

Christina Dolkar

Dear Immigrant, Welcome to America!

Although I don't know your name, where you're from, or exactly how you got here, I do know one thing. It took you time and effort, along with courage and confidence, to get here. To leave behind the streets you walked every day when you lived there, and the sound of family members you may not hear for years. That takes a kind of courage that not everyone possesses within them. Don't you worry. It can be nerve-racking and scary. At first, it'll be a craze of emotions. That's only natural. You're stepping into the unknown, and that's never easy.

America tends to go through several mood swings. It's as if America were diagnosed to be bipolar. There will be days when it will feel like the land of opportunity. The land of the free. All of those stories you heard other people tell. It's the palace where dreams, work, and school are within reach. But then, there will be days when it will feel baffling, unfair, or even hostile. Both exist. My point in making this letter is that I may remind you that even when the challenges seem larger than the opportunities, you still belong here. This is home for you as well now.

One of the first things you will notice as you step into America is the diverse community. Walk through any major city, and you will hear a dozen different languages in a few blocks. Take New York City as an example. The Big Apple. Almost every country has its representation within a neighborhood. Jackson Heights, Chinatown, Astoria, and Flushing are common areas full of diversity. You will smell scents of the different spices in kitchens belonging to people who, like you, brought their culture across seas. You will see faces of every color, dresses of every tradition, and festivals that light up whole neighborhoods, and bring everyone together. Even though America is technically one nation, it is actually a ginormous patchwork quilt of

millions of stories, stitched together by people who had come from somewhere else. Don't think of yourself as another stranger roaming into the states. You are the newest thread in that quilt.

Yes, opportunity is part of the reason why people come here. It might be school, work, or even the freedom to shape your own fate. Maybe you see yourself attending college, having your own company, or giving your kids a future you never would have been able to dream of before. Those dreams are possible. They will not always be available—sometimes the path will be long and circuitous—but the greatest thing about this nation is that there is a path. Others have traveled ahead of you, and you shall too.

In all honesty, there will be days when you will ask yourself why you came. You will feel the frustration of not knowing what to say in English when people speak too fast, and you sit there smiling kindly while trying to keep up. You might feel everyone's eyes on you when you have an accent, or when you're wearing a cultural outfit and decide that you don't belong. Perhaps you will miss home so desperately that it hurts. Homesickness sneaks up on you, and catches you off guard. When you get a smell of food that reminds you of your grandmother's recipes, or when a holiday comes along and it just isn't the same with people around you. Those moments will hurt.

But the reality is, all of those will be what strengthen you. It takes patience to learn a new language. It toughens you up to handle prejudice. It will make you proud to take your culture everywhere you go because it will make you homesick. America isn't perfect. There will be

Christina Dolkar

these obstacles throughout your entire stay here. But these obstacles will only thicken your skin. You will eventually appreciate how much more resilient you have become because of it.

The best advice I could give you is: never let go of your roots. Your culture is not something to hide or be ashamed of. It is something to be proud of. Share your friends here your favorite songs, your favorite cultural food, a holiday you might celebrate back from where you came from. America runs on the differences among everyone. America loves to embrace differences. Historically, the nation comes from the people who bring their cultures to the nation. America, without you, without immigrants, is not America at all.

In the meantime, let yourself expand into new traditions. Don't be afraid to try the foods, the holidays, the customs you never knew before. You don't have to choose which culture you wish to embrace. Embrace both. That is the real magic of being an immigrant. You live in two worlds at once. You carry one homeland in your memory and another in your future. Few are fortunate enough to reside in such a beautiful country.

Community is just as important as culture. Meet those who understand you, if not your language, religion, or even just the feeling of being new here. They will assure you you're not alone. And at the same time, bond with those who are different from you as well. Friendship will be one of your greatest tools for building a life here. You will be surprised at how many people want to help you if you are given the chance.

Christina Dolkar

Most of all, have hope and patience. America isn't perfect. It is broken, chaotic, and messy. But it is also strong, and so are you. The immigrant story is woven throughout the history of this country. From those who built the railroads and cities to those who became doctors, artists, and leaders. By being here, you're part of that story now. Someday, you will look back and realize that the obstacles you had at first became the foundation of your success.

So, then, dear immigrant, welcome. Welcome to the all-night diners, the full buses, the suburban villages of peace and quiet, and the frenzied cities. Welcome to the contradictions and promise, to loneliness and friendship, to challenges and triumphs. Welcome to a land that will infuriate you and inspire you at the same time. Most importantly, welcome to a land that needs your voice, vision, and courage.

You belong here. Don't ever forget that.

Sincerely,

A Fellow American