

# I Wish That I Could Belong

## Four Characters

*SHAHNAZ (Iranian student) is in her third year of university. She is studying to become an engineer. She is extroverted and likes sharing her opinions about a variety of topics.*

*CARLOS (Argentina) is in his second year of university and he is studying Business and International Relations. He is known for being very outgoing and sociable, and he hopes to make American and international friends in order to feel more integrated into the culture.*

*TUẤN ANH (Vietnam) is in his second year of university and is studying Music. He was quite popular at his university and had many friends there. However, now that he is in the US, he is more reserved and shy.*

*YASMINA (Germany/Syria) is in her final year of university and is studying Sociology. She is bicultural/bilingual with a Syrian father and a German mother. She grew up speaking both languages. She is sociable and is caring and supportive of her peers. Yasmina wears a hijab (a traditional head scarf worn by Muslim women).*

## Scene I

*The four international students are meeting for the first time during an orientation for international students at a US university. For all of these students, this is the first time that they have come to the US to study. During an icebreaker activity, which is held in a classroom, students were asked by the orientation organizers to discuss each other's backgrounds and their first impressions of being in the US.*

*They are sitting around a table. There is some noise in the background as other students are also seated in groups and introducing each other.*

*SHAHNAZ (smiling and doing a brief hand gesture to greet everyone):*

Hi, everyone. Nice to meet all of you. I'm Shahnaz and I'm from Teheran, in Iran.

*CARLOS (waves at everyone):* Hey guys, I'm Carlos from Argentina.

I'm from Buenos Aires. The capital of Argentina.

*YASMINA (also does a brief hand gesture):* Hi. I'm Yasmina from Heidelberg in Germany.

*TUẤN ANH (brief hand gesture):* Hello. I'm Tuấn Anh. I'm from Hanoi.

Nice to meet you.

*CARLOS (trying to make the group feel comfortable):* So, you guys are

from a lot of places (*he moves his arm in a circular motion to indicate that he is talking to all three students*). That's amazing. I've never been to any of those countries. Like Iran, I don't know anything about it. Can you tell us?

SHAHNAZ: Yeah, sure. So, I'm from Teheran. It's a really beautiful city with a fantastic view of the mountain. There are hills all around the city. It's a very lively and modern city, but it's also a very busy city. One thing that bothers me, though, is the amount of traffic there (*shakes her head and puts her hand on her forehead*). It's really crazy! What about Argentina? What city are you from again?

CARLOS (*talks using hand gestures, especially to convey size and time*): Yeah, so I live in Buenos Aires. It's in the north of the city. There's a fantastic view there of the Rio de la Plata, or River of Silver in English. It's like a river, but I think it's like a sea because it's so large. We have a lot of influence from Europe. You can see that from the architecture of the buildings. There are long avenues with sometimes eight lanes. It's also a very exciting and dynamic city. Many Porteños—they are the people from Buenos Aires—say that their grandparents come from Italy. You know, I also have grandparents who emigrated from Italy to Argentina a long time ago.

SHAHNAZ (*amazed*): Oh, wow. Do you speak Italian?

CARLOS: No, but I want to learn. You know, they say also that many people from Argentina sound Italian when they speak in Spanish. So, what about you, Tuấn Anh?

TUẤN ANH (*a bit uncomfortable*): Uhm, well, I'm from Hanoi. It's the capital of Vietnam. It's in the north. There are many neighborhoods in the city. One of the oldest ones is the Old Quarter, where there are many shops and cafés. There's a large lake there called Sword Lake or Hoàn Kiếm Lake. It used to be a quiet city, but now it's gotten bigger with more buildings and lots of traffic everywhere. The city has become more modern, but there are still parts of it that are traditional. There are temples there that have existed for centuries. I go to the Hanoi Conservatory of Music there and I'm studying to be a professional guitarist.

SHAHNAZ (*interested and trying to be friendly*): Wow, that's great. Maybe you can play something for us.

TUẤN ANH (*smiles*): Yes. OK. When you have time.

CARLOS (*points to Yasmina*): Hey, what about you, Yasmina?

YASMINA: Yes, so, I'm from Heidelberg. It's a university town in southern Germany. Heidelberg University is the oldest university there. The town is really cute and very easy to walk around. In

the downtown area there are many shops and cafés. There's even a castle built on top of a hill. There's a great view of the river called the Neckar that runs through the town.

SHAHNAZ: Wow, that's great! Hey, I heard you speaking in Arabic before with another student. How do you know Arabic? I mean, I thought that you were German.

YASMINA (*blushes*): Oh, I'm actually half Syrian, half German. My father is Syrian and my mother is German. I grew up speaking both Syrian Arabic and German.

(*Everyone looks impressed.*)

SHAHNAZ (*feeling a bit envious, but trying to conceal it*): You're so lucky.

CARLOS: Yeah, that's really great.

YASMINA (*beaming*): Thanks.

CARLOS: So, what are you studying? Tuán Anh said that he's studying to be a professional guitarist, but what about you, Yasmina and Shahnaz? I'm in my second year of university and I'm studying Business and International Relations at the University of Buenos Aires.

SHAHNAZ: I'm in my third year of university and I'm studying to be an engineer.

CARLOS (*surprised*): Wow! Really? I haven't met many women who are planning to be engineers. I'm impressed.

(*Shahnaz looks flattered.*)

YASMINA: Yeah, that is great. I'm in my last year and I'm studying Sociology. I hope that I can do a master's degree here in the United States in Sociology. And you, Tuán Anh?

TUÁN ANH (*hesitates*): I hope that I can stay in the US and get more professional training in playing the guitar. I want to improve my English first. Maybe next year I can enroll in classes at a conservatory here.

CARLOS (*slightly disinterested*): Yeah, good idea. So, maybe we can answer the next question. What are your first impressions of the US? We have to find common answers.

SHAHNAZ (*takes the lead in the conversation*): Oh, OK, so, maybe I'll start. You know, the first thing I noticed when I came out of the airport was how big the cars are. (*Everyone nods approvingly.*) I mean, I have never seen such big cars like that before.

CARLOS (*excitedly*): Yeah, I agree. In Argentina, we don't have big cars like that. There aren't many places to park big cars. Also, I love how everyone is so helpful and friendly. When I could not find my way to my host family's house, I asked a lady on the street and she was very nice. She took me there. I didn't expect this. I mean,

in Argentina I do this, too, but I didn't know that it's like that in other places.

SHAHNAZ: Yes, I also think people here are very helpful. When I needed help carrying my bags, there was this nice man who offered to help me. And what about you, Tuấn Anh?

TUẤN ANH (*pensive*): Hummm, I think that the people here talk really fast. I don't always understand them. I often pretend that I understand what they are saying because I feel shy about asking them. Also, everyone here seems very busy, like in Hanoi. They are always in a hurry.

YASMINA (*enthusiastically*): Yes, me too. I also feel that I can't understand the people here sometimes. They use a lot of slang—I think that's the word. It's very confusing because they will say something and then will wait for an answer. I feel embarrassed when I have to ask them to repeat. I was also surprised that people don't walk much here; they drive their cars everywhere.

CARLOS: Yes, I know (*loudly*). When my host mom wants to go to the supermarket, which is at about a 15-minute walk from her house, she takes the car! (*Laughs.*) It's not that far. In Argentina I usually walk to the supermarket, but if I'm very lazy I take the bus.

SHAHNAZ: So, it looks like we have found some things in common about our first impressions of the US. I can't wait to learn more about being here.

## Scene II

*The four students are in the school cafeteria. They have had two weeks of school now and have been spending time together outside of class. Carlos sees three of his classmates and comes toward them.*

*There is noise in the background of people talking and eating. The students are sitting around a table.*

CARLOS (*waves*): Hi, guys. How are you? Can I eat with you?

SHAHNAZ: Yes. Sure (*points to an empty seat*).

CARLOS: What are you talking about? (*As he is talking, he takes the seat and sits down.*)

YASMINA: Our essays that we have to write for tomorrow. Shahnaz is worried because she hasn't started her essay yet (*looks at Shahnaz sympathetically*).

SHAHNAZ (*glumly*): Yes. I want to, but I don't have time. I have other things to do. Why do we have assignments for class? And why do we need to write them for a specific date? I mean, I know that

certain universities in Iran have them. In the sciences, they do. But mine doesn't; we only have exams (*looks frustrated*). We don't have to do extra things like this is for our grade. Is it the same for the rest of you?

TUẤN ANH: Yes, it's the same at my university in Vietnam. We only have exams. We don't have to write essays. I used to study a few hours before the exam because I always felt that I had enough time to do it. Here, though, some of my professors give a lot of importance to deadlines. I have to make sure that I give my essay exactly on that date or they lower my grade. I'm not used to professors being so strict about this.

CARLOS: Yeah. I understand what you mean. I'm not used to that either or to writing essays. You know, at my university, the classes are really big and the teacher doesn't check if you are present or not. He doesn't even know my name. But here, some of my classes are small and the teacher expects me (*points to himself*) to participate.

YASMINA (*points to herself*): Yes, it's the same situation at my university in Germany, but actually I do have seminars there. I like that here the teachers are friendly and supportive. It's not like at my university where the professors generally prefer to keep a distance from their students. I feel comfortable here sending our teacher an email when I have a question about our assignments or about the homework. What about you, Tuấn Anh?

TUẤN ANH: Yes, for me that's very unusual, too. At my university in Hanoi we do not have contact with teachers outside of the classroom (*shakes his head to convey the meaning of "don't"*). Also, in classes there, the teacher always stands in front of the room and speaks. But, in our classes here (*points to the floor*) the teacher wants us to speak more and asks for our opinion. Because I have never really had an opportunity to express my ideas in front of a whole classroom, I always feel a bit nervous when the teacher calls my name. It's very difficult for me to think of what to say about a particular topic. Plus, I don't understand why the teacher always wants me to talk.

CARLOS (*loudly*): That's because you never say anything! You should speak more! I mean, are you usually quiet?

TUẤN ANH: No, in Vietnam I am very talkative. Yes, I know (*briefly puts head down*). I need to speak more. It's hard, but I'm trying my best.

SHAHNAZ (*showing sympathy and talking in an encouraging voice*): I think that it just takes practice. You need time to feel comfortable speaking. You know, for me, too, I need time to get used to giving presentations in front of the class. That's so hard. I feel so nervous standing in front of the class and talking about a topic. I don't usually do that in Iran. But, here, teachers expect students to give lots of presentations. I don't know how they do it. I'm always afraid of making a mistake.

YASMINA (*smiles*): Oh, you know, I also feel the same way even though in Germany I was trained since I was very young to give presentations. So, I should feel confident speaking in front of an audience. But, I just find it so hard (*looks embarrassed*). I always worry that I'll forget something or that the teacher will criticize my work.

(*The other students nod in agreement.*)

SHAHNAZ: So, what are your plans for this weekend? Are you doing anything special?

CARLOS (*excited*): I joined the Hiking Club today and we're going to a park tomorrow for a picnic and a long hike. It's going to be fun. You know, we have clubs at my university, but they are usually political. It's nice to join a club where people can meet and have a good time.

YASMINA: That's great that you're going. Are there any international students?

CARLOS: I don't know. It looks like there are mostly Americans.

YASMINA (*a bit envious, but tries to conceal it*): That's nice. I'd like to meet more Americans. I feel that all the clubs that I've joined represent a certain nationality or ethnicity, like the German Club or the Spanish Club. What about you, Tuấn Anh?

TUẤN ANH (*unsure*): Yeah, I don't know yet. I would like to, but maybe later once my English has improved. You know I'm part of the Vietnamese Student Club and we're having a dinner this weekend. We're going to cook traditional Vietnamese dishes such as *phở*, a type of soup made with noodles and beef, and *phở xào*; it's a dish made of fried noodles and vegetables. You can come if you like.

YASMINA and SHAHNAZ (*interested*): Sure. Thanks for inviting us. (*Yasmina claps her hands very quickly to show that she's excited.*)

CARLOS: I hope you have fun. (*Looks at his watch.*) Oops, I have to go. It's time for class.

(*Students stand up from their seats, say good-bye, and move toward the exit.*)

### Scene III

*The students have been invited to Shahnaz's place for dinner. She has made several Iranian dishes for them.*

*The scene takes place in a room with a couch on the left side of the wall. There are three or four chairs displayed in a semicircle and a coffee table in the middle with some Iranian specialties.*

*The doorbell rings.*

*Shahnaz opens the door for Carlos, who is the first to arrive. He comes in.*

*Carlos wants to say hello to her, but as he comes closer to give her kisses on her two cheeks, Shahnaz pulls back, feeling uncomfortable.*

SHAHNAZ: Uhm, hi, Carlos (*a little embarrassed*). (*She waves at him and then closes the door behind him.*)

CARLOS (*looks a bit embarrassed, but tries to conceal it by changing the topic. He faces her*): Hi, Shahnaz. Wow (*looks around*) nice place and it smells really good in here (*makes a sniffing sound*). What did you make?

SHAHNAZ (*points at the table*): Oh, I made a dish called kebab. It's, how to say it, made with lamb and the lamb is cut into pieces and you put it on a stick. I learned the word (*starts to hesitate, trying to find the right pronunciation*), it's ah ... skwaw ... no, skewew, oh wait, it's skevers, that's it, skevers (*pronounces the "w" from skewers like a "v"*). There's also pallow; it's "rice" in Persian and an eggplant dish called *kashk-e-bademjan*.

CARLOS (*enthusiastically*): Oh, that sounds very good. I can't wait to try everything. I have never had Persian food before. (*Hesitates a bit before speaking.*) Uhm, sorry for before. It's a habit.

SHAHNAZ (*smiles and motions to him that it's OK; she has forgotten*): Don't worry about it.

CARLOS: You know, in Argentina that's how we say hello to our friends: one or two kisses on each cheek (*points to his cheeks*). It's funny because you had the exact same reaction as my female American friends. They were a bit surprised when I tried to greet them that way. I'm a bit confused because I see some of them hug each other all the time.

*(There's another ring and Shahnaz opens the door for Yasmina and Tuán Anh.)*

YASMINA (*smiles warmly and waves*): Hi, Shahnaz! It's good to see all of you again. (*She comes in and waves at Carlos.*)

TUÁN ANH (*more relaxed than usual and briefly makes a hand ges-*

*ture to greet Shahnaz*): Hi, Shahnaz. It's great to be here. Wow (*he comes in and looks around*), nice place!

SHAHNAZ: Hey, Tuán Anh and Yasmina. It's great to see you. Thank you for coming. (*She gestures to them to come forward and then closes the door.*)

YASMINA: This is going to be great. Oh, it smells really good. I'm so excited about trying Persian food. (*As she is talking, she moves toward the table, looks at the food with hungry eyes, and then goes back to the others, who have formed a circle.*)

SHAHNAZ (*laughs*): Yes, of course. I hope that you'll like it. As I told Carlos, I made kebabs. Lamb skewers (*pronounces again the "w" from skewers like a "v"*). Pieces of lamb on a stick, with *pallow*. It's a rice dish. And eggplant dish called *kashk-e-bademjan*. (*She points to the empty chairs, inviting Yasmina and Tuán Anh to sit down. Carlos sits back down on his chair.*)

(*Yasmina sits next to Carlos and Tuán Anh sits next to her. Shahnaz sits next to Tuán Anh.*)

TUÁN ANH (*looking at the food*): That sounds very tasty. I have never tried Persian food before either. So, what were you talking about? (*He looks at Shahnaz.*)

SHAHNAZ: Actually, Carlos and I were talking about how physical contact is very different between the US and Argentina and I think in Iran, too.

CARLOS (*trying to adopt a lighthearted tone*): Yeah, I was telling Shahnaz that I was confused about that because I saw some Americans hugging and shaking hands, but when I tried to kiss them on both cheeks—this a typical greeting in Argentina—they didn't seem to like it. Also, when I'm talking to them, I tend to move closer to show that I'm really interested in the conversation. Sometimes I touch them on the shoulder or the arm just as a sign of affection, but then they look uncomfortable and move back. (*As he is talking, he tries to demonstrate the situation to Yasmina, but as he moves toward her and wants to touch her arm, she instantly backs away, causing Carlos to feel confused and embarrassed.*)

YASMINA (*trying to act as if nothing had happened and to remain calm*): Ah, yes, I can see how they would feel uncomfortable. It's the same in Germany. We like to keep our distance and are not very affectionate, particularly with people we don't know very well. But, with my Syrian relatives and friends, it's the opposite. People stand close to each other and we do kiss on the cheek and shake hands when we see a close friend (*points to her cheeks*). Three kisses starting on the right cheek. But if it's a particularly good



friend, then one kiss on the right cheek and three more on the left. But, this is only for people of the same sex. Men and women would not normally do this. (*As she says this, she looks briefly at Carlos, who looks away, feeling sheepish.*)

SHAHNAZ (*surprised*): Oh, wow, we have the same greeting custom in Iran! And yes, people from the opposite sex cannot kiss on the cheek. And you, Tuấn Anh?

TUẤN ANH: Yes, I think that it's the same as in Vietnam. We don't like a lot of physical contact. We need some distance. When my friends greet me, we just say "hi." No hugging or kissing. When I was in high school, I would say "hello" by making a V with my two fingers (*he mimes the action*).

CARLOS (*amused*): Ha, that's funny. I had no idea. I think that in the US it means peace. It's a good way to greet someone without using physical contact.

TUẤN ANH: Yeah, I guess so. Even between boyfriends and girlfriends in Hanoi they don't show much affection in public. Well, that's not actually true. It used to be that way, but now things have changed and you can see couples hold hands in the street. Even people of the same sex often hold hands or put their arms across each other's shoulders as a sign of friendship. But, kissing and hugging among couples is not common there. If they want to be affectionate, they sometimes go to the park to try to find some privacy. But, there are always people around, so it's not really that private. (*Yasmina and Shahnaz smile and Carlos smirks. Even Tuấn Anh chuckles a bit.*) Here it's different; I have noticed many couples kissing on campus. It's unusual for me to see them be so openly affectionate. They don't worry about people watching them all the time.

SHAHNAZ (*serious tone*): Yes, me too, I have noticed this. I am not used to it. In Iran, men and women definitely do not show any affection in public. They don't kiss or hug like in the US and even when Carlos tried to give me kisses on the cheeks, I felt uncomfortable. (*When she says this, Carlos looks away, pretending not to be embarrassed.*) But, now, you know the younger generation in Iran wants to break away from tradition. More men and women from that generation want to show their love in public.

YASMINA (*looks at Shahnaz knowingly*): Yes, it's the same in the Syrian community that I belong to in Germany. Men and women keep a distance and only between members of the same sex can they be affectionate. However, in Germany, men and women are not shy about being affectionate and kissing in public. It's interesting to me how I belong to two different cultures that have differ-

ent views about physical contact. I sometimes don't know how I should act. I mean, because of my religious beliefs, I do avoid contact with the opposite sex, but, at the same time I do not condemn people who kiss or hold hands in public.

CARLOS (*bored by the topic and wanting to move on to another one*): Yeah, interesting. You know, though, it makes no sense to me that Americans can seem so friendly and open, but when it comes to personal space and physical contact, they tend to be reserved.

SHAHNAZ: I think that it depends on the context. Maybe when you become close friends with them, they don't mind the contact, but perhaps in other situations when they don't know you as well, they prefer to keep their personal space.

CARLOS (*gesturing when talking about time and looking happy that once again the focus of the attention is on him*): You know, another thing that I noticed about Americans is how they think of time. In Argentina we don't worry so much about time. I mean, when I say that I'll come in one hour to a meeting with friends, I sometimes arrive one or two hours later. It's no problem. But, here, if you are more than one hour late, people are annoyed with you. Perhaps they think it's rude when you arrive really late to a meeting. Have you experienced something like that?

SHAHNAZ: You know, in Iran, time is also not so important. We don't worry so much about being late. If I arrive late for a family gathering, no one gets angry. It's completely normal.

TUẤN ANH: Yes, in Vietnam, too, time is not so important. I mean, I sometimes arrive late to class and the teacher never says anything. There are times when even the teacher comes late to class (*smiles*). I don't worry so much about being on time to meet my friends as they usually show up late. I wonder what it would be like if everyone there was on time. Maybe it would make life easier? I like, though, that I don't depend so much on time to do things. I find that very stressful.

YASMINA: You know, the stereotype is that Germans are so punctual. We always arrive on time for work, school, or meetings with friends. It's like time controls our daily life. I mean, it's true in many situations, but not all. For example, I'm usually late when I meet up with friends. It could be my Syrian side (*smiles*) that influences my German side. Syrians are also not as concerned about time as here. You know, it's funny because two days ago I met an American classmate for a study group. We had scheduled to meet at 3 p.m. and I arrived 30 minutes late. I apologized for my lateness. I didn't think that it would be problematic, but my classmate seemed upset at me and thought that I was not being respect-

ful. I told her that I tried to come on time, but for some reason I was not able to. She said: “But you’re German. Aren’t Germans on time for everything?”

SHAHNAZ (*laughs*): Wow, well, I guess, we shouldn’t believe the stereotypes of a particular culture.

TUẤN ANH: Yes, not everyone does the same thing in Vietnam. It can be more of an individual thing.

YASMINA: Exactly. I think it’s an interesting way of seeing how time and space are different in every culture and how for some cultures like the US and Germany, time is more important than in, say Argentina. And distance and personal contact depend on gender and level of friendship or relationship.

CARLOS (*looking hungry and getting up from his chair*): All right, everyone. Why don’t we eat? I’m starving!

(*They all agree, stand up, and move toward the table with the food.*)

#### Scene IV

*It has been one month now since the start of school and the four students have planned to meet in the student center of the university. Yasmina, Shahnaz, and Tuấn Anh are sitting on three armchairs and talking quietly. There is an empty armchair next to Tuấn Anh. Students all around them are going in and out of the student center, chatting in a lively fashion.*

*Suddenly Carlos appears and moves toward them.*

CARLOS: Hey, guys! ’s’up? (He extends his left hand and two fingers in the manner of a rapper.) My American friends from the Hiking Club are teaching me slang. (He points to an empty armchair next to Tuấn Anh and sits down.)

(*Yasmina and Shahnaz look at him glumly and Tuấn Anh stares at him thoughtfully.*)

CARLOS (*surprised by the looks on their faces*): Oh, what’s wrong? Why are you looking at me like that?

SHAHNAZ (*glumly*): Hi, Carlos. That’s great that you have met some American friends. I feel that it hasn’t been easy for me.

YASMINA (*looks sullen*): Yeah, it hasn’t been easy for me either. I mean, I have tried, but I feel that most of the people I spend time with are international students. I feel that we understand each other better. (Her face changes and she seems more cheerful when she talks about her experience with international students.) Like, we cook together, we have study groups, or we go to movies. I have met some really nice students from Vietnam and last week Tuấn

Anh and his friends and I went bowling. It was so much fun. Don't you think, Tuấn Anh?

TUẤN ANH (*smiles*): Yes, it was a lot of fun. I really enjoyed it. I'm glad that Yasmina was there because I got to practice my English. Usually, when I go out with my Vietnamese friends, we only speak in Vietnamese, but when she came along, we had to speak in English. I have met some students from Saudi Arabia, Colombia, Romania, and Togo, but I don't spend time with them after school. I don't really talk to Americans either; I feel nervous because of my English.

CARLOS (*exasperated*): You should try! I mean, you always say that you are worried about your English, but how are you supposed to improve if you don't make the effort? You have to give it a shot—that's another expression they taught me. You'll see; they don't care how well you speak English. They just like having a good time.

YASMINA (*slightly defensive and taking Tuấn Anh's side*): That's easy for you to say. You have made lots of American friends in just a few weeks, especially girls. They look like they are in love (*stresses the word "love"*) with you.

CARLOS (*amused*): What? That's not true. I just try really hard. And you should, too, Tuấn Anh.

TUẤN ANH (*uncomfortable*): Well, you know, I am not usually like this. In Vietnam, I was very popular and it wasn't hard for me to meet lots of people. But, here, because I don't feel confident about my English, I always worry about making mistakes and people laughing at me. I really want to be myself, but my worries about my level of English make it very difficult for me to do this.

SHAHNAZ (*also agreeing with Tuấn Anh*): Well, I also think, Carlos, that you are lucky because you don't worry so much about your English. I mean, I don't understand Americans sometimes. For example, I met this girl in my Engineering class and we started talking about the class and then, she told me that we should meet to go out for coffee. I was really happy because I don't usually talk to anyone in that class and she was the first American to talk to me. Then, I waited for her to arrange a time and day for us to meet, but she never did (*sounds disappointed*). I was really surprised. I mean, she seemed so nice and open. I feel that Americans are more individualistic than in Iran. There, it's easier for me to make friends. When I'm at a party, for example, someone usually comes up to me and starts talking and asking me all kinds of questions, even personal ones! I feel that we make friends faster than in the US.

YASMINA: Yeah, the same thing happened to me (*looks slightly annoyed*). One day these American girls were talking to me as if I were their best friend, but then the next they seemed more distant. ... It's strange, I mean, it's the opposite when I'm in Germany. People are usually reserved and take their time before they get to know you. It takes a while, but once you become friends, you stay friends for a long time. I actually like that way better. That's how I have made most of my close friends. (*Her eyes brighten when she talks about her Syrian heritage.*) But, my Syrian side also influences how I see friendships. It's a different mentality from Germany, even though the idea of mutual trust and respect is the same. I feel that with Syrians or people who have Syrian heritage like me, I make friends more easily. Everyone is very accepting of each other and is willing to help anytime. Plus, once I have gained the friend's trust, I know that our friendship will grow. True friendship depends on how loyal that person is, particularly during hard times. What about you, Carlos?

CARLOS (*pondering Yasmina's words*): I'm pretty open about making friends and I think that's also a part of my culture. We usually approach people we have never met before and start talking to them (*enthusiastically and gesturing*). I just enjoy being around people and talking to them about everything and nothing. On the weekends, I usually go out to dinner or to a club in a big group; it's more fun and we have good time. Plus, I also meet new people in the group. And what about you, Tuấn Anh ?

TUẤN ANH (*seems to hesitate at first before speaking, weighing his words carefully*): Yeah. I guess it depends on your personality. When I am in Vietnam, I am usually very talkative and sociable and go out a lot with my friends. Some of my friends tell me that being a best friend means that you can share your secrets and tell them personal information. I guess I have a different understanding of what that means.

SHAHNAZ: So, pretty much everyone has a different opinion of what friendship is. You know (*there is a longing in her voice when she speaks*), I wish that I could meet more Americans. I have tried and I want to learn more about the culture, but I just feel that they don't welcome me.

CARLOS (*critical*): Maybe you need to be more open and patient. I mean, I don't agree with you about Americans being individualistic. You can't generalize. The ones I have met are not like that. They have welcomed me into the group. They are always asking me questions about my culture.

YASMINA (*annoyed and glaring at Carlos*): Well, you know I have tried.

It's not like I haven't done anything about it. I have joined clubs, but when I go to the events, no one really makes the effort to talk to me. Is it the same for you, Tuán Anh?

TUÁN ANH (*quietly*): It's hard for me too. I want to meet more Americans, but I don't know what to say. I don't know what to talk about or how to act.

CARLOS (*unnerved*): You guys aren't trying hard enough. All you do is complain. Come on, guys, it's not difficult! If I can do it, so can you! It's not about personality, it's social skills. If you practice, you will surely improve!

(*Shahnaz and Yasmina stare angrily at him and Tuán Anh smiles uncomfortably.*)

CARLOS (*sensing that there is tension*): OK, guys, time to go (*stands up from his seat and leaves quickly*).

## Scene V

*The four students are in their second month of the program. During this time, Yasmina, Shahnaz, and Tuán Anh have been faced with a variety of issues regarding their identity and adapting to US culture, which has caused them to feel varying degrees of culture shock. They decide to meet at Shahnaz's place.*

*Shahnaz is sitting on her couch and reading a textbook from her Engineering class. She seems distracted and is not able to concentrate on her reading.*

*The doorbell rings. Shahnaz stands up and goes to the door. She opens it. Yasmina and Tuán Anh are standing outside. She kisses Yasmina on the cheek and waves at Tuán Anh.*

SHAHNAZ: Hi, guys, thanks for coming. I'm really glad to see you. I feel that I haven't talked to you in a while. (*She motions to them to sit on the couch and closes the door.*)

YASMINA (*looking upset, but at the same time happy to see Shahnaz*): It's good to see you, too. Yeah, you're right we haven't seen each other since the break. I have been busy studying for finals. (*She moves to the couch and sits down.*)

TUÁN ANH: Yes, I have been busy, too. I have had to prepare for finals. (*He sees a chair, moves toward it, places it next to the couch, and sits down.*)

SHAHNAZ (*puzzled*): Where is Carlos? I thought that he was coming, too.

YASMINA (*slightly annoyed*): Well, he and his American friend (*stresses the word "friend"*) are coming later.

SHAHNAZ (*surprised*): Friend? Do you mean girlfriend? (*Yasmina and Tuấn Anh both say “yes.”*) I had no idea. I haven't seen him lately, so maybe that explains it. I'm happy for him, I guess. So, how are you feeling? Yasmina, you look upset; can you tell us what's wrong.

YASMINA (*becomes sullen again*): Well, it's actually something that I have been experiencing for the last few weeks, but I have tried not to get upset about it. Yesterday, though, something happened that made me feel really angry and made me wonder what I'm doing here.

TUẤN ANH: What happened? Can you tell us?

YASMINA (*tries to speak in a calm voice, but becomes angry when she recalls the event*): Since I've been here, I have noticed more and more that people stare at me because I'm wearing the *hijab*. I mean, I was used to that in Germany. People would sometimes make insensitive comments about Islam, and Arabs. I thought it would be different here. I know that Arabs and Muslims are often presented in a negative way in the media in the US, but I thought that at a university, people would be more accepting. Every time I go to an event or even to class, someone, like girls, will look at me with pity in their eyes and will even whisper to each other. How do you think that makes me feel? They somehow assume that because I wear a piece of cloth over my head that I am oppressed. How do they know that? You know, yesterday, I was sitting with my American classmates studying for our finals when one of the girls looked at me and asked: “Hey, Yasmina, can I ask you a question? I have been meaning to ask you for a while now, but why do you wear a head scarf all the time?” I answered: “What do you mean?” She replied: “Well, I thought that women who wear the head scarf are forced to do it and are oppressed.” This really annoyed me. I said: “No, not necessarily. I wear a head scarf because it's my choice and because I'm honoring my religion.” She said: “Yes, but isn't Islam a religion of violence and hate toward women and other religions?” I tried to stay calm and wanted to explain to her that she was misinformed, but she kept talking: “And aren't you from Syria? Isn't it a violent country where people are killing each other now?” Her response made me very angry because instead of asking me to explain the situation, she had already made up her mind. She had no interest in listening to what I had to say. I could not stand studying with her, so I left. I'm just so tired of reminding people that Islam is not a religion of hate and that all Arabs aren't terrorists. Even here, I feel that I have to be ashamed of my identities as Muslim and Syrian. Some of my family mem-

bers and friends in Syria have died there to demand more rights and reforms and she dares to call all of them killers.

SHAHNAZ (*gently touches her arm and looks at her full of compassion*): Oh, Yasmina, I'm really sorry to hear that you've experienced this. It makes my blood boil when people say things like that. (*Her face turns somber.*) You know, even though I have met some lovely people here in the US, I have also been faced with a similar situation. I have noticed that when I meet Americans for the first time and tell them that I am from Iran, some people's facial expression changes. They suddenly look at me suspiciously and ask me strange questions, like (*mimics what they say and adopts a high-pitched tone, sounding disdainful*): "Why are you here? Can you go back to Iran? Oh, you're from *that* (*stresses the word "that"*) country." Even when I try to explain to them that the media here don't show how Iran really is, they only talk about the country in a negative way, they don't seem to believe me. They basically think that all Iranians are terrorists and that we support the Iranian government's policies and views. Why can't they see that we are not all like that? I'm definitely not like that. I want to show that I want to be friends with Americans and that I very much like the culture. But, it's difficult when I have to deal with this type of hostility (*looks down at the floor and looks as if she is about to cry*).

(*Yasmina puts her arm around her and Shahnaz leans into her.*)

(*Tuấn Anh tries to look sympathetic, but he is unsure how to react. There's a moment of silence before he finally decides to speak.*)

TUẤN ANH: I'm sorry, Yasmina and Shahnaz, that you have experienced this. You know, I also feel like I am not accepted here. I have felt it from the beginning, but I thought that it would change. I have tried to make friends with American students like Carlos suggested. I just feel more comfortable with my international friends. They understand me better and want to know more about me and my culture. They don't see me as just another Asian man. They ask me questions about Vietnam, just like you (*smiles*). I like that during our conversations you are interested and you ask for more information about my life there. It means a lot to me. You know, last weekend I went to a party with a French classmate. He is really nice. He's actually been to Vietnam. I was talking to him when his American friend came up to me and asked for my help. He said that there was a Chinese student who couldn't speak much English and he needed my help translating his words into Chinese. I looked at him and said (*slightly annoyed voice*): "I'm not Chinese, I'm Vietnamese. We don't speak the same language."



Even my classmate was shocked that he had said that. The friend didn't seem to care. He apologized and then left. Even though it was a silly incident, I still felt upset. There are also times when people ask me strange questions, like the ones you get (*looks at Shahnaz*). For example, "Do you fight kung fu over there or do you eat only rice there?" "Is there still a war in Vietnam?" I mean, yes, we do eat rice, but that's not the only thing we do! And no, the war ended in 1975! I was born afterward, so I don't understand why they ask me this. I want to feel that I am more than just a stereotype.

*(Both Shahnaz and Yasmina nod and show looks of concern.)*

YASMINA: So, I guess all of us are feeling the same way.

*(Just then the doorbell rings.)*

SHAHNAZ: That's probably Carlos (*does not look very pleased*).

*(She stands up from the couch and goes to the door and opens it.)*

CARLOS (*standing at the door, looking cheerful and with his arm around his girlfriend Jessica's shoulder*): Hey, Shahnaz. Sorry that I'm late. I was with Jessica, my girlfriend (*as he says this, he moves to the side and with a hand gesture, introduces her to Shahnaz*). This is Jessica.

Jessica (*answers in a friendly manner*): Hi, Shahnaz, it's really nice to meet you (*she waves at her*).

SHAHNAZ (*reserved and gives her a small wave in return*): Hi, Jessica. Please come in.

*(She motions to them to come in. She then closes the door behind them and brings two chairs for Carlos and Jessica without saying a word. Then, she goes back to her original place on the couch. Yasmina and Tuấn Anh are talking in a low voice.)*

*(The atmosphere is tense. Shahnaz and Yasmina look at Carlos and Jessica in an envious and resentful manner and Tuấn Anh looks sad. No one says a word. Carlos and Jessica are visibly uncomfortable and sense that their presence is not welcome at that moment.)*

CARLOS (*feeling uncomfortable*): So, how are all of you? I mean, I haven't seen you in a while.

YASMINA (*snidely*): Well, you've been clearly busy.

CARLOS (*gives Jessica a look that implies that they should perhaps leave*): Yeah, that's true. Uhm, you know what, actually we can't stay very long because I need to take Jessica home. It's getting late.

SHAHNAZ (*critical*): Yeah, you should. We actually have things to do, too.

*(She escorts Carlos and Jessica to the door. Everyone says good-bye very briefly and then she closes the door behind her.)*

THE END