

*So Where Are You From?*

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*“So where are you from?”*

“Kyrgyzstan.”

That answer tends to leave a long pause hanging in the air. Sometimes they blink, politely searching for a familiar word. Sometimes they tilt their head and ask, “Is that Kazakhstan?” or “Pakistan?” I have stopped being surprised. I usually smile and say, “No, Kyrgyzstan is a beautiful country in Central Asia, surrounded by mountains.” That is my opening line, the one I have learned to say with both pride and patience.

That moment, that tiny pause between question and recognition, used to bother me. It felt like my country existed only when I explained it, as if it could disappear again the moment I stopped. But over time, I began to see it differently. The pause was not a void, it was an opening, a small doorway into a conversation I got to start.

If I could describe Kyrgyzstan in one word, it would be “mountains”. They rise everywhere, shaping the skyline and the people. They teach patience, resilience, and how to keep moving even when the road is winding. When I left for Hungary to study, those mountains were the last thing I saw from the airplane window. They were fading slowly, like someone you keep looking back at.

In Hungary, I learned what it means to carry a country few people know. During orientation, we were asked to mark our homes on a giant world map. Pins clustered around Europe and East Asia. When I pressed mine into the center, the room grew quiet for a moment. Someone leaned closer to read the tiny letters. “Kyrgyzstan,” they said softly, testing the sound. I nodded and smiled, realizing I had just introduced my home to a room full of strangers.

At first, I felt the weight of that role. I felt the need to represent, to make my country visible. But soon, that weight turned into something warmer. Those first weeks, I tried cooking lagman for my classmates. It is a simple mix of noodles, meat, and vegetables, but it did not taste right.

I laughed and said, “My mom makes it better. She always does.” Still, my friends ate every bite, asking for seconds. We laughed about how every culture seems to have its own noodles. That evening, between the smell of overcooked noodles and the sound of laughter, I felt something shift. Home was not something I left behind, it was something I could rebuild, even imperfectly.

I do not always cook, but I still find ways to carry home with me. A tiny komuz keychain hangs from my bag. It was a gift from teachers and students in Naryn, where I visited rural schools during a work trip. They carved it from wood and engraved it with my country’s name. The real komuz is played with three strings; it sounds bright and strong. Mine is silent, but it still speaks. Whenever someone notices it and asks what it is, I tell them. And just like that, home begins another conversation.

The longer I live abroad, the more I realize that carrying home is not about preserving it untouched. It is about letting it grow — through stories, through friendships, through the pieces of it that travel with you and take new shapes in other people’s lives. Sometimes my friends send me photos of mountains and text, “This looks like Kyrgyzstan.” I smile every time. Somehow, my country now lives in their worlds too.

My studies here continue to remind me that learning is not limited to lectures or exams. It is in the way we share our perspectives, how we translate our worlds for others. That is what education truly means to me — expanding the map of what we understand together.

So yes, I am from Kyrgyzstan — a beautiful country surrounded by mountains. And every time someone asks me where that is, I am grateful. And if that name still makes people pause, I do not mind. It means there is still more to tell.