

From Canada to Belgium

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Right now as I'm sitting in my dorm typing this in Ghent, I cannot believe I've made it this far. When I was 15, I had a challenging period where I struggled with my mental health and will to live. I had given up in school, lost all hope, and completely shut myself off socially. My parents saw how hard life was for me at this time, and they wanted to help me find some stability again. Looking back, I realise how hard it must have been for them to see me dealing with so much pain. Because of their emotional and physical support though, I was able to "have a fresh start", where I could work on building my self-confidence back up again. I was enrolled in a different high school, one with smaller class sizes and a more involved staff. Initially, I was still a bit standoffish, but with time, I started to warm up to the teachers and put effort into my education again. I can imagine this time was also stressful yet rewarding for my teachers, who got to see me grow and push through my challenges. My grades began to rise, I started to learn French, and even took on part-time jobs. I rediscovered my ambition and began to feel like my life had value again. I learned the importance of empathy, community, and patience during this time of my life. Today, I don't jump to cold conclusions when I meet someone who seems to be having a hard time. I remember the importance of having a helping hand when I was struggling so deeply, and I now extend this support to others. With this new spur of motivation, I started to question what I wanted to do after school. University was the expected route, but it's such a flexible option. I love Canada, my home country. It was an amazing place to grow up. Being as multicultural as it is, one learns to appreciate the world for all its diversity and uniqueness. I grew up eating global cuisines, seeing different cultural garments, languages, and traditions, and interacting with people from diverse backgrounds. Because of this, I have always been open to exploring the world and indulging in new experiences. Taking this into mind, I realised that what I wanted was to study abroad and expand my horizons even more. Considering I was learning French and had a strong interest in the social sciences, I landed at Brussels, Belgium, for its similar multicultural atmosphere to Canada, and its proximity to high-ranking global political institutions. I had saved some money from my part-time work, but I still needed to do a bit more preparation before this dream became a reality. I took a gap year as I wanted to bring my French to a more fluent level, and work full-time to save as much money as possible. My gap year taught me discipline, independence, and the importance of setting long-term goals.

To practice my French, I took an immersive French program in Quebec, where for six weeks I lived with a Quebecois host mom while attending language classes during the day. I remember feeling a bit awkward and embarrassed at first, as I had a hard time getting around and speaking the language clearly. In class, I felt behind compared to my peers, and started to doubt whether I could succeed. Sitting here now though, I realise it's a bit silly to think this, as I'm sure the other students felt nervous and maybe behind as well. After all, we all start from somewhere. After classes, I would go home to hang out with my host mom. Living together was a bit tricky at first. She spoke no English and I spoke little French, so our early communication was slow and awkward. She was an incredibly patient, generous, and thoughtful woman, however. We quickly became close, and often did activities together on the weekend. She told me she once wanted to learn English, but lost the skill over time from a lack of practice. Nonetheless, she made an effort with me when I struggled with my French, and it inspired me to work harder myself. It showed me that while language learning is stressful, a little patience and kindness go a long way. Today, I continue to value learning languages and truly immersing myself in a culture. Though challenging at times, the

payoff is worth it. People are less judgmental than we fear, and learning a language opens doors to deeper connection and opportunity. Quebec is quite different from my province, but I found a love for it and learned to appreciate its culture, language, and society. Living in Quebec challenged my assumptions about what it means to be 'Canadian.' The cultural identity there felt quite distinct, more collectivist, and more protective of the French language, and it made me realise that a national identity can express itself in various ways. This experience taught me to not underestimate my adaptability in unfamiliar environments. Since Quebec, I've felt more confident stepping into other intercultural spaces and trusting my ability to learn through discomfort.

I chose to study in Belgium because I wanted to challenge my personal growth, deepen my French, and be in a diverse, international environment. The program I chose and the city of Brussels especially, ticked all these boxes. Coming here was daunting at first, as I was confronted with a new education system, unfamiliar bureaucracy, a language barrier, and being so far from home. When I arrived, I felt scared and uncertain, but having lived here for a while now, I couldn't be happier to have made this choice. My hard moments have taught me to be more organised, resilient, and adaptable — skills I continue to build each day. Living away from home, I've had to learn how to make a home where I am. I've made friends from around the world whose diverse perspectives have challenged me to be more curious and knowledgeable. There have been cultural shocks though. I've had friends and partners with very different lives from mine, and adjusting at first was not always easy. At times, I have been told I 'have no culture' or that my family is 'too distant,' which is deeply hurtful. Hearing these things were painful at first, and I used to just accept it. As I've been living in Belgium though, I have become closer to my family and have opened up more to them about the insecurities and doubts I face sometimes. These comments pushed me to be more assertive and proud of my background. I'm sure that the people saying these words didn't necessarily have a malicious intent behind it, but were just curious or confused about how my family interacted and the way I grew up. These moments made me realise how cultural identities are often measured by proximity to tradition. In my case, a more individualistic, relatively 'newer' North American upbringing didn't align with their experiences. Living in Belgium has taught me so much about the world, and myself. I have learned how to better live in multicultural environments, where multiple languages and cultures interact. This has encouraged me to learn more languages myself, having picked up some Dutch while being here. It has also opened the door to meeting new people with different backgrounds and beliefs, which had I stayed in Canada, I would have interacted a lot less with. While Canada is diverse, I've found that in Europe, people express their cultural roots more strongly. This has deepened my appreciation for diverse cultural identities, as I believe we learn more and become better people through engaging with different opinions.

Though my path hasn't always been easy, I'm very satisfied with where I've ended up today. When I was 15, I felt like my life was over, and I truly gave up on any sense of hope or dream for the future. This time was also incredibly difficult for my parents and those close to me, as I can now see how much they truly cared and how much time and work they put into assuring me that I was loved. I used to give up at the slightest indicator of a situation becoming tough, but my international experiences have taught me that our hardest moments can also be our greatest opportunities for growth. I was always an adventurous child, but that spirit was lost as a teenager. Because I had such huge support during my rough patch

though, I now have the safety net and the motivation to be curious again. Today, I am eager and active in my life. If an opportunity presents itself, I take it, as I no longer fear what would happen if I took it, but rather what would happen if I didn't. Even if my life is hard sometimes, I don't want to live it with the regret of knowing that I could have done more, but didn't because I was scared. Arriving in Quebec and Belgium was quite scary for me at first. In Quebec, the new language and the familiar yet different culture took some time to adjust to. I started to question my own identity while there, and what it meant to truly be Canadian, yet rather than feeling left out and hopeless, I wanted to use the fact that I didn't speak French to motivate me to learn it. This experience taught me the importance of integration, and how learning the language of a different culture is not just useful, but a sign of appreciation and respect as well. In Belgium, the shock was a bit larger. I spoke a bit of French at that point, however growing up in North America versus Europe has its differences. At times, I felt like I was less than my peers, as they all seemed to have such rich histories behind them, whereas I felt like an empty slate with no real flag behind my name. Living here however, I learned that I do have a culture, just expressed differently from that of a more traditional one, and that this is something I should be proud of. Values like independence, shaped by growing up in Canada, have helped me better navigate life abroad. I now have friends from across the world, and living in Belgium has only strengthened my appreciation and curiosity for other cultures. I am incredibly grateful for the opportunities I have had, and I will continue to remain proactive and motivated in my life journey and exploration of the world.

Alongside this essay, I have compiled a photo collage alongside descriptions to better visualise my journey. The photos I have included may seem very mundane, but that's the point. To me, the little things in life have been a huge motivator for me, and something that has kept me going even during my hardest days.

EUCI Collage - Madeleine Moser



This is a picture of a ramen dish I had with my mom at a popular Japanese restaurant in my hometown, Calgary. It was a flavour I had never had before, so I wanted to try it out. Before leaving for Belgium, my parents spent a lot of time with me and offered me great love and support. We were never picky eaters growing up, and that's one of the aspects I love about Canada. It's common to try out different cuisines and appreciate all they have to offer. Growing up, my parents taught me the importance of being open-minded and spending quality time with others. Today, I continue to be curious, always trying out new dishes. Most importantly, I enjoy sharing my love of food with others, using it as a way to socially bond and explore different cultures together.



This was the dog of my host mom in Quebec. I would often take him on walks as a way to help her out, but these walks also helped calm my stress and allowed me to explore the area. He only understood French commands, so I learned some basic phrases – something that encouraged me to keep expanding my vocabulary. I also interacted with the neighbours and discovered different shops to try out. These walks motivated me to step out of my comfort zone, meet new people, discover different areas, and learn more phrases.

This was the last dinner I had with my host mom before I went back to my city. She was an amazing cook and always made sure I was well fed. This night, we had Lebanese dishes. It was interesting to note that despite being in different provinces, Canada remains a strong multicultural country. We enjoy exploring different foods and cultures. My host mom not only helped me learn some more cooking skills, but she also introduced me to different cuisines that I had not cooked at home before. I believe I also opened some doors for her, as I ordered us Vietnamese food one night which was something she had never tried before.



This photo was taken the day I arrived in Belgium. I was so incredibly exhausted upon arriving. The flight was long, and I had been awake for more than 24 consecutive hours. When I entered my room, though, I felt a rush of excitement and happiness. This has been a new beginning for me—a new shot at becoming a better person. When I was 16, I never could have imagined doing something like this. Living in Belgium has taught me to be strong, hopeful, and open to possibilities.



Since living in Belgium, I've made so many incredible friends and tried lots of new cuisines. This is a photo I took of the Vietnamese coffee shop in Antwerp that my Filipino friend and I went to. I love spending quality time like this with the people I care about. Talking with each other about our lives, while also indulging in a different culture in a city we had both never visited before!

The infamous cinnamon buns! Anybody who knows me knows how absolutely crazy I am about these things. This little treat has not only been my comfort snack, but a lifesaver in some cases. When I'm having a bad day, I'll go to my favourite shop and order some buns, which always brightens my mood. This has shown me that even when dealing with difficult times where we feel overwhelmed or helpless, we can always indulge in the little things of life to bring back a sense of control and enjoyment.



My international experiences have shaped me into the motivated and curious person I am today. I am always eager to meet new people and travel to a foreign destination, constantly learning more skills and knowledge along the way. I believe our differences are beautiful and are something that should be valued, as we all have something we can learn from each other. One of the main lessons I've learned is that we will never grow if we don't challenge ourselves. Getting outside of my comfort bubble has opened up the world for me, and I am a better person because of it.

