

Lost in Translation

My fascinating American life started with a series of little dramas.

In the first week, in Sultan's restaurant, a waiter asked me, "Soup or salad?"
"What's a *supersalad*?"

In the second week, I ran to the front desk and asked for a *rubber*. The secretary was a bit embarrassed and asked me why. It turned out that I wanted an *eraser*. A rough start, huh?

In the third week, I went to the main library and saw my advisor's name nicely engraved on the wall. With wholehearted respect, I told him that I found his name in the library as a "University *Extinguished* Faculty". Before I realized what I said, my advisor started broadcasting his sudden change of status from *distinguished* to *extinguished* faculty. Then with a blush, I begged him not to laugh at me. He hugged me and said, "My girl, I am not laughing *at* you. I am laughing *with* you."

As you can imagine, in the following years, I continued making hilarious jokes in my ordinary life, more than enough for a storybook.

America is a place said to be a dreamland. Many come here for higher education, more opportunities, or a better life. It was once my dream as well. However, for me, the biggest driving force was simply a language fantasy. On the first day my parents taught me the ABC's, I swore to myself that one day I would go to America and learn to speak as beautifully as a native speaker.

I was 23 years old when I finally realized my dream. Once I landed, I took a long deep breath--hmm, this is the very scent of my new habitat--and I could not wait to explore it. As a small town, Lansing is quite different from the city I came from, but it is surprisingly novel to me. It's a place where everyone is warmhearted and cheerful and having a conversation with a stranger is perfectly normal; where everything is spread out and without a car you are "handicapped"; where people love to get soaked on a treadmill but have to find the closest parking spot before entering a grocery store; where families get their whole-week's supplies in jumbo-sized packages at one trip and a farmer's market is only open for a few hours on Saturday;

where people favor so-called “tailgating”, which is, to me, just barbequing in a huge parking lot; where brutal football is worshipped on every single campus and rioting or burning a couch work equally well to express both happiness and agony after a victory or a loss. How different and how fascinating!

I phoned my father and told him all these interesting things I observed in my new life. In return he asked me to explore the American culture. Since then, I started poking my nose into nooks and crannies while struggling with my accent and vocabulary, and at the same time enjoying my spanking new American life.

However, very soon, after I tiptoed through little bits of Western cultures and tasted food from different countries, I woke up from the excitement and became frustrated by my slow progress with language. I was lost, since I had never really thought about what I should do after I came to the States, other than learning to speak. It was sad because I felt that I had come to a country where I did not belong. Loneliness and nostalgia gradually took over my heart, plus the interminable Michigan winter cast an extra layer of blues. I was stuck in my small apartment feeling “lost in translation”.

For a very long time, I was sort of depressed and angry, always kvetching about how boring this little town was and daydreaming about how nice my life would have been had I not left China. My life was barely moving along, at the pace of a three-toed sloth.

One day, I went to school very late and a senior faculty greeted me with “How’s your day?” Surprisingly, “Gloomy.” slipped out.

- “Why?” she raised her eyebrows, seeming very concerned.

- “I do not like the winter here. It is awfully long and there is no sunshine out--so gloomy!”

- “Come on, girl, get a life!”

I was stunned. Somehow I was expecting her to give me a hug and comfort me a little, just as others would do. “Jeez, ‘get a life’, she is bold!” I said to myself. That night when I was at home alone, I thought over my life-changes in America. I avoided reading because I found English was difficult. I excused myself from writing journals because I was no longer in a Chinese environment. Then what? No more exercising, snacking all the time, putting on weight, and becoming a couch potato. This was not the life I had dreamed of for 23 years. Bitterness sucked out all my spirit and I felt hollow inside. All of a sudden, her words hit me again. Yeah, get a life! Facing the transatlantic transition, from China to America, it was my mind-set that held me back. I should have thought about alternatives for coping with the transition. Reading English is difficult, but it may very likely help me improve. Walking to the gym on a cold winter day is not easy, but it would definitely cheer up my spirits. If I do not try, how will I know this is not a place where I belong?

Then I joined aerobics class on campus; I asked my American friends to write down a list of classic movies I needed to watch to learn the history of American movies; and I started reading again. The first book I picked was *The Joy Luck Club*, and from that point on, I fell head over heels in love with English fiction. I continued with a lot more, such as, *Confessions of a Shopaholic*, *Harry Potter*, *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, *The Kite Runner*, *The Notebook*, *The Education of Hyman Kaplan*, *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress*..... Guess what? I picked up writing again, this time, in both English and Chinese.

Interestingly enough, the more I engaged myself, the more fun things I found to do. I have always been interested in art and found Wharton Center to be a very good place for musicals and performances; also I was introduced to a small theater, Boarshead, in downtown Lansing, where fabulous dramas are staged. I was fascinated with Western cooking and learned to bake many

things from French lemon soufflé to Viennese poppy seed strudel. Believe it or not, I even volunteered to work at Dusty's Cellar THREE times. I was turned down every time, but I am glad I asked. Maybe one day I will receive a phone call and be asked to work as a baker there. I was enchanted by the historical places I read about in all sorts of books, so I backpacked all over Europe and left my footprints in front of Notre Dame, Sagrada Familia, the River Thames There are numerous fascinating stories one after another, more than I could tell. Voila! Life in Lansing is no longer boring but colorful and abundant.

My life has been transformed. I find myself more cheerful and optimistic than ever. Thanks to the quietness in Lansing, I have time to read, to meditate, and to change. But it's not always quiet, I am also blessed that I am surrounded by a lively crowd that is wise, caring, supportive, and generous. Without these wonderful people, I would have never plowed through.

Today, life in America is not just about polishing my English, but learning about everyday life. This journey is certainly not easy, with its ups and downs and joys and tears, but it has been exceedingly rewarding. While I am still stumbling through this language and culture maze, I am no longer lost, like the hymn says, "but now am found".

Epilogue:

At the time I almost finished this essay, I received the news that a college classmate passed away from a massive stroke. While I am writing my fascinating American life, I realized how blessed I am to be able to wake up every morning and breathe the cold air in the early winter of Michigan. Life is short and precious. Health is priceless. Although this essay was not originally written for him, I want to dedicate it to my friend, Dexin Guang, and may he rest in peace.