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Land of Opportunity

Ashley Radee '13

Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy

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Ashley Radee

Mr. Adam Kotlarczyk

Literary Explorations I

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Land of Opportunity

“We are the most perfect society now existing in the world,” wrote Michel-Guillame de Crevecoeur in his 1782 book, *Letters from an American Farmer* (325). Although that sentiment is debatable, the meaning rings clear; America is a land of opportunity, without oppression, without “princes for whom we toil, starve, and bleed” (Crevecoeur 325). Back in the 18th century, America lived and died for freedom, and people around the world took notice. The United States still plays a big role in the global power scene, but some people would argue that the ideals of America, of liberty, hard work, and prosperity, died a long time ago. My father, an immigrant, is not one of those people.

My father, Apichart, was born in Bangkok, the capital of Thailand, in 1949. The son of immigrants from China, he was used to the traditional concepts: hard work, responsibility, and respect. “You do not question what your elder says,” my father told me. He then added, “Marriages are arranged, and you’re told what profession you’re supposed to be” (Radee). It seems strict, but in the rigid social structure of Thailand, that’s the way life goes. Although my dad didn’t reside in the wealthier section of Chinatown, his childhood was much better than some. His father, Visitt, worked long hours in a textile factory to put my dad and his two siblings through school. The family

worked their way up the social food chain, but there is scarce wiggle room for anyone in a country of over 67 million people.

The plight of the impoverished on the streets of Thailand is hard to imagine when in the U.S. In the Americanized areas of Bangkok, the streets are teeming with men in business suits; in poorer urban areas, the filthy streets are paved with the sorrowful faces of those who will not eat tonight. In recent years, the poverty level has decreased, but it still remains a problem (“Thailand’s Official Poverty Level”). In the 1970s, the high poverty level and precarious government situation contrasted with the relatively stable economy.

In 1965, communism began to trickle down from neighbor country Laos. Soon after, in 1967, the northeast of Thailand was engaged in a civil war (Fearon, and Laitin). Although isolated to the Northern regions, away from Bangkok, the communism still managed to spur governmental instability and unrest. The instability finally managed to topple the government in 1971, when the Prime Minister, Thanom Kittikachorn, staged a coup d’etat (“Global Security”). In 1972, Kittikachorn created a new constitution where a majority of the legislature would be controlled by the military and police force. That same year, my father graduated from Mahidol University. He didn’t stay to see the student riots and massacre, as he emigrated to the U.S. in 1973 (Radee).

What my dad found in America, besides opportunity, was shock. His initial reaction to the sights and sounds around him was an overwhelming feeling of displacement. “The cultures were much different,” he said (Radee). At the time, America was a land of hippies and yuppies, of the Vietnam War, and of disco. Nixon was president, the Miami Dolphins just triumphed in the super bowl, and Shaft had a TV

show. “Adapting was drastic,” he said, chuckling (Radee). Even through all the change and culture shock, he felt safe in America. “I remember the Statue of Liberty in New York City and how amazing and beautiful she was,” he said. “Almost welcoming, yet protecting, too” (Radee). Although a resident of America for over 30 years, in his eyes, the country has a fresh beauty found nowhere else in the world. However, times weren’t always picturesque. Even with opportunity, success still requires innumerable hours of hard work.

The first challenge America served my father came in the form of six years of cardiac post-grad training. “It was all about work,” he said about his first years as an American, “and we had little free time.” Still, as demanding as his introduction to America was, he has nary a bad word to share. “I never was discriminated against,” he said (Radee). “I always felt welcome here.” The 1970s known for being an especially tolerant decade, but my dad insisted that he was always treated like an *American*.

In Letter III of *Letters from an American Farmer*, Crèvecoeur speaks for America with his instructions to “work and till; thou shalt prosper provided thou be just, grateful, and industrious” (332-333). “If you are good at your profession and have a good work ethic, I believe you can do what you want,” said my father, echoing the same idea (Radee). After a half-dozen years of training, my father became a full-fledged doctor. He continued to metamorphose into the man he is today, a cardiologist with his own practice.

America is a symbol to the world. To some born and raised here, the wonder around us goes unnoticed and unappreciated. The best perspective on America comes from the immigrants who came here seeking a new life. Whether you are fleeing from a war torn country, or just looking to start writing the next chapter of your life, America

will inject vigor and vibrancy into your being. Skeptical as you may be, this country, the melting pot of culture, will feed you, clothe you, and guard you. Wrote Crèvecoeur, “Men are like plants; the goodness and flavor of the fruit proceeds from the peculiar soil... in which they grow” (326). The United States is the most enriching soil that anyone could ever root themselves in. With hard work in your veins, freedom in your ground, and Lady Liberty as your gardener, the success you bloom is unlimited. Said my father, at the end of the interview, “To me, [America] *is* the land of opportunity” (Radee).

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