

I'll Carry it With Me Wherever I Go.

“Are you on vacation or going home,” the passenger beside me asked. “Going home,” I replied.

“Are you excited about your vacation? Have you ever been to Jamaica?” I asked in return.

He explained to me how he had chosen Jamaica as his vacation spot and how he was with his family, who was sitting a few rows ahead of us. As he continued, I nodded when I thought it was appropriate. I was not listening to him. I was too excited to listen to anyone's story. As the plane started to descend, my heart was beating in my throat. I was not afraid that we wouldn't land or had any fear we might crash. I knew my chances of dying in a car accident was greater than a plane. I was exhilarated. I hadn't been home in six years.

As I joined the line to declare customs I felt uneasy walking towards the visitors line. Now that I had a US passport, I was no longer citizen. But was I a visitor? I moved through the line bewildered that there were so many white people. Despite that, I still felt at home. The hot humid air was familiar— hot air that not even the AC could cool. I finally made it to the customs officer and handed her my passport.

She looked inside handed it back to me and said, “ Welcome home”.

I smiled, not being able to find the words to say thank you, thank you for recognizing that despite being in the visitors' line and not having any of the accompanied or unaccompanied luggage that usually signals a Jamaican returning with gifts for friends and family I was coming home. I know there was nothing that identified me as returning home. The officer was only able to tell because she saw my place of birth from the passport. Regardless, it made me feel even more Jamaican, more right to be in this airport than anyone else.

I remember the first time I ever contemplated no longer being Jamaican. It wasn't the day I was naturalized as a U.S American citizen. Even then, I had a strong sense that I was foreign. Summer of 2016, I was on a plane to Mexico. I was filling out the customs declaration form. I already wrote in my nationality as Jamaican and was looking for my passport number. As I scanned the page I found that my new nationality was United States of America. United States of America? I remember thinking. “That is not even a nationality”, I said aloud. That is just the name of the country. I guess United Statian would not have worked, but how will I say I am a United States of America?

The weeks leading up to my trip home were confusing. I was ecstatic to be going home, but I was also conflicted about how much I had changed. I was nervous about how my family would feel about my wardrobe, my hair, my nose piercing, and my new accent. I wondered if assimilating in U.S. culture would prove me unfit for life back home. This combined with the ordeal of seeing my extended family in one setting was enough to dissuade me from making the trip. Since my paternal family was having a family reunion, my persuasive aunt was hell bent on everyone attending. And so I was convinced to take the trip.

I have several memories during childhood of my mother leaving home, several memories crying and holding onto her even though, we had been planning for her departure weeks before

she left. My mother left for the U.S. for the first time in 2001. She left behind four kids to live with her mother: three boys age eleven, nine, six and one girl age five.

I remember talking to her once on the phone asking, “why did you have to go?”

“To make a better life for you and your brothers.” she had replied.

I didn’t understand at the time as I didn’t see anything wrong with our lives. When my mother left, things changed. As a five-year-old I had to be reminded to take a shower. I had to plan to have my hair combed. I had to choose for myself what clothes I would wear every day. I had to make sure to ask for dinner. My mom left and took home with her.

As we arrived at my paternal grandparent's house, everything seemed to have shrunk. It seems as if it wasn’t big enough to hold me. Everything was exactly as I had left it. As I walked up to the brightly colored coral verandah, I saw that the same chairs sat in the same position I left them six years ago. How have they lasted that long? I wondered. I walked through the house looking at everything — looking at the rooms, looking at furniture, looking at the decorations, looking for something... anything that was different — looking for some sign of change; something that would explain why this place where I had grown up looked exactly the same but felt so strange to me. The blue clock was still above the painting of white Jesus, its hands frozen in time. That clock always needed batteries. The little center table that housed all our picture albums was still there with all three albums underneath. It had a pink ruffle table runner. It was one of four table runners that were always rotated. I wonder if they still had the other three. The blue room I had grown up in still had the two beds. The queen and a twin tucked in the corner for my cousin, Romane. It seemed as if someone had gone out of their way to re-create the house from my memory, but no one was home.

Because no one was home to greet me, we decided to visit my maternal grandparents home. There a lot had changed. My uncle and his daughter were now living with my grandparents which made everything look and feel different and there was a table in the living room that I didn’t know. This house was busy with life. I was greeted with my screams, tears, hugs, and the food, even though I wasn’t hungry. My grandmother was surprised to see me.

“Sistah?” she said. It was my childhood name given to me by my brother that was currently in the States, “Is that you?” My grandmother was looking for her glasses.

“Yes, it’s me”, I replied.

“Uh” she responded loudly. She was hard of hearing.

“Yes, it’s me” I replied louder as she took me into her embrace. She felt so soft and smelled like comfort. I hugged her and cried. I didn’t realize I had missed her.

“Where’s Maro?” She asked.

“We had to leave him to take care of the house”, I replied loudly, “He had to work. He needs the money”.

“You are tall as a tree”, she said as she looked me up and down and took me in her arms again. “Are you eating? You look so slim! Are you hungry? Do you want some food?” She asked me without leaving any time for me to answer. “Welcome home Sistah”, she said.

“Sam!” “Sam!” “Samoya!” I heard my father yelling my middle name. It was reminiscent of when I was a child. I grew up between my paternal and maternal grandparents' home. The only thing that separated the two houses were the backyards that were fenced in, but with an opening so my brother, Maro, and I could roam freely from one house to the other.

Whenever I would get in trouble in one house I would just run and hide in the other. This made punishment sometimes difficult as I always had an escape. Because of the two homes my guardians, which consisted of my father and aunt in one household and my maternal grandparents and the other, would always threaten to kick me out of the house as my punishment for doing something wrong. Sometimes without the threat of being kicked out, I would pack my things and move between houses. To find me, one simply had to yell my name from one of the back porches.

“Sam! Sam! Samoya!” yelled my dad. I came to the back door to see my dad. He hadn’t aged a day. He no longer had long braids, instead, he had little short twists. He was in the beginning stages of growing out his hair again. There was no longer an opening in the fence for me to go through and hug him. Another cousin that was excited to see me begin aggressively pulling down a piece of the fence so I could get over.

“Don’t pull it down” I pleaded, “I’ll just go around”.

He whispered something under his breath about my grandparents and kept pulling at the opening despite my plea. He finished the opening and then I hugged him and my father. They marveled at how much I had grown and offered me food. They too thought I wasn’t being fed enough food.

My father left to be the United Kingdom a few months after my mother left for the States. He too was looking for a better life for himself and his two children he had with my mother. A few days after he left, I learned that he was arrested. He spent four years in England, in prison. Through ages 5 to 9, my father existed only through letters and phone calls. My mother would come home at the end of every nine month period and leave again after two months. Until one day she left and didn’t come back for three years.

Not having my parents around during my childhood was hard, especially not having my mother. When something went wrong I would call my mother because I was closer to her. Also, she had more time to talk on the phone than father did. I would tell her everything: what happened at school, what I wore that day, how my hair was styled, who asked about her, and I would also tell her I didn’t like living with my grandmother or my aunt.

She would tell me it would be over soon. “Soon you’ll be home with me”, she’d say.

In July 2011, at 15, I came to the United States to live with my mother. After 10 years, I left home to finally be home. I was excited to be in the United States with the massive highway system that scared me from the plane. I was excited to see that day went on for 14 hours and the sun never seemed to lose its intensity until it was dark. I didn’t like the food though and the air was impossibly dry — smelled dry too. I didn’t like my stepdad or my little brother, both of whom I was just meeting for the first time. Somehow, since we were no longer separated by space, my mother and I drifted apart. We drifted and my stepdad and new brother made me feel alienated. They were a family. They had a rhythm; a way of coexisting that I could not perfect. I wanted to go home.

After living with my mother and her family in Dallas for three years I got somewhat used to the house. My little brother grew on me. In November 2015, my older brother, Maro, came to live in the US. This made life easier. Finally, there was someone who understood exactly what I felt because he too was going through the same thing.

In 2014, I left for college in one of the whitest and oldest cities in Texas. To attend one of the whitest an oldest liberal arts college in Texas. I made a space there. It was a space I had to carve out, but that was more accommodating of who I was and what I wanted.

In 2016 I moved into a house in Georgetown, that I now consider my home. But now I must leave. I have graduated and in less than a month my lease will end. My roommates will go and I too will have to go. Now I have full control of over where I go. Now I have an opportunity to find a place that existed in the Ivy House here in Georgetown, Texas.

"Where will you go now?" asked my landlord, "now that you are done with school."

"I think I might go learn Spanish somewhere, " I responded.

"I wish you were my kid" he replied, "both my boys came home after college. I keep telling them that I will give them one of my property to live in. They have to pay rent of course, but I just want them out of my house. Will you go home?"

"Eventually," I replied.

Author's Note

Writing this narrative was hard. I have always thought about these stories but only shared them with one other person. I started out wanting to write about moving to the U.S., but that story does not seem to have the same significance in my life like it did 4 years ago. To write this story now is to acknowledge that I cannot blame my parents for their perceived shortcoming as they were trying to figure out a life for themselves and their families. Writing this story meant taking responsibility for how I respond to my search for home knowing I have had a few homes. Something I do not think came through in the article, but I still want to emphasize is that my past search for home was rooted in a naive understanding of home as being with my mother. Then I held a nationalist concept of home in a foreign country. What I want to show is how these experiences of home had led me my current understanding of home as being where I am, but at the same that does not devalue the other homes I have had over the years.

I think because this article was personal it was the easiest to write about. I had a hard time separating myself in the other two articles. --Camelia Henry, Summer 2018