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“We are so grateful, but..”

(THINGS REFUGEES MIGHT NOT LIKE TO SAY)

I'm homesick. Everybody is so kind, but it's terribly hard to have to speak English all the time. I have family back home; I miss them and I'm worried about them. The food here is very good but I'd give anything for the taste and smell of the food I'm used to.

I'm embarrassed. The people brought us a great big pile of clothes they had been given and said we were to take them. Some were okay, but we felt like beggars. The other night somebody left a bag full of old shoes on our doorstep. Today a woman brought me a dress. She said it was brand new, and I could see that it was, but it was ugly and old-fashioned. I look terrible in it, but clearly she expects me to wear it.

I'm confused. These people are Christians, and I don't know whether they expect us to become Christians too. We have our own faith. I don't know whether there is a faith community within reach. I think there must be one in the city, but how could we find out? And we haven't a car. Somebody takes us shopping, but how can we ask for a big favour like a drive to Toronto?

We're Catholic. In our country, Catholics and Protestants don't get along. Will these Protestants be offended if we ask to go to the Catholic church?

We've never been interested in religion. Do we have to go to church?

Our religion forbids alcohol. If we go to somebody's home for a party, will we be expected to drink alcohol?

I'm worried. We don't want to start a baby until things are more settled, but I don't know how to get birth control. All the doctors here seem to be men, and in our culture, a woman doesn't talk to a man about something like that.

The church gives us a weekly allowance, and we spend some of it on cigarettes. We've always smoked, nobody in our country ever said it was harmful, and it's hard to stop, especially now because we still feel very stressed. But the gentleman who hands us our cheque makes little jokes every time about “Now you mustn't spend this on cigarettes.” One of the ladies who takes us shopping says the foods I buy aren't healthy. Sometimes she takes things out of my cart and puts them back on the shelf.

We bought a radio. We're paying for it on time. It was expensive but it gets a program in our language. We heard somebody at the church saying that if we could buy luxuries like that we were getting too much money; we should be cut back.

I'm lonely. Everybody does things for us, but we need to be useful. Everybody needs to be needed. I need a job, if it's only babysitting or housecleaning! Even a volunteer job would be good; it would give me something to do, put me in touch with more people, let me practice my English, and it would go on my resume.

Back home I was an engineer – but languages aren't my thing. Learning English is tough and tiring. I can only speak slowly. Some people shout at me as if I were deaf. Others talk about us in front of me as if I weren't there. I can understand even when I can't reply. I'm not deaf and I'm not stupid.

The new home is wonderful; but the stove doesn't work very well. We don't like to say anything because everybody has been so kind. We put some of the crockery away because we just didn't like the design. A lady said "Oh, where are the mugs I donated?"

A man brought a painting he'd done and, without asking us, took one of our pictures down and hung it in our living room. My wife cried; but we don't like to take it down in case we offend people in the church.

A nice family have asked us to go swimming. I have scars from ill-treatment in prison; I don't want anybody to see me in a swimsuit. We keep saying "Maybe another time," and "Later," and "Thank you very much," but they keep offering.