COMING TO AMERICA:

It has been almost four years since I first set foot on the United States of America. I arrived on December 28, 2000 to an aftermath of a blizzard, armed with the heaviest coat I could find in Kenya, my home country. Needless to say, it was like shielding oneself with a feather against a hungry lion. Then again, it is not profitable for a coat store to carry a line of winter attire along the equator. On arrival I realized that my attempts to create a ‘winter effect’ in Kenya by leaving the door to the freezer compartment of a refrigerator open, in preparation for Michigan’s winter was ineffective and even weak. So much for my preparation. I could not believe it was possible to feel so cold, what with the coldest of winters at 55F in Kenya (that’s when everyone sits around the fireplace and the story telling begins, the sound of the drum…) with the average daily temperature of 77F all year long.

That was just the beginning of a rude awakening on weather differences. The whole place looked bleak. How the entire scenery can be white and yet the only word to describe the day is ‘dark’ or ‘dull’ was a complete paradox. Bear with me: I was not used to empty streets. I grew up in a large overpopulated city, Nairobi, which is Kenya’s capital, boasting a population of 3 million. In Kenya’s streets, one literally rubs shoulders with fellow pedestrians in the streets. Thousands of people milling about all year long. Snow flakes are the most beautiful thing, observed on the television. I came to learn that once they hit the ground, they turn to ice. After falling a few times, I invented a new
walking style, true to the belief that necessity is the mother of invention. However, nothing prepared me for skidding cars! Oddly enough, I actually had fun when my car would go out of control and make an about turn— as long as there was no one nearby. It felt surreal, like I was in a movie.

It was not long before I realized that every cold day brought with it the promise of a brighter day: Summer. The summer did not disappoint. Summer; that most beautiful season when the sound of laughter lingers in the air, the ever present aroma of grilled meat, car windows are rolled down and you can actually hear the music playing in the other cars! But the best treat Summer brought with her was the people. Everyone found an excuse to be out. Everyone was so friendly! It is amazing what the weather can do to people. There is always magic in the atmosphere, in the summer; a mysterious, inviting air about her. I begun to say things like ‘It’s a beautiful day today,’ a phrase Kenyans consider totally American, since a day in Kenya is like any other day in the year.

When I got past the shock of the winter, I began to really enjoy myself. I became aware of the vast diversity that MSU represented, some aspects of which were in sharp contrasts to what I was used to; the different people, different cultures, different foods.

I once said to a friend of Asian descent, “I cannot believe you people eat dogs! That’s taboo in Kenya!”

She in turn said to me, “Now, I cannot believe you people eat goat!”

Goat is a favorite dish in Kenya. We eat it fried, barbequed... Oh, the ways of making goat is endless. You can imagine the shock on my American roommate who goes to the zoo to pet a goat, that I eat what she considers a pet, and my shock at finding out that she goes to the zoo to pet livestock!
Foreign to me was the public display of sexual innuendoes. All the advertisements on television, magazines and music seemed to all be directed toward sex. Bear with me once again. In Kenya, the word sex is considered taboo, so much so that when a proposal was made to introduce Sex Education in the Public School system, it was met with strong opposition from the general society and the Church. Sex in Kenya is that one mystery that no one talks about, but we see its effects raise its ugly head with national tragedies such as HIV/AIDS.

Privacy is every Kenyan’s obsession. Not only do we gate our homes, we also erect high concrete wall to keep away the Peeping Toms. Further, we are known to not discuss any family issues or business with ‘outsiders’, not even friends. So one can imagine my shock at how Americans are free to tell about their problems, not only to acquaintances, but also to total strangers! I have had people just start narrating what I have always believed to be personal information to the entire classroom! Once when I was new to the country, I took a bus and was totally shocked to hear a loud conversation that was going on between three young women of about age 20. They held crying babies in their arms and were talking over the crying in foul language about how the fathers of their children were in jail! Now, in Kenya, to be jailed is a shameful thing and should one have to go through it, it is not considered something to talk about in public. By the time I got off the bus, I felt the need to support my jaw to keep it from dropping.

I applaud the US on its ability to make one feel like they are in their neighborhood regardless of what city or state one is in, with the franchises. I never have to worry about what I will eat- I can always grab a burger from McDonald’s be it in Lansing or Los Angeles. Further, the simple tradition of continuous maintenance of assets is missing. In
Kenya, it is not until a road is totally impassable that repair is done, to highlight but one thing.

In my stay in the US I have come to appreciate that all people are basically the same, that variations come in how and where one was raised. Patience is paramount to peaceful coexistence, and with just a little bit of effort, fast friendships can be forged between people of diverse backgrounds. I love to travel, love to meet new people and I am grateful I chose to come to America to further my studies. It has been both an academically and socially satisfying experience to me.