

(De)fences

(de)fences is a descriptive short story about gaining a new perspective through international volunteering experience. It deals with culture shock and overcoming it.

At home the spruce trees stood quietly in a mute seriousness, forming fences around the silent yards. One day with wistful thoughts I left my safe and secluded yard and thoroughly closed the gate behind me to start my international volunteering experience.

I found myself in the middle of three million people in a city of trees with leafs and open gates. I might have looked like everyone around me – just like that woman in a waterproof jacket walking her dog and stopping to buy bread from the window of a Turkish bakery, or that boy wearing broken sneakers trying to light his cigarette while driving a bicycle – but something always gave away I was an outsider. Maybe it was the uncertain way I placed my steps or the slight scent of fear on my skin. What ever it was, I felt lonelier than ever.

I gave up listening the words I couldn't understand and I became mute since my language wasn't valid anymore. Everything turned hazy like in one of those nightmares where you have to rush but you don't know where to. There was always a road to cross, metro to catch, a workday to start, an email to reply.

Then one day in the middle of my everyday office tasks I heard the sound of the church bells coming through the open window, they sounded delighted, almost merry. My gaze started wandering from the computer screen and I took a good look around me.

Through the office's open windows I saw that the spring was already coming, the lilacs were in buds, and their stunning scent was lingering among the tourist groups walking on the church yard with their open maps. I took a deep breath like I wouldn't have been even breathing in a long time. Suddenly the world wasn't just a place to survive, it was place to see, feel, take a part in.

Instead of continuing to write the email that I was about to send to the office in Hanoi I took a map out and search for the office's address. I imagined myself strolling around the busy streets of Hanoi filled with scooters and colourful little food stalls taking over the pavements. I continued doing this all day and in my mind I visited Semarang, Kampala, Tegucigalpa, Kathmandu and Bogotá and while doing so my world started growing bigger, my perspective started broadening. I realised that the fences back home, like all the fences and barriers were not just to protect but also to exclude, prevent from seeing out as well as seeing in.

From that day onwards I started to let my own guard down and I started to listen again. I noticed that behind the unfamiliar words people's hearts were beating in the same rhythm than mine.