

Lost in the Heat

Polina didn't want to move to America. At the age of 12, she was very set in her ways and did not welcome change. She had a group of friends whom she had known since nursery school and enjoyed hanging out with. She also could hardly speak any English, so she doubted she would be able to make any new friends.

Her father was selected to be a Russian representative for the International Space Station project to NASA. They were moving to Houston, Texas, for a year. First, she imagined Texas to be a desert with cowboys riding around on horses. When she found out that Houston was a big city, however, she imagined skyscrapers.

The reality turned out completely different.

Nobody actually lived in the city. It was surrounded by many suburbs, which were really just small towns. They lived in a suburb called Katy, in a neighborhood with houses that all looked the same as if stamped out by identical cookie-cutters.

She had really been afraid of the heat. On the big wall map they had in Moscow she had seen that Houston was the same latitude as Africa. But now she barely noticed it because of the blasting freezing air-conditioning everywhere: in the car, in every store, and at home. Every time she stepped outside, however, she was assaulted by the overpowering heat.

Her parents were off at work, so she found herself alone most of the time. She tried watching TV but couldn't understand anything. She thought about chatting with her friends back in Moscow, but then remembered that it was the middle of the night on account of the time difference.

That was when she decided to go for a walk. She knew it would be scorchingly hot, but she felt suffocated sitting inside. So she lathered up with sunscreen, laced up her sneakers and went outside.

The full force of the heat was like a blazing furnace. But after a while she got used to it. She walked along the street, thinking about how strange it was here. In Moscow, everyone lived in apartment buildings with courtyards. In the summer, there would be lots of people out strolling, enjoying themselves. Here she didn't see a single person. An occasional car passed by but that was it.

She kept walking aimlessly until she stumbled upon a highway. To her left, there was a field with cows. Beyond this small oasis of country life, other housing communities were visible in the distance, mirroring the one she lived in. Further down the highway was a small convenience store. She was thirsty so she walked there to get a drink.

When she opened the door, she felt frosty relief from the heat. The cashier looked up, smiled and said, "How're you doing? It sure is a scorcher today, ain't it?"

Polina had no idea what he was talking about, so she just stared at him.

"What's wrong, little darling, cat got your tongue?" he asked, but she just paid and left.

She didn't notice which direction she was going and ended up in a neighborhood she assumed was hers. Everything looked familiar. It was only when she couldn't find her house that she knew she was totally lost. She was sweating and feeling dizzy and when everything started going black, she remembered the cows. She should have looked for the field with cows to get back. That was her last thought...

When she woke up, she was lying in a hospital bed. Her mom and dad were there.

"What happened?" she inquired.

A nurse didn't understand the language, but guessed her question.

"You're lucky to be alive little lady, you had a heat stroke. Guess you know now why people don't go on walks in the Texas heat!"

Polina couldn't find her house because...

1. ...she'd left the map of her neighborhood at home.
2. ...she didn't know her street address.
3. ...she ended up in the wrong neighborhood.
4. ...the cashier in the store gave her the wrong directions.