Eunjae Lee

The American Dream

It’s a bright sunny day in Torrance, California. The rays of sunshine form shadows and tan blocks on my skin. I look out towards the beach and the fantastic view of the ocean. I’m lucky. I would consider myself lucky to be here. People from all over the world and all ages try to come to America in hopes of fulfilling their dream and in hopes of making money. The freedom and opportunities that lie in America is what attracts them. “The American Dream” is what they call it. My parents were the same. I was born in South Korea and have been living in Southern California since I was 4 years old with both of my parents. At first, I didn’t think it was strange at all to experience both Korean culture and American culture while growing up. I am bilingual and celebrate even all of the traditional Korean holidays in America. I have many Korean friends, as well as other friends of different races and cultures. Never have I thought that it was strange to live like this. After all, I’ve basically been living my whole life this way. Then, through these three very specific and rare moments did I realize that I can’t be “normal” and that I can’t have the same “normal” life that other people could experience.

“Umma1! What are we going to do for Thanksgiving this year?”

“I’m not sure. I think we will just go to church and if you want, we can have some kimchi-jjigae2.”

As my mom is answering my question, I’m thinking about what a “traditional” American Thanksgiving would be like. After all, I’ve only seen it on T.V. shows and movies. Families as big as 30 people gather around during this time and have big meals filled with turkey, ham, mashed potatoes, and other dishes. Everytime we return back to school from a holiday such as Christmas or Thanksgiving, my teachers ask, “How was your break? Did you guys spend a good time with your families and eat a lot?” I could never really relate to or answer that question. My only family in America are my parents and we don’t celebrate like what I would see on those T.V. shows or movies. It’s such a small ordeal, but seems like such an experience that I would like to have. I respond to my mom, “Sure, sounds great” and head to get dressed up.

I hear my mom and dad arguing again in our living room. We live in a one bedroom apartment and I can hear everything that is happening outside the door. It seems like they are arguing again about our financial situation. Ever since my parents got here, our family has had many financial problems. My dad could not earn as much as he earned back in South Korea and my mom could not easily find a job as she did not speak much English and she wasn’t comfortable speaking in English. “Oh, how is it in California? You must enjoy the sunny weather there. You should succeed. Nevertheless, your parents went through hardships to get to America.” Experiencing these situations hearing those words from others also burdens me even more. I get put in a mindset where I need to and want to try my best. I must succeed for my parents and bring pride to my family.

“Adeul3! Can you come and help me?”

“What is it appa4? I’m busy with homework.”

I go outside to the living room anyways. My dad is making a phone call. He mouths to me, “Can you please translate what she is talking about?” He hands me his phone. I take it and start explaining to my dad. As soon as I am done making the phone call, my mom asks me to go to Target with her.

“Why umma?”

“I have to go buy something, but I don’t know what it is called in English.”

“Alright, let me go put my hoodie on.”

After returning from Target, my grandparents who live in South Korea call us. I talk to them in Korean and afterwards it is already 10 p.m. I head in my room to finish up my English essay that is due tomorrow.

Through even just these three experiences, I can still think back and learn from them. As long as I spend a good time with my family is all that matters. Who cares about all the turkey and ham? I’d gladly have some kimchi-jjigae with my family on Thanksgivings. I’m glad that my parents came to America to give me this opportunity to live here and experience both cultures. Maybe having a burden to do well isn’t a bad thing. There can be good burdens too, and they can help and push me to succeed. Translating between English and Korean is a gift now that I think about it. Being bilingual is a gift in itself. Through these rare and momentous experiences, I got to see what this “American Dream” is all about. It’s the experiences of multiple cultures and the experience of positive thinking through these hardships in a foreign country. I can proudly say that I’m a South Korean living in America.

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1Mom or mother in Korean

2Korean kimchi stew soup

3Son in Korean

4Dad or father in Korean