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A Dynamic Sanctuary

There's a voice in my head. A grating, pessimistic, insatiable voice that insists on a static, so-called "perfect" definition of home—a place free from conflict and stress: a place of pure comfort and respite. Sometimes I wonder if it's even a part of me. It sounds like it learned what family was through American sitcoms rather than the reality of living between two cultures. It feels foreign. It feels annoying. It feels like...an alien. Yes, let's call it that—an Alien. Growing up between my American nationality and Ghanaian heritage, I've fought with this Alien that simply refuses to acknowledge and accept that home can be messy and stress-filled, but still a place filled with love, support, and comfort. My eighteen years of navigating life through the lens of my cultural duality taught me that home isn't a static entity that's either a sanctuary or a battlefield—it's a dynamic fusion of both, and the very tension between comfort and conflict is precisely what defines it.

Home is a dynamic, complex state, filled with both comfort and—

“Just stop it.” The voice materializes beside me, no longer just a voice in my head. The Alien grimaces, its silvery fingers hovering over my keyboard with disapproving precision. “Once again, you’re just making excuses. Aren’t you, human?”

“Excuses? What excuses are you talking about?” I ask, flinching from its sudden arrival.

“You’re making a compromise.” The Alien’s voice carries a cold certainty, ironically exposing its ignorance to my perspective. “What kind of mental gymnastics is this? If you must explain why conflict belongs in your home, then you’ve lost the plot. Your home can’t be defined as a sanctuary anymore. It’s...just dysfunctional at that point.”

“You misunderstand me, Alien. Conflict and stress also make up a home because it’s not supposed to be perfect. It can also—”

“No.” The Alien snatches control of the cursor, deleting my next sentence. “You should be finding a better home. A proper home. A home that fits your description instead of rewriting the definition of home itself to accommodate for your family’s chaotic dynamics.”

“You don’t get it, do you? Growing up between two cultures isn’t a cakewalk. You must double down your efforts to read in-between the lines and accept that it’s impossible to be perfect in both. Maybe in one culture, speaking with passion is interpreted as being engaged in conversation while the other sees that as obnoxious. In one you take your shoes off at the door, and in the other, no one cares if you walk over the carpet with them.”

“Then you should pick one and stick with it.” The Alien snapped back, typing with sharp, rapid clacks of the keyboard. “What you’re describing is nothing more than a compromise, not a home.”

“You really think that the complexity of my home is dysfunctional? Don’t be so quick to dismiss this simply because you can’t see the beauty behind my multi-cultural environment. Let me show you what’s missing when you demand perfection.”

I wake up to the warm sunlight of a Saturday morning spilling through the wide windows of my room, illuminating the soft, gray covers of my bed...and the five copies of ACT practice tests scattered on

my bed from last night. The same moon-light walls that lulled me to sleep felt like a cell, closing in on me like a reminder of all the concepts I was yet to finish or even understand. Sizzling Jollof from the kitchen snaps me out of my trance, and I find myself running down the stairs by the time I shake off the last bits of stress. Downstairs, the smell of tomatoes and spices hits me like a warm embrace. The sound of my parents speaking rapid Twi with grandma over the phone creates a backdrop of familiarity that makes my morning feel less overwhelming. I couldn't understand everything they were saying, just a few words here and there. But it was melody of their intonation and the smell of jollof that reminded of what home smelt, tasted, and sounded like.

“Wo ho te sen, Kekeli?” My mom greets, pausing her conversation on the phone as she notices me hovering by the doorway.

“Me ho ye, paa. Meda w'ase.” I try and hide my anxiety with a positive, reassuring response, but my mom can see through that.

“You just woke up, and I can already tell somethings wrong.” She added, gesturing to the heated Jollof on the oven counter. “Go eat some Jollof and decompress before you start studying, ok? Your dad burnt it as always, but it shouldn't be too bad.”

“Thank you,” I murmur, scooping a generous amount of orange goodness on the spare paper plates from my graduation party. “I'll try and get at least one practice test done before the evening.”

The Alien almost recoils as it reads the final sentences of dialogue, its silver form somehow managing to look disgusted and confused at the same time. “What kind of linguistic chaos is this? Pick a language, human. How can you call this home if you can't even decide what language to speak?” It points an accusatory finger at the Word document, tapping harshly on the

computer screen. “You can’t even understand half of what’s being said. You call that comfort? That’s just confusion behind the façade of so-called belonging.”

“Why do you see that as a bad thing? The multi-lingual aspect of my home isn’t a symptom of division. It’s an aspect of the dynamic nature of my sanctuary. I was able to find respite in both language and food before heading back up to my room to face the challenges of the day. Yes, it is true that those things didn’t dissolve the stress of my impending ACT practice tests, but they allude to fact that these so-called ‘mundane’ things fuel my home, like a strong foundation. In fact, because of those simple interactions between my mom’s jollof rice and Twi, I was culturally grounded. My trip to the kitchen didn’t eliminate the stress—it gave me the strength to keep pushing through.”

The taste of tomatoes and spices lingers on my tongue as I reluctantly climb up the stairs, my warm bowl of jollof in hand. The same bedroom that was caging me in now seems more...open. Almost welcoming. Not because of the room itself—the ACT practices tests were still scattered all over my bed, mind you—but because of the dynamic ability for once part of my home to nullify the stress from another. With a deep breath, I set my jollof next to my ACT practices tests, readying myself for an intense afternoon. I flip to a fresh page in my MoteMote planner, hovering over the page as the productivity paralysis slowly creeps in. This wasn’t the first time I battled with this. I knew better than to simply shut down. I brush off the initial hesitation and write down one specific task with neat and deliberate letters: complete 5-10 ACT Math problems.

“That’s it?” The Alien scoffs, reading the paragraph over my shoulder. “One simple task? You have five ACT practice tests to complete, and you’re limiting yourself to ten problems in a single

subject? This is exactly what I mean by your compromising. You're content with the bare minimum instead of picking a side and pushing all the way through."

"That's where I disagree," I retort, pressing the shift button to start a new paragraph. "You call this a limitation, but this is a strategy for me to focus. When I focus on a single task, I don't have to worry about others floating around in my head to distract me from my goal. I'm forcing myself to pour my energy into the task before me instead of wasting it on stressing about what is to come."

With my single task written down, I reach for my laptop and open my Notion workspace, pulling up my dark academia study playlist. The soothing melody of classical piano melodies mixed with gentle rain ease my anxiety and give me the momentum to begin. The sounds vibrate against the walls, slowly opening the prison cage and turning my room into a warmer, calming space. The sunlight felt less blinding, and the ACT textbooks didn't feel as heavy. Music wasn't a mere form of entertainment; it created the atmosphere I needed to succeed. Three hours later, my dark academia playlist has cycled through twice, my bowl of jollof sits empty, and I'm staring at a trigonometric problem that looks no different than cryptography. I can feel the once welcoming walls closing in again with each failed attempt, signaling to me that I need to take a break. I push back from my desk with a sigh, ready for a warm mug of Earl Grey tea in the warm glow of my sunroom.

"Running away already?" The Alien snorts, its voice dripping with satisfaction. "And here I thought this room was your 'sanctuary'. What happened to your brilliant time management system and cultural grounding?"

“I’m not running away,” I reply as I type. “I’m adapting. I’m taking advantage of the nature of my home.”

“Adapting? First your bedroom causes you stress, then it comforts you, then it reverts to stressing you out. A real home would provide a consistent comfort, not this...ping pong game of emotional needs.”

“But not all forms of consistency are healthy.” I continue. “A home that only functions a single way can feel like a prison. The ability for my home to have different spaces that can serve different needs is a blessing, not a blemish. The sunroom was that blessing for me.

I pad down the stairs, muscle memory guiding me straight into the pantry to reach for the familiar crinkle of Nacho Cheese Doritos and a King Size Kit-Kat. By the time I cross through the foyer towards the sunroom, I find my parents had already beaten me to it. They were nestled together on the soft, grey cushions of the couch, steaming cups of tea in their hands, surrounded by my mother’s army of hanging indoor plants. My mom glances up and immediately read my furrowed brow and tensed shoulders that I swore I had hidden.

“What’s wrong, sweetie?” She asks, setting down her cup of tea with a patience look in her eyes that makes it a bit easier to breathe.

“Oh, nothing much.” I fumble with my snacks, scolding myself as I realize how many times we’ve had this exact conversation. “I just...wanted to talk a bit about college.” My dad scrolls on the Apple TV remote, browsing his favorite SpaceX updates channel with a practice ease.

“Are you still nervous about social life?” He adds, his eyes flickering to me to read my expression.

“Yes...I just don’t even know where to start. None of my classmates are going to Virginia Tech, and I’ve been doing online school since Covid. I hope I don’t act too awkward around others.”

It’s always the same complaints, the same worries, the same questions, but my parents listen patiently, no matter how many times I apologize for taking up their time.

“Kekeli, your dad and I know you are ready for this next stage in your life, ok?” My mom replies simply, patting the space next to her on the couch. “You have been gifted with the wonderful ability to speak your mind and let your voice be heard. Use that and put yourself out there. Do not be ashamed by your heritage, family background, or even your little accent you picked up from us. There are all things that make you distinct and unique—be proud of them.”

I settle into the warm cushions between my parents as I tear open my Kit-Kat wrapper. The crunchy wafers and melty chocolate mix with the lingering taste of this morning’s jollof—culinary layers of home supporting me through my stress-filled day. I sit with my parents until their tea grows cold, mulling over my mom’s words as I pad back to the kitchen, loading their mugs into the dishwasher. The same hands that fumbled with ACT math problems this afternoon move with purpose through small acts of care that feel just as important as any other academic achievement. Looking back, I’m still not sure how my parents were so patient with me—specially during this stressful Saturday. But they never seem tired of reminding me that my unique, bicultural path caught between languages and worlds is exactly what prepares me for my next stage of life.

“I don’t understand,” The Alien admits, its voice quieter than usual, almost confused. “Your bedroom invokes stress and comfort, your kitchen grounds you with foreign languages and foods, and your sunroom provides you with the same conversations on repeat. None of this is

efficient nor consistent. How can you call this chaotic, dysfunctional collection of spaces a “home”?

“That’s exactly what home is.” I correct. “It’s not a static place. It changes with you, supports you differently depending on the moment, and meets you wherever you are. These conversations and patterns of emotions aren’t stagnant or repetitive—their reliable.”

“So...home isn’t perfect?”

“No. It’s even better than that. It’s ever-changing, it’s real, and it’s mine.”

As I finish the last sentence of the essay, I can hear the Alien’s voice fading, replaced by a silence of acceptance. Tomorrow, I will wake up and face the same walls of my room again—I might even hear the voice of the Alien once more. Whether they press closer like a cage or spread out to give me space, it’s still a part of my home. Home isn’t a static sanctuary free from conflict or complexity. It’s a living, growing space that shifts and holds through every day, trial, and obstacle of life.

Use of Generative AI During Invention, Revision, and Editing Stages ONLY— I firmly and honestly admit to using generative AI in the initial and review stages of my project. Generative AI assisted me in developing a topic, understanding perspectives, brainstorming points/ideas, and other initial writing tasks. All generative AI content was thoroughly revised and edited by me to, ultimately, make it my own. Generative AI sparked my creativity and critical thinking so that I could work past any writer’s block or other starting issues. Additionally, generative AI provided feedback on my draft, serving as a critical reader responding to my ideas, argument,

organization, and other global aspects of my paper. Generative AI served as a proofreader of my draft, checking for syntax and other local issues with language usage. I critically assessed the feedback and made revision/editing choices based on my own understanding of the project's purpose, audience, topic, context, and writerly identity, thus using generative AI feedback in the same manner as I would human feedback on my rough drafts.