

“RAMENEZ MOI”

Trigger warning: this essay is rambling

I dreamed about it. I talked about it. I achieved it. *The American dream*, as I would say. The big yellow buses, the excessive drinks, the fast food on every corner, or the cliché of policemen in their car with donuts in their mouths. I remember when, with my family and neighbors, we went to the U.S. for the first time in 2014; all I was looking for was *this*. The donut had to be pink, with a policeman wearing sunglasses slumped in his car and a cup of

coffee on the dashboard like the movies. When I finally saw it, from that day on, the desire to go back never stopped.

So in November 2021, the last year of high school, I started the paperwork with the exchange organization PIE. After the confinement, it became a bit of a trend on TikTok, with everyone going off to an American high school as an exchange student, and I was as influenced as anyone else.

Soon enough, in 2024, I arrived in Cedar City for my university years. I joined Southern Utah University and became a T-bird. I was far from my parents, in another country, another language, another culture. It was just a way to create another life for myself, and all I could think of was that this was my key to *liberation*. Yet to this day, I still wonder whether I wouldn't have been better off choosing another option, one without the mental burden of classes, accommodation, food, sleep, or even vacations. Would it have been different if I'd been able to travel more?

I remember last year; first year, first experiences. With French friends we went to Boston, New York, and Toronto, all in the three weeks of December 2022. There was so much to see, discover, and experience. It was an adventure, yet there was still frustration. Not only because of the remarks made by these French girls from France about my culture, but also because of the weather, with its sweaters and scarves all over the place. On Christmas Day, the Big Apple was not hotter than -18 degrees Celsius. It was *The Blizzard of the Century*.

Always wearing a sweater or a hoodie. Always needing to cover up. Never being able to breathe fully, that's how I felt. They'll tell me it's all the same; "Get used to it." But not having the cashmere, cotton, wool, or synthetic fabric clawing at my skin every day, sucking away the lotion I took the time to apply like a leech, is a memory I looked forward to.

Being able to live without air conditioning, with greenery, tropical flora everywhere, and the sun caressing my skin directly as I put on my favorite tank top and shorts, was normality on my island.

“You chose it, no one sent you *4230 kilometers* away from your island.”

Yes, I chose to be here.

Yes, I'm happy to be.

But no one can feel the lump in my stomach, the lump in my throat, or even the pinch between my diaphragm and my lungs that seems to be my heart itself, crushed by so many contradictory feelings.

For instance, this summer I'm supposed to go to France and see my family, yet none of them are willing to put up the money to come when they were the ones who wanted to go to the Olympics in the first place. Me, all I wanted initially was to go back to my island. I remember the conversation I had last Friday with my brother; it was just hopes being shattered. He said he wouldn't be in France this summer, but “Can you still bring me some shirts when you come back?” What am I supposed to do? Mail them to him? Give them to my parents to bring back? Why should I spend my money on him when he doesn't even make an effort to come? The tears flowed without me being able to hold myself back, and I can still see my roommates' eyes in the living room staring at me.

“Well, Florian, I'll leave you to it; I've got to go and do my homework.”

“Oh, you're leaving, you won't talk to me anymore?”

“Well, it's not like you talk either, plus it's useless.”

And just like that, the WhatsApp video call ended. From this, a question still lingers in the back of my mind: really, who is my real family? *Who are the ones who keep me going?*

Yes, my parents will be there. Yes, they're my family, the ones who gave me life in fact. But I don't actually crave them, if I may say so. When the word family is used, all I see are the tears and laughter on my friends' faces as I leave for the airport.

I cry at their names on my phone, unable to hug them. I cry at the announcements of moments in their lives that I can't be there for. I cry every time someone says to me, "No, but the snow is beautiful, you're exaggerating." Yes, it is beautiful, I won't deny it, but what about my snow? My fine, multi-colored sand. Black in the north for the volcano and white in the south for the tourists. What about my marine air and its Trade winds blowing regularly from east to west as a function of subtropical high pressure? It makes my hair twirl and carries the local scents and music, reviving my memories.

I remember the summer of 2022, when my best friend and I got lost in Saint-Anne, one of the four main corners of the island. Having decided to go with friends to the beach, I wanted to go on an adventure. We got up at 8 a.m. to catch the first bus, then the TCSP, then another bus to make a stop "au Marin" before stopping in the middle of the sweltering heat. We protected ourselves with the sports mat we had before finally catching another 45-minute bus and finally arriving at the beach, where our friends were already waiting for us. Afterwards, it was time to buy drinks and climb the many hills of this town to get to the market and make the return journey under 87.8 degrees Fahrenheit. When the four of us sat down, a palm tree was doing its best to shade our drunken heads. Then, the inevitable happened and we had to retrace our steps to take half of the group to vomit. A security guard wasn't far from us, and I remember the giggles everyone had when Josh shouted that someone was following us. It was no simple task to keep him on his feet, but eventually, the day came to an end, and everyone left their own way. Still, too good to be true, the story didn't end like that, and my best friend and I found ourselves stuck at the bus stop at 9 p.m.

because the automobile didn't show up. So to pass the time, we talked about my departure and everything she was going to miss.

“No, but that means I'm not going to see you drunk, your first loves, your first clubs, your evolution, your American majority, or even your friends.” *Gaps* She'd paused for a second before shouting in my face; “I hope you won't forget me, that you'll call me every day, tell me everything, talk to me about-”

“Mia, breathe. I won't forget you, and I'll tell you everything; don't worry.”

Yet now I tremble and weep as I write this essay without her knowing. But I have to regain my composure; my roommate in the bed right next to me can't know.

She can't know. My mother can't know. *They* can't know.

Just today, my mother told her boss, asking about “The American,” that my teeth were always showing and so I was supposed to be happy here. And when she told me this, I smiled even more, even though in my case it was “of course Mom” in an ironic way.

“Girl, when are you available?”

“Let me know when you can so we can call.”

“It's been a long time since we've spoken; you need to tell me about your life.”

“Don't worry, I promise, I'll tell you everything when I can.”

It must be a month and still no news. Am I really busy, or am I *avoiding* the confrontation that these calls represent for my heart?

I stay busy; I have homework, I have competitions, I have marching band, I have to go out with my friends, I have to take care of myself, I have to see my counselor, I have to prep my meals, etc., etc., etc.... But I know that in reality, every call is complicated because I don't know when I'll see them next. In the end, it's better to be busy, even if the blood around

my nails keeps staining my cuticles. That's why the next four semesters I have left show 18 credits. *Yippee!* Another two years instead of one, circumstances that weren't foreseen, but once again I have to adapt so they don't worry about me. Yes, I wanted to finish my degree in three years to prove to myself how good I was, to be able to go home and spend more time on my island, but also because my means are limited. How am I supposed to finance my fourth year? A second loan? A third job? Even with the \$6,500 scholarship, tuition is too expensive.

I have to admit that I'd like them to take a plane ticket and surprise me, but then there's the matter of money. As always, money is the problem and always has been. They say that money doesn't make one happy, but it does help. Many people from the West Indies can't go back home because tickets are too expensive. Even if you're in France, part of the same "country" by being one of its departments, tickets are over 1,000 €. A friend told me that her ticket cost her 1,132€, and that is just for three weeks in Martinique. That is a whole month's salary. And it's the same for me. *Oops, I can't say that, or they'll grab my jacket again.* But the truth is, I'm still annoyed that I can't say what I feel.

Yes, I made the choice. Yes, I could have pursued this degree in France. But would I have been as happy? Would I have regretted not having pursued this dream? Yes, it's expensive. But what can I do about it? The questions keep piling up, as they always do: *Why isn't it like in the dreams?* Why isn't it that simple? Yet to find peace in them, one of my roommates suggested I see some missionaries. They've told me many times about their experiences and how the Holy Spirit helped them find peace or Jesus, but the emptiness is still there.

So I look for comfort in relationships, reassurance, and a protective cocoon that makes me forget all my questions, all my apprehensions. It's pushed me to do things I'm not used to, like seeing a boy I don't know at all to do **you know what,** and it didn't really go well, but that'll surely be for another essay. Or like, being ready to get into a relationship with

a guy I did know for less than three weeks, to fill the void. I acted very reserved to get him to “like me” and even watched saxophone videos to pretend I understood his interests.

Basically, I was ready to be someone else, and still am when I post on my Instagram stories. I'm very careful about what I post, so as not to offend or even have people think I'm “weird.”

For example, *Carnival* is from the beginning of February to the end of March in Martinique. This time of debauchery, when everyone dances, dresses as they please, or lets off steam, I sort of hid it. Through the videos reported by the media, I was careful to pick out only those that showed the costumes, the traditional dances and music, the mini queens parading through the streets, but never the whole truth. Yes, it's part of the culture, and it's a great moment to show, but there's a lot more going on. The twerking, the stripped-down outfits, or even the cursing uttered in the *vidé*, it's something that might actually be shocking in Utah.

But in reality, I wonder if it's really a social thing, or if it's me who feels like I'm losing myself, and that's why I'm so eager to come home and claim my origins through my writing, my videos, and my actions. I want to *be* myself, to be able to speak as I wish, to be able to dance as I wish, and to be understood by those around me, even if that wasn't the case when I was there. This proves that the expression, “It's when you lose something that you realize its true value,” is all too true.

One day, after a major panic attack, I spoke to a friend, explaining how unwell I felt, how out of place I was. In fact, the detail adding to this feeling is the fact that since I arrived here, I'm no longer able to be serene in a car. Which is odd, given that the roads are linear and very long-distance. Yet before this anxiety attack, I could do anything. Sit in the middle seat, be in cars with more than seven people, not knowing how fast we were going. All of this without getting the slightest fright on deadly bends. So much so that my mother no longer wanted me to drive with one of my friends, because she thought it was too dangerous on our

tiny, winding Martinique roads. But today that's impossible. I'm always the first to call for the front seat or the one by the window.

So my friend advised me to go see a therapist for some relief, whether from this experience or just from my problems in general, but the problem is that I still haven't gone because the language is blocking me. I know *I am* the one who decided to come and study English, and what's more, I'm an English major, yet it's still so difficult to express myself fully in these terms. Yes, I have a bigger vocabulary than when I arrived, but there's still a certain blockage in all discussions. I can dream about my exes in English, still I feel like it's impossible to talk to a therapist in that language — they won't understand me. So I keep it to myself, and don't tell anyone about my worries, whether here or in Martinique, then explode *occasionally*. I don't want to worry them; I don't want my mother to tell her boss that I've lost the smile she's paid for all these years; I don't want her to worry about me and get hurt too.

So much so that on Thursday, April 11, when we had the university lockdown, none of my family knew about it, and it's the same thing about the one at the library last year. Sitting in the College of Business Dean's office, Ken, with his office assistant Lexi and another lady from the front desk, I sent *no* message. Actually, when we received the alert at 9:16 a.m. that morning, at first I wasn't stressed. I was staying for five hours to catch up on the work hours I lost, and I wasn't going to lose it again. But then a lady came up to me, all confused, and told me to go *home*. So emotions ran high, and I started to panic. I headed for door 127, the custodial closet, to take off my gloves and set up the various products. And that's when Ken arrived, taking turns to see if everyone was okay. At the sight of tears in my eyes, he offered to let me stay with them, and during the five hours I was with these three individuals, none of them were stressed by the situation. They were doing their semester

budget, homework, etc, while I was on my first day of menstruation, the cramps and the stress crushing my insides.

When the news spread, they all received calls from their families and others, while I had *none*. Why didn't I? Because I hadn't told anyone. I didn't want to worry them about it. And so I had nothing until the very end of this situation, and I remember saying to Lexi, "I'm not telling my mom; she's gonna freak out," as if it was normal, when it was not. I protected their lives instead of my own, and that's the way I've always been. However, despite the fact that one of the reasons I didn't want to say what happened is because I don't want to be sent home and say goodbye to this dream that's costing me so much money, there was still a part of me that thought this would never have happened if I was *home*. If I was in my country, on my island, in *my* French system. And that's what my brother told me too after I explained the situation to him. Following our argument on Friday, I told myself that if I'd escaped death, it was for a good reason, and that I couldn't leave this planet being angry with him, so I told him. And the first thing he said to me was:

"Do you realize that this would never have happened if you'd been home?"

Home? Is a big word really.

Normally, it defines the domicile or house we live in for most of the time. Yet the United States is not where I feel at home. Last time I had a discussion with a friend on the subject, while she told her father that she couldn't wait to get back home, referring to the U.S., it was quite the opposite for me. "*Chez moi*" is in Martinique. She asked me how I could say that, knowing that I lived here for more than eight months— more than half the

year. I couldn't and still can't explain it, but all my feelings are for this island and the people who live here.

A rather ironic thought, given that I've always wanted to leave and have always been the first to want to explore the world like her big sister. But for all that, I'm also the first person, when asked if I plan to live in Martinique in the future, to say that there's no way I'm going back to this tiny piece of land. And today, I'm writing an essay complaining about the U.S.

But really, right now, I just want to go *home*.