations in China and America?” At that time, my mind was empty, and no matter how hard I tried, I just couldn’t recall the word “format.” Then, I clenched my fists and placed them on my temples, trying to hide from everyone. After I struggled for a minute, I looked up at my professor in despair and said, “Sorry, I don’t know how to say it in English.” “In Chinese,” the professor said. I was shocked by his request and answered in Chinese. At that moment, I understood that he just wanted to encourage me to speak up. Also, I came to realize that studying here was to risk expression rather than expect a perfect answer. Honestly, this situation is still happening, but the frequency is much lower than before.

Slowly, I began to notice that I was surrounded by kindness and warm people. I went to different kinds of events. At a weekly International discussion group, I met Ember. I went to church and had lunch with her family, who engaged me in the first real conversation outside of the university. What surprised me was an elegant lady with red lipstick and perfectly styled hair saying, “Call me Granny, just like Ember does.” Granny — what a beautiful and warm word. Every time she picked up her phone and pushed up her glasses, she would say, “I can show you a picture.” Even though I wasn’t in those photos, I felt completely welcomed. When we said goodbye, Granny hugged me. I didn’t know when I would see her again, so this time I summoned up my courage to hug Granny tightly. At that moment, I was thinking how there are so many lovely people in this world. Maybe they had always been there. It was just my fear and anxiety that had undermined the bridge of communication.

Gradually, this courage also flowed into the classroom. I started to raise my hand and ask questions. When my mind went blank, I chose to say, “Sorry, let me think about it,” instead of saying sorry all the time. At the end of the first session, one of my professors walked up to me and said he was really proud of me and saw my improvement. His words encouraged me, and I felt embraced. I recalled the scene in which I was waiting for the DART bus, feeling helpless and lonely; now I could feel the world was supporting me. Subconsciously, I had fallen in love with this place, which is full of warm and lovely people, and I also had fallen in love with myself, slowly changing from anxious and discouraged to positive and open-hearted.

Ten years ago, I thought New York was America. Now I know that bustling New York has its own light, and peaceful Delaware also has its own way of transforming people. The curious and energetic girl from ten years ago and the slightly lost young woman from ten years later both found their way in the world.

This afternoon, when I walked from the dormitory to Morris Library, yellow autumn leaves drifted slowly down from trees, choosing to use all of their energy to give this world one last dance. I want to embrace this world with all my energy, too. At last, as a conditional accepted program student whose major is Applied AI for Business, I am reminded of Brian Kernighan’s first successful coding program message in 1972, in which every beginner, including me, learns: “Hello, World.”