

Precious Jimah

Period One

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### Mastering the techniques.

Change is good, well it has the potential to be good but sometimes it can be especially tiring. It requires conformity and I have never been one to conform to anything. Moving from Nigeria proved to be an eye opening experience and I discovered, the hard way, that the United States is as different from Nigeria as night is from day. English, being the number one language in the United States is vital and people who do not speak that language stand out. I had to change a lot of things about my speech and language to fit in, and to excel.

My accent and the way I pronounced words was a big problem. This was partially as a result of the fact that I spoke a lot of my native language in Nigeria. For the first few months after moving, phrases like "huh?", "I'm sorry?", "come again?", and "what was that?" was becoming common. It was all polite but it became frustrating when every conversation I had required me to repeat things over and over again. I avoided saying words like "honesty" and "familiarity" because I never seemed to get them right. I overemphasized the "h" in "honesty" and pronounced "familiarity" like "familarty", it was very embarrassing. I especially disliked words like "Wednesday" because coming from me it sounded like "Wensday", and "lasagna" which sounded like "lasana." They sounded nothing like the way they should be pronounced or the way they should sound. In school I was terrified to speak up, I found myself hoping that the teacher doesn't call on me to answer a question in class. My history teacher, Mr. Elmore, noticed my predicament and decided to talk to me about it and to help me with it. He once told me change is inevitable and adjusting will be a wise choice.

After school every day I went to his classroom and read books out loud with him listening and pointing things out to me. I didn't take it very seriously until a fellow student asked me why I spoke like it was a struggle, another student told me that I wasn't doing the English Language proud. I decided to show them that I could be good, even better with talking in the American way. I read books out loud, I read articles and kept repeating words over and over, and months later I realized that I had mastered the American way of speaking. There was almost no trace of the accent I was born with, I felt proud, I felt American. However this had not been my only struggle, writing felt like a whole new world.

The very first paper I wrote was returned back to me with a marker drawn vertically on the far right side of the paper, apparently I shouldn't write past the margin. It was exciting to be able to defy everything I had been taught for 15 years and learn new things, learn how to be a part of this foreign community. I spelt gray as grey, it drove my English teacher crazy. I wrote the day before the month when I wrote dates in exams or quizzes. When I wrote my name, I always put my last name before my first name, this was because in Nigeria you are said to be less important than your family or your last name. My teacher called me Jimah for a few weeks before I called to her attention the fact that Jimah is actually my last name and Precious is my first name. I called a period a full stop because well, that was what I knew it to be. Writing was not a bed of roses for me, there were too many rules to follow and with every paper I hoped I got it right.

I remember one paper I wrote, I was supposed to write a fictional story, easy enough right? I mean all I needed was imagination. I was fairly confident that I would do well enough and came up with

a story about three sisters who liked to hike but got into an accident that changed their lives forever. In class we were reading our stories out loud and it got to my turn to read my story to the class. It was going well until I read a particular line and a low murmur swept through the class, I stopped reading and wondered what was wrong. Was it something I said? Or was it someone else? The line I had read went like this "...then she slowly pulled the torchlight out from under her pillow", now I know how wrong that sentence was but it surprised me then. I was meant to say flashlight and not torchlight, I didn't realize that flashlights were not called torchlights, torchlights were an entirely different thing in the U.S. I corrected the sentence and it read "...then she slowly pulled the flashlight out from under her pillow." Another line read "He didn't realize he left his cell phone on the gas cooker", that line was even more confusing than the other. No one knew what I was talking about and I had to explain what I meant by gas cooker. After a few laughs I was corrected and understood that a gas cooker is actually a stove. As time went on and as I began to feel more comfortable I learnt other things like fuel is called gas, and brackets are called parenthesis. Every word I wrote was passed through a checkpoint in my head that prevented me from writing unreasonable or incorrect sentences.

Becoming a better writer was much harder than becoming a better reader and speaker because it required much more finesse. Although my accent is still very evident when I talk to my family or any other Nigerian, no one who hears me, without critically analyzing every word I say, will guess that I was born and raised outside the United States. I have successfully become a part of the American community but I have found it necessary to hang on to my primary way of writing and speaking because as different as one is from the other, each of them have helped me to understand the other.