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How to be an American

11th grade

Word Count: 1,997

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Step 1

“Going to McDonalds really makes it feel like we’re home,” Erika’s mom said as she gave Erika and her brother Sam an energized squeeze. “What do you guys want?”

Erika stared up at the menu, trying to concentrate but distracted by all the noise and images around her. The first thing she noticed was that everyone was speaking English. She’d never gotten used to this on any of her visits to the States before. Back in Burkina Faso, her family spoke English at home, but she never heard it anywhere else. Even at International school, they spoke French. “What do you want, Erika?” Her mom prodded, bringing her back to America.

“I don’t know, I just want a hamburger.”

“What kind? A cheeseburger? You could get a Big Mac...” Erika watched the screen above the drink stand, showing ads for different drinks and desserts. She tried to make out the lyrics to the pop song playing, but wasn’t sure what it was about. She took in the flashy signs on the windows advertising new burgers with three different kinds of meat, stacked so high that you couldn’t even fit it in your mouth.

When they sat down, she didn’t even know what she had ended up ordering. She saw a family with a screaming child get up and leave, throwing away large chunks of perfectly good sandwich. As she bit into her hamburger, with the soggy bread and dry patty, she remembered other visits to the States. Staying with her grandparents for her Grandpa’s birthday when she was nine. Going to her grandmother’s funeral when she was twelve. She wished that this was just a trip, like those were. A couple weeks, even a month or two, would be fine. Not forever. She hated not knowing if they could ever go back.

Everything was so different here. She wished with a tight gut for there to be just one familiar thing to grasp. She missed the Burkinabé food so badly. She would give anything to

transform her burger into a plate of Ragout d'Igname. It was all different: the buildings, the music, the language, the food... even her family. In Burkina Faso, her parents acted normal. Sure, they talked about life in the U.S., but that was fine. Whenever it came time to plan a trip back to the States, it changed. They spoke so eagerly, calling it "home". Erika knew she had been born there, that she was a U.S. citizen. But having lived in Burkina Faso for over ten years, the U.S. wasn't home. Her little house in Burkina Faso was home. *But you're stuck here for a year at least, until dad figures out if his job wants him in Burkina Faso or somewhere else.* How would she survive?

Step 2

Erika was in the house, reading *Harry Potter* when Sam ran in, the screen door slamming behind him. His curly blonde hair was dark with sweat.

"Hey Rika," he panted, "Can you get out your machete? I want to show Jordan."

"Sure," she said.

"Okay!" Sam said, then yelled out the door, "Jordan! She said yes, bro!"

Jordan stepped in, his dark skin reminding her of the neighborhood kids back home.

"This is so cool!" Sam said, as Erika pulled her machete from its sheath, showing off the carefully carved handle.

"That's pretty dope." Jordan said.

"Yeah," Sam said. "Dope."

When the boys had gone, Erika sat, staring at the page in her book. Sam, at ten years old, was always very enthusiastic. But the way he'd been talking to Jordan seemed so wrong.

She remembered three summers ago, when he came back from a week at camp in the U.S., with all the new slang and words like 'dang', and 'freaking'. It had worn off pretty soon once they were back in Burkina Faso.

Today he had made the machete sound so special, to win Jordan's respect. She knew he used his own regularly back at home. He didn't trust the airport's care of their luggage, so he'd left it with a friend for safe keeping.

She was amazed at how close he and Jordan had become in the two weeks they'd been unpacked. She still hadn't talked to a single girl her age. How could he let Jordan influence him so much? She was six years older than him, and felt very protective. Especially with dad out of state and mom away or working on the computer most days.

Was that what you had to do to fit in? Become just like them?

When Sam came home, he stubbed his toe and cursed. "Do not say that word, Samuel!" Erika said sharply. "Where did you hear that?"

"I dunno, at Jordan's house, I guess."

"He's a bad influence on you! I'm gonna tell mom that you shouldn't play with him."

Erika muttered.

"He's my friend! You've been such a jerk ever since we got here!" He marched away.

Step 3

Erika locked her bike outside and walked into the ice cream shop. It was the first day she felt like she actually knew what she was doing. Two weeks of training and now Lone Star Dairy Bar felt more familiar to her.

"Erika, you lived in Africa?" Vera exclaimed when she saw her. Her green eyes were wide. "Carla told me."

"Yeah, Burkina Faso."

"Isn't that where the Muslim terrorists are? Didn't they kidnap those girls?"

“Um, you’re thinking of Boko Haram. They’re in Nigeria and that area, not Burkina Faso.”

“Oh. So where is it then?”

“Western Africa, above the equator.”

Carla joined in, “Wasn’t that where the E. coli outbreak was?”

“Ebola.” Erika corrected. “Not really. That was almost 1,000 kilometers away. There weren’t any cases in Burkina Faso.”

“Oh.” Carla said, walking off to take an order.

“Still, Africa is such a dangerous place to live, you must be so glad to be back.” Vera said.

Erika grimaced at that assumption. What could she say? That she hated it in America? That the last thing she wanted was to become an American? The way they seemed so cold, wasteful. In your face, but unconcerned with the rest of the world.

That back home there were so many people she loved... she stopped herself. How could Vera possibly understand? She didn’t know the difference between Boko Haram, Burkina Faso, E. coli and Ebola. She probably thought that African was a language. “I miss my friends there.”

Later that day, Erika stepped outside to empty the trash can by the metal tables. Vera and Carla were both on break, talking at a far table.

Erika could barely hear what Carla was saying. “Yeah, she’s pretty weird. The other day she asked me who Harry Styles is.” Both girls laughed. Erika’s ears became hot. She knew they were talking about her.

“Yeah, she doesn’t know... *anything*. The way she talks is kind of different too. And her clothes!” Erika pushed back into the shop, without emptying the trash can. She rushed to

the bathroom in the back, glad no one noticed her. She locked the door and stared at herself in the mirror, failing to swallow the tears before they came out.

She knew had nothing in common with those other girls. They were obsessed with clothes, shopping, boys and celebrities. It seemed like they spoke a different language than her. Or that they were from a different planet.

Erika realized that even though they might have been born in the same country, she wasn't "from" the same country as they were. But she so was tired of standing out. Here of all places, where her skin color was just as normal as any other, she thought she could blend in. In Burkina Faso, everyone knew she was a foreigner, even from a distance. Here, it might not be as obvious, but there would always be something... the way she talked, or the jokes she missed, that would set her apart. There was no way they'd ever accept her.

She went back to work. Smiled at customers. Took careful note of the other girls in their skinny jeans and the cloth sneakers she thought were called Converse.

When she got home, her mom smiled and said, "What do you want to do with your first paycheck? You wanna go shopping?"

"Yeah, I'd like to buy some new jeans."

Step 4

Erika attempted to cover up her inner turmoil. She didn't have an appetite, but she still tried a new ice cream flavor with Carla.

"I went to the movies last night, and there was this creep right behind us in line..."

Erika listened as Carla told her story. She laughed when Carla laughed, but didn't understand the significance. She was sure she missed something. Carla finished her story and gestured at Erika's ice cream, "How do you like it?"

“It’s pretty good. I still like lemon shaved ice better.” She remembered a trip to the market town she’d taken with her dad when she was little. “My dad-,” Erika began, but she paused. Carla was staring vacantly off. Erika sensed that her coworker didn’t really want to hear about it.

“Also likes it.” She murmured. “I need to go.” She threw away her trash and went to the bathroom, where she washed her face, and waited for the redness in her eyes to go away.

She sat in her room that night. Stared into the darkness. *What are you doing? You’re kidding yourself if you thought it would be as easy for you as it is for Sam. Life just isn’t fair like that. These girls will never be your friends. They don’t care.*

Step 5

Sam was out playing with Jordan, mom was visiting with a friend, and dad was still at the conference. Erika had nothing to do. She checked her email and saw that there was a letter waiting for her from Mrs. Vaanderhall, her teacher back at the International school in Burkina Faso. It read,

“Hey Erika,

How have your first couple weeks back been? I’m sure there’s been a lot of work to do, unpacking and getting settled.

I just remembered my time back home in London after my first teaching assignment, three years in Korea. Was that a shock for me! Everything seemed so familiar, yet so different from what I expected. I couldn’t relate well with my old friends. I found the first few weeks extremely discouraging. Can you relate? I pray to God that this hasn’t been a difficult transition for you, but it is very common to feel upset and confused when transitioning into a new culture.

You should know, you don't have to love everything about America just because your parents are from there. And not everything in Burkina Faso is completely peachy either. But you've had the privilege to live in both places. Now, even if you aren't feeling very privileged about it, you have the opportunity to take the best of both. You are neither one nor the other, you're a beautiful mixture.

I know what it's like, traveling between cultures. Don't forget what we learned in Literature last year: Hamlet, Act 1 Scene 3, *'This above all: to thine own self be true'*”

Erika's mom took her shopping. She pulled out some skinny jeans in her size. She tried them on. Looked in the mirror. Closed her eyes. Tried to picture herself riding her bike or climbing a tree. They were really tight. She didn't like them.

“I want to stick with my old jeans.” They left the store.

The next day, she walked into Lone Star Dairy with the patterned headband made by an old lady down the road in Burkina Faso. She realized that being an “American” didn't mean what she'd thought. She didn't have to be wasteful or obsessed with meaningless things. She didn't have to fit in. She just had to be true to herself. Then anywhere could be home.