Imagine this: a classroom full of unknown people, language, and culture. Your body fills up with confusion, frustration, anger, sadness, and fear. You need to use the bathroom, but even that is scary when you don't know how to ask. Suddenly, everyone quiets down. “It's icebreaker time,” the teacher says. Everyone introduces themselves. But for you, English is an unknown tool. You stand there silently as kids walk past, probably thinking you’re quiet. If only they knew how talkative you really are. The nightmare ends. Everyone sits down, but a second term begins. The teacher walks around passing out papers. You glance at yours, and the first thing you see is the word “Name”. You wish you knew what it meant, but you don’t. Survival skills come in. You look around trying to copy what everyone else is writing. You turn to the girl next to you and copy her name. You could give yourself a pat on the back, but little do you know, the first time you wrote your name in America, it wasn’t yours. You weren’t cheating; you simply didn’t know English.

The person you’re imagining is me, a nine-year-old Ukrainian girl who misses the grandmother that raised her. Now, I was walking on the ground of the unknown. When I tried to speak, someone laughed at my accent or my limited understanding of simple words. Every day, I came home and answered my parents' question, “How was school?” with the usual, “Good, as always.” Little did they know, I felt like an outsider.

I began to hate the very thing that made me different. All I wanted was to be like everyone else. Quickly, I learned that no matter how badly you want something, wanting it isn't enough; you have to work for it. My parents, who still struggle with English today, looked at me and saw a fluent, Americanized daughter. I only wished everyone else viewed me through the same eyes.

I thought that the only way for me to fit in was to blend in. Like a chameleon, I changed the way I spoke, acted, and even what I cared about depending on who I was around. At home, I spoke Ukrainian and held onto the traditions I was raised with. At school, I tried to sound and dress like everyone else. Living between two worlds didn't help me find myself. Instead, it left me wondering who I truly was. I became so focused on becoming the person everyone else wanted, that I slowly began forgetting who I wanted to become.

When I visited Ukraine in the summer of 2023, I expected it to feel like home again. Instead, I realized I no longer fully belonged there, either. One night, air raid alarms went off. I remember how fast everything changed; I found myself hiding while distant explosions echoed outside. In that moment, I understood something on a deeper level: how quickly life can change, how safety is not guaranteed, and how people live completely different lives depending on where they are born.

I came back to America thinking about everything I had experienced. I realized I had spent years trying to choose between two versions of myself while never fully belonging to either. Living between places and languages wasn't something I had to fix. It was who I was. For a long time, I believed that fitting in meant becoming a shapeshifter, changing myself until I fit with every person I pass by. But I started realizing that in trying to be everything, I was slowly disappearing. Now I understand I don't have to choose between who I was in Ukraine and who I am in America. I don’t have to forget one version of myself. I am both. The same girl who once copied another girl's name now writes her own, without needing to look at anyone else.