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“WHAT IF”

Have you ever thought how different your life would be if you were born in another country? A country where you cannot walk on the street? Or a country where you cannot go to the food store the day you wish to? Because that is exactly how Venezuela looks like. Since I landed in United States, I have always thought how lucky people are for being born in America, and not in other poor country like Venezuela. I may not experience any cultural shock as costumes, traditions, homesickness, or difficulties learning the language could be, however, I have definitely experienced more than that; how different my life style could have been for being born in another place rather than Venezuela.

During my first weekend in America, my host-dad invited me to a basketball game in Philadelphia, Sixers vs Timberwolves. I was so excited about it because I had never been in a basketball stadium before. In fact, I could not sleep the night before just imagining myself sitting in the big Wells Fargo Center stadium waiting for the players to go out, and of course, all the pictures that I would take there. Even though the game and living the experience of my first game was pretty exciting, it was not the most surprising thing about that night. Instead, walking on the street at night after the game ended, it still shocks me nowadays, THAT was the most amazing and powerful feeling that I have ever had since I came here. Most of you might be thinking, “Just walking on the street? What about going to the museum? Or the zoo?” But folks, let me tell you something, there is nothing more essential, fulfilling, and basic in life than feeling safe and enjoying every moment of your life to its fullest. I stopped for a minute, in the middle of the night, to observe around me. I felt the wind on my face, and even though I was wearing 3 pants that night, I could still feel the calm on my feet, while taking a deep breath and thanking God for the opportunity for being alive.

Coming from Venezuela, I had never experienced that magnitude of relief. I still remember how my mom used to freak out every time that I went out with my friend. She used to ask me the most common questions “Where are you going? With whom are you going? What time are you coming home?” However, in Venezuela, it’s necessary to add more questions that bring more worries. For example, I can phrase some of them that my mom used to say, “If you see someone following you, please call me. Last night there were two kidnappings on the area, please be careful. If on the way there, you got robbed, please call me from another cellphone.” According to an article posted by *Telegraph* in January 2016, Caracas, the capital of Venezuela, is placed on the number one as the most violent city of the world. In fact, on the top 10, Venezuela is listed twice. So, with that information, you might be able to imagine how my reaction was when I came to America, a country where children ride bikes and play on the street, where there is no fear to go to the park, where there is freedom. Yet, in Venezuela there are many people who never come back home.

Also, my first time going to the food store was not different at all. During a cold night, I was waiting for my host-mom in the car, my hands were freezing, and I could not feel my nose, what a perfect moment for going for food shopping I thought. “So, Camila, what kind of milk do you like?” she asked while she was walking into the store, but when she turned back, she saw me standing at the front door. I was just staring at the size of that gigantic food store, which its name rings to it. It was the largest food store that I had ever been to in my life. While I was trying to wake up from that dream, I repeated to myself “Kind of milk? How many kinds of milk are?” And to be honest, until today, I have no idea how many of them are. “I have only had the regular milk,” I said while I was walking through the food aisles.

The reason why a simple food store can cause me that kind of feeling is because the lack of food and services that Venezuela is facing. In order to go to the food store, each Venezuelan citizen has been assigned a particular day of the week. To illustrate this, my last number ID is four, hence, I am able to go to the food store to buy a basic food basket solely on Thursdays. However,

this does not guarantee you any product. Someday, after at least six hours on the big line, you may not find any product available to buy. Can you imagine my face when my host-mom asked me about the kind of milk that I would like? My family is still living in Venezuela, and they have spent more than one week without milk. As expected, this questions it was more shocking than any museum or basketball game could.

Nevertheless, even with all of these economic and politic issues, Venezuela made me the person who I am today, and the person who I am proud of. If I had the chance to choose where I would have liked to be born, I would choose Venezuela a thousand times. I am so grateful with all the turns that my life has taken in the last year; my host family who taught me everything about this culture, my teachers who support me with kindness and love, and all the American people that I have met on the road who gave me the warmest welcome. But my personality grew in Venezuela, all the values that my family have taught me mean everything to me, and I would never change a second with them. I thank Venezuela for making me the independent, strong, and bold person that I am, and which helped me to reach where I am today, studying in this amazing university. I still have hope that this crisis in Venezuela is going to end, there will be a change in my country, and we will be the great country that we used to be. I believe that everything happens for a reason, and Venezuela is my most beautiful disaster I have ever felt proud of.