

A Gentle Spectacle!

Here I was at the beach, a bow-legged bald-headed boney kid dressed up in his Sunday best seated in the midst of a barely clothed crowd watching the tides dancing to the rhythm of the dying summer's afternoon breeze. In Kenya, it was a cultural crime for women to walk around in mini-skirts, yet here I was in Jersey Shore staring at women running around in their star-sparkled bikinis. In Kenya, it was considered a taboo for men to walk around in their underwear. The culture considered such men as mentally unbalanced. Yet here I was, a young confused lad trying to decipher whether I was the mentally unbalanced or the men around me in their striped undergarments. I was 21 years old when I came to America for school. Back then, I recall, I was carrying a small black luggage in which I had neatly tucked in a small white and aqua-blue striped towel, a wrinkled pair of pale-blue jeans, an old white shirt, a toothpaste, an over-used toothbrush, a metallic-silver family photo album, a pair of old white and black sneakers, and a worn out 50-dollar note pinned deep inside my wallet. I was a 5.5 ft. tall, 123lb tiny, boney, bald headed young man with a bloated belly looking forward to a new life in America as a student. Back then, everything I knew about America was from the movies and television shows. And as you can imagine, my image of America was thus made up of a fine recollection of beautiful mansions with large blue backyard swimming pools neatly packaged behind the white picket fences not so far away from the Hollywood's glamorous lifestyle. I imagined young tattooed men cruising through the boulevards in their big fast cars waving at young women in their star-sparkled bikinis driving their convertible Porsches with their hair prancing to the tunes of the summers' zephyr. It was indeed a spectacular spectacle - one born of my young naïve imagination.

However, as the summer's breeze began to wane and the sun began to recede into the golden eastern horizons, the fall foliage ushered in a spectacular scenery that was nothing less of a total enchantment. The multi-colored trees whose falling leaves carpeted the boulevards redefined what magic was to me. In Kenya, I was only used to seeing green leaves and trees, yet here I was now gazing at a rainbow of trees! I felt like I was in a mystical land standing between the spectrum of colors in those trees dotted streets. I was both stunned and enchanted by the blossoming picturesque that covered the boulevards. Within the briefness of the moments, the spectrum of colors and of magic taught me how indeed rare and infinite beauty is-if only for a brief moment! For when I thought I was getting used to the magic, a skeleton holding a butcher's knife popped up on my neighbor's backyard, then a scarecrow dressed up like a grim reaper, and then an adult size doll dressed up like a nurse holding a bloody axe stood by a cracked tombstone! It was Halloween! In my Kenyan state of mind, it was witchcraft! I recall locking myself in my room and calling my friend and telling him, "*I think my neighbor is a witch. I can't stay here; I have to go back home!*" It took two Halloweens for my friend to convince me that I was not living in a witchcraft invested society! I dressed up like the Phantom of Opera for the fourth Halloween.

In the years to come, I struggled to get accustomed to the American lifestyle. I was scared of many things. I was scared of loneliness. My family and network of friends were all back in Kenya. I was nervous that no one would understand my broken British English dotted with my thick Kenyan accent. I recall struggling to pronounce phrases like the Americans which often ended in frustrations. It was a terrible frustration trying to pronounce the word 'water' like an American where a 't' sounds like a 'd'! I was afraid that I was never going to fit in among my peers both at home and school. Back then, I was just a bow-legged bloated-belly soft-spoken kid

who had no idea that in America, ‘bathroom and restroom’ actually means a ‘toilet’. So, I always wondered what it meant when my classmates said they were going to the ‘bathroom or restroom’ during class hours because in Kenya, bathrooms are places where one goes to take a bath or a shower and restrooms are places where people go to rest. It was such a mental dissonance trying to articulate why Americans parked in driveways and drove in parkways! I still recall that feeling the moment I landed in America! It was in 2007. The year of the Pig. The Fire Pig. I felt confused, alone, and lost!

Today, 10 years after, I am still learning the American way of life. I still get lonely even when surrounded by people. I still miss my family, my traditional food, my friends, and my culture. Every time I go to a party, I still feel like the weird kid standing at the corner. In classes, I can still hear my annoying accent reverberating throughout the classroom walls. Sometimes I just wonder whether my classmates can understand me! I still wonder whether my teachers think I am smart enough or I am just an empty coconut shell! I still hear questions such as “do you guys in Africa eat lions, giraffes, or cheetahs?” And I am still thrilled by those who take curiosity in learning about my culture. In all these years, what I have learned is that you never get used to the American way of life, you just learn to grind along with it. You just learn how to balance the different cultural norms and expectations while allowing yourself to experience the wonders that America can afford you.