

Between Two Skies

By Onidë J., AYA Exchange Student from Kosovo hosted in Minnesota

There is a moment, somewhere over the Atlantic, when you are neither here nor there. You belong to no timezone, no country, no kitchen table. I remember that feeling well; suspended between Kosovo and a place called Hermantown, Minnesota, that I could not yet picture.

I had looked it up on Google Maps before I left. A small community near Duluth, tucked against Lake Superior. It did not look like anything I knew. Kosovo is loud with history, layered with memory, a place where your neighbors have known your family for generations. Hermantown looked quiet in a way I did not yet understand, the kind of quiet that turned out to be full of things, once I learned to listen.

The hardest part came first, as it usually does. I missed the smell of my mother's cooking. I missed the way people back home argue warmly over coffee for hours about nothing and everything. My host family was kind, genuinely kind, but kindness in a new language is hard to receive when you are still figuring out how to say what you mean. There were siblings in the house, noise and movement and inside jokes stood outside of, smiling anyway.

Then came sports. I joined the tennis team, and later found myself on alpine ski slopes I had never imagined racing down as a child in Kosovo. Something shifted in both places. There is a language underneath language, the one made of effort and showing up and doing the work beside someone until they stop being a stranger. I did not need perfect English on the court or on the mountain. I just needed to be there, consistently, and eventually I was no longer the foreign kid. I was just a teammate.

Original oratory pushed me further. Standing at a podium, competing in a third language, trying to find words precise enough to move strangers, that was its own kind of belonging. Every round I competed, I was saying: I am here, I have something worth saying, and I trust you to listen. Eventually, people did.

School games pulled me in too. Friday nights in Minnesota have their own particular feeling, the cold air, the lights, the way an entire community presses into the bleachers for something as simple as a high school match. In Kosovo we gather too, loudly and often, but I had never seen quite this, neighbors and teachers and parents who barely knew each other all leaning forward for the same moment. It reminded me that community is not so different anywhere. It just wears different coats.

But I will not pretend I stopped missing home. I missed Kosovo every day; its mountains, its mess, its particular warmth. Missing it did not mean Minnesota had failed me. It meant had been lucky enough to love two places, and that is a complicated, heavy, wonderful thing to carry.

America turns 250 this year. From where I stood, a teenager from Kosovo in a Minnesota winter, I saw a country still figuring out what welcome means, but full of ordinary people practicing it anyway. A host sibling who shared their room. A coach who learned to pronounce my name correctly. A family that added a chair.

That is what I hope carries forward: Not grand gestures, but the small faithful ones. The extra chair. The patient pronunciation. The bleachers that somehow always have room.

Home, I learned, is not one place. It is every place that chose to make space for you.