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Essay #2

### **Into Foreign Land**

In the summer of 2004, I started my first job at a local Milwaukee Dairy Queen. Like those stepping into foreign land, I was nervous, frightened, anxious, but I was excited and desperate for fresh air. It was my first taste of freedom, and I took it for all that I could.

With this job came DeMarco, a young, alluring, exotic blend of Mexican-black. When he and I started seeing each other outside of work, I felt once again that mix of apprehension and novelty. He was intrigued at my Hmongness; I was intrigued at his lack of it. My parents were less amused. My mom feared the repercussions of me dating outside the Hmong community and tried to persuade me otherwise. My father, on the other hand, was acutely outraged. He demanded that either I obey him or he would, without hesitation, disown me. He threatened that a Hmong girl would only suffer without her family. He blamed my every action on my mom.

It was because of DeMarco and the aftermath that I started to realize that Milwaukee was a city which limited me in every direction, that the Hmong culture held me prisoner, that my family restricted me with expectations. Before Dairy Queen and before DeMarco, I had loved everything about being Hmong because it was who I was. I loved Milwaukee because it was home, and I knew nothing more. As any child would, I strived to make my parents proud and to become what they wanted me to be, what they expected me to be.

I was obedient. Along with my two sisters, I helped my mother with the household chores, forgoing the joys of childhood at a young age while my older brothers continued freely

and carelessly. I excelled in my schoolwork to please my parents, surpassing all my older siblings, and setting a standard that I have yet to fully reach.

I was passive. I did not whine when I could not spend a night over at a friend's house because I was too young though my brothers were able to do so at even younger ages. I did not complain as all six of my brothers imitated my father, enjoying themselves, expecting to be waited upon by the females of the family, learning the behavior of a Hmong man, while I swept up their messes, cleaned their dishes, and washed their laundry.

Slowly, I was molding into an ideal Hmong woman. And I didn't fight it.

But my mold was different from my mom's or aunts' or perfect Hmong wives' whose molds were purely Hmong. I, on the other hand, was being shaped by both my Hmong heritage and my exposure to American culture. While my parents were teaching me to be passive, my schoolteachers were encouraging me to be active, to voice my thoughts and opinions, to stand for what I believed, even if all this meant rejecting conformity. Though I didn't realize it as a child, these two opposing cultures sparked a battle within me, and I struggled to merge them. I failed at any attempt to find a perfect balance.

During my younger years, I lived up to what my parents wanted and what the Hmong culture demanded. I was the shy girl at school who was afraid to raise her hand, who spoke softly and only when spoken to. At home, I was the obliging daughter my parents had trained me to be, never arguing back, never complaining, and never disobeying. Together, my parents and I had set that standard high for me, and I lived each day working up to it.

My father must have been so proud to have raised such a daughter. And as such a daughter, I feared disappointing them. I feared disappointing my mom because she treasured me,

and I was afraid of losing her love. I feared disappointing my father, but only because I feared him.

DeMarco made my fear a reality and pushed me to face it head-on. Choosing to have a relationship with him destroyed the pride my parents once had for me and disappointed them immensely. With the image of the perfect daughter shattered, I was able to see my own reflection and to understand that I did not want to live my life according to my parents and abiding all the rules of the Hmong culture.

The night my father discovered my relationship with DeMarco, I was working and he was waiting to pick me up, but I failed to notice him. DeMarco and I worked closely in cleaning up DQ's eating area where we were visible, and my father immediately recognized our relationship. When I looked up and saw him, our gaze met. His eyes were ice-cold, his expression frozen with anger. His stare was more terrifying than usual, and I stood petrified. DeMarco had noticed his hateful glare, but he only laughed. I never asked, but I don't think he laughed as a sign of disrespect for my father. It was because he didn't know or understand the Hmong culture. He didn't realize the seriousness of the situation like I instantly did. To him, it was just a moment worth laughing at.

That night, my father and I rode home in awkward silence. I was waiting for him to yell at me, but he didn't. I waited for him to interrogate me. I waited for him to give me an I'm-right-listen-to-me speech, but he didn't. I walked into my room before I heard his warning: don't be stupid.

Almost every night afterwards, my father would sit me down to point out the problems in my relationship with DeMarco, or with anyone who wasn't Hmong. He lectured me in front of

my mom, partly to show us who had the power in the family, and partly to show her how to be a mother and how to raise a daughter. My mother made no objections and never dared to interrupt him. Like my mother, I had no choice but to stay and listen.

He always began as a father looking out for his children. He'd express his concern over the drastic difference between our culture and that of DeMarco's full American upbringing, and the troubles that this gap would inevitably bring to me if I were to spend my life with a non-Hmong. DeMarco would never understand the Hmong culture, my father would say. And so he would never truly love me. Not only that, my father assured me, the Hmong community would turn its back on me the moment I defied its rules, and in the end, I would be alone. What kind of father would he be if such a thought did not pain him? But my father was not one to convey his love or anything that would make him seem vulnerable, and his concern for me never lasted long.

In the core of his talks, it was apparent that he was only worried about saving face, primarily his own. He would underline the cruel and life-lasting consequences a Hmong girl would receive if she dared to step outside her only acceptable role. He emphasized the reputation of shame placed upon a Hmong woman who dared to go outside the Hmong community and the indirect effects it would have on her family. But now I realize my father didn't really care about that daring girl or woman. He didn't care what kind of reputation she developed for herself or her loss of face. Because although it was humiliating to be that girl who had no respect for her culture, it was even more so to be the father of such a girl. My father was also not one to lose face, and he would not let my actions change that. All the while, he never took responsibility for having helped raise me, for shaping me into who I had become. Everything I did was wrong and who I had come to be was wrong. And he blamed it all on my mom.

Before they found out, I didn't really try to hide my relationship with DeMarco from my parents. But I can't say that I wasn't afraid of how they would react if they knew. Looking back, I can remember the inklings of fear and caution. I recall having the feeling of necessary secrecy, but still, I did not keep my relationship from my family. I just never directly informed my parents. When they finally found out, I was terrified. Even before they talked to me about it, I felt as though I had disappointed them, disobeyed them; it was as though I had betrayed them.

My father always pointed his finger at my mom; why didn't she raise me right? It was entirely her fault that I was so daring and so rebellious, so unHmong-like. It was her fault because I was her daughter, and it was her duty to bring me up the right way to become the right kind of woman. Watching my father blame my mom, I felt the fall from that high position I once held in my parents' eyes and the crash onto the cold, hard floor. This accusation magnified the reality of my defiance and the intensity of its effects. But though I felt pained in opposing them, the more my mom tried to change my mind and the more my father threatened me, the more I saw it necessary to continue my stay in this foreign land and to step further into it.

Although my father blamed my mom for my disobedience, he did not realize that the person I had become, the one who he found so disgraceful, was because of him. My father wanted me, as well as my sisters, to be just like my mom—adoring, meek, servile—but I had witnessed the treatment that this type of woman, this ideal Hmong woman, received from Hmong men, especially her husband, and I did not want that. My mom never spoke out against my father; she never went against his wishes. Yet, she could never fully gain his love or respect.

I was determined not to be like my mom, not to be forced into a role of eternal submission. Even the traits of my mom that were desirable, I lacked. My mom was patient and

yielding; I was intolerant and stubborn. But lacking her good qualities allowed for me to attempt an escape from the role of a Hmong woman. I was determined to be free from it. I promised myself to be cautious of all Hmong men so as to prevent any possibility of becoming like my mom. Inside me, the battle intensified between the two opposing cultures that together could not exist in harmony but each alone could never complete me.

I am still struggling to bring the Hmong culture and the American together in me. I have realized that there is no definite balance between the two and to blend them so that both can coexist is a tricky and delicate process. In resisting the rules set upon a Hmong woman, I am not declaring my shame in the Hmong culture. I take pride in being Hmong and I embrace it; it is who I am. But I can never allow myself to fully be governed by the Hmong culture because the American part of me clashes with it. I don't agree with every aspect of either culture. Slowly I have learned to take what I find important from each of the two cultures and merge these qualities together to build my identity.

DeMarco had unveiled to me the possibilities that I was formerly restricted from. I never told him the details of the Hmong culture nor did I share with him the reactions of my parents. To this day, he isn't aware of the major role he has played in my life, and we are no longer together. Still, because of him I now have the opportunity to step outside and beyond the intended role for me and the Hmong restrictions. Because of him, I can enter that foreign land and feel the mix of nervousness and excitement. Because of him, I can say I am no longer truly restricted, and even my parents have grown more open-minded. My father had raised me to be a passive female, an obedient daughter, an ideal Hmong woman. Instead, I was growing into an active, rebellious, modern American.

When I realized that to be me I must not let one culture dominate the other, I became a proud Hmong, an assertive American, a strong woman.