



"A LOT OF SNOW — A LOT OF BREAD"

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A Ukrainian newcomer's perspective on winter

Veronika Ivanytska is a Ukrainian evacuee who left her home in Southern Ukraine to come to Canada in the fall of 2022. It was an experience of many firsts: the first time she'd left her country, her first time travelling alone, her first time on an airplane. And of course, her first experience of winter in Edmonton. She is currently studying at the University of Alberta. We thank her for telling her story.

Like winter in Canada, Ukrainian winter tries on different outfits. It might greet you with cold in the north, be snowy and windy in the west, offer no snow in the south, and appear somewhere in the middle in the east. Some people do not like the cold and stay indoors as much as possible. Others leave the warmer regions to enjoy ski tours in the Carpathians. There are lots of folk omens, and most people of older generations still believe in them. “A lot of snow – a lot of bread,” my grandmother says, treating me with homemade jam.



My Ukrainian winter lives among short frosts and long thaws. It looks through the fog that overhangs the frozen Dnipro River. Puffs of smoke from factories curl up in fictional, fanciful clouds. My Ukrainian winter lives for three months, surrounded by the beauty of the East, in the historical heart of the Ukrainian Cossacks, the Khortytsia Island, and around the industrial giants of Zaporizhzhia city.



In recent years, snow has been a rare guest in my hometown, but when it comes down, the day becomes special, almost like a holiday. Just go outside and see how the kids are sculpting snow women and men: sometimes small, with curious coal-black eyes, sometimes large with old buckets on their snow heads. Sleds appear on the streets. We run to a steep slope in the park, and in a moment the sleds rush to face the unknown. The wind whistles in our ears, an uneven hill deceitfully changes direction, you fly into a snowdrift, and the sleds slide, lonely, further and further away. Time runs unnoticed and the evening sneaks up together with tiredness. I walk down the central avenue dusted with snow. The city's main Christmas tree stands proudly right across the street. I slow down to admire the view of the blue

and yellow lights wrapping around it. The evening sky, yellow lights on other trees beside it, red dots of traffic lights, and cars stopped to view it all. And me, chatting with my friends, thinking of the future, which seems as bright as these lights before the winter holidays.



Lots of my memories are of the New Year. In our family tradition, the holiday season begins with decorating our apartment two weeks before the end of the old year. Together with my dad, we buy and decorate a Christmas tree, inhaling the natural smell of pine needles. We help my mom prepare delicious meals, set the table, and treat ourselves as we say goodbye to the past year while making a wish. After the clock's twelve chimes, I call my loved ones and run out to the balcony to see the rainbow flashes of fireworks in different parts of the city. And then we make gifts for each other and wish for health and happiness. New Year's night is always sleepless, full of food, entertainment and talks. After a few days, Christmas comes with visits full of feasts and kutya, a ceremonial Eastern grain dish.

This year has been a huge contrast to both my past experience and that of my friend, Tanya, who is still living back home. She is courageously staying in Zaporizhzhya, which has been near the frontline from the very beginning of the invasion. “This winter, all our thoughts were with our soldiers who defend the country in the trenches in rain, and in snow, and in storms,” she says. “And we all hope that next year we will celebrate the winter holidays together with them, in our already free cities and villages, in comfort and warmth.”



I was not as courageous as Tanya.

One March day last year, I packed my things and left my beloved home city. It has already been a year since I was home last. Homesickness is an unfortunate way to feel sick. Homesickness comes during the day or at night without any warning.

Homesickness caught up with me here, in Edmonton, 8000 km away from my Zaporizhzhia. I arrived in Canada at the end of August. I was wearing a blue cap and smiling in the sunlight. I began to suspect something was wrong pretty soon. There was a strong heat outside, but everyone I met mysteriously repeated: “Winter is coming.” I checked the forecast and tried not to panic, for winter in Edmonton seemed ominous, and very different from my southern Ukrainian city.

Winter started for me in November. It was the second day of the month when the first snowfall began and I, the girl from the southeast, looked at this in disbelief and sent dozens of pictures to my loved ones back home.



Edmonton's winter prepared a lot of surprises for me, but to my surprise, mostly pleasant ones. Once the real frost came, at first, it was tough to adjust and force myself to go outside. Different insights came to me one by one. The first was that Edmonton's winter is a stubborn one, with a habit of going back and forth, but never in a hurry to leave.

Sudden temperature jumps turned out to be the second challenge. As a weather-dependent person, I couldn't get up some days. The transition from -10 to -30 and vice versa was too much for me, the one who was born for the mild winter.



The third realization was that the sun in Canada is deceitful. I had to deprive myself of the Ukrainian expectation that sunny weather means warm weather.

After I did this, sunny days became happy days. Sometimes a shiny winter fairy tale greeted me from the window. I went for a walk in layers of warm clothing just to feel the frosty air and crunching snow. I raised my head to see the tall trees and squirrels and rejoiced like a child.

I discovered lots of winter activities that I have never tried before. Although ice rinks are popular in Ukraine, I personally got on skates in Edmonton for the first time. We found a completely free ice rink, I never fell once, and I wandered the evening downtown with other Ukrainians after.



I tried snowshoeing in the river valley. I didn't understand what snowshoeing was until I saw actual snowshoes, and I messed up the left and right feet. A half-hour walk through the snowy park wasn't an easy task, but afterwards, we cooked sausages and apples in cinnamon on the campfire.

We tried to play amateur hockey, without any special equipment or full team, and were completely exhausted after five minutes of “the game.” But it was a perfect winter day anyway!

And the fun didn't end there. After celebrating Canadian Christmas, I prepared to celebrate the second one, on January 7, according to the Julian calendar. I visited a Ukrainian Christmas Carol Concert. Ukrainian Canadians and Ukrainian newcomers sang together, united, and their singing echoed through the church and through my heart. At such moments, Edmonton feels like home.

It is not only about views or activities, it is also about people. I meet incredible people wherever I go, and every time it feels like a Christmas gift or winning the lottery. I sense Canadian hospitality and warmth, and my longing for the Ukrainian winter lessens a little.

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