

One
Good Thing
About
America

RUTH FREEMAN

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To my students



September 14

Dear Oma,

We go to my new school today. It is VERY BIG. Mama and me and Jean-Claude we walk from the motel and find school. Mama write and write many papers for the school. A man come. He speak English and French and help us. I tell Jean-Claude to stay calm but he is bad boy. A lady bring the crayons and I tell Jean-Claude to play with them.

Many many children are in the school. 400 say the man. Yes 400. Vraiment. Really. It is like the city. And my school at home in Congo is like one little house. I tell the man I get lost. He say I do not. I get lost. I know it.

We sit at table in little room a long long time. The students go by and look at me. Also they mayke noise. A big noise all the time. I do not like my new cloze. The

man say the word is itch. He write it for me. My new clothes itch. I am nine years old so I am in the forth grade say the man. I hope that is good. I tell Mama to tell the man I am good student but she does not no the English. I no many more English than Mama. I tell the man I am good student. I go tomorrow for my first day of school. This night I am talking in mirror in bathroom and saying Hello Good morning Hello Please Thank you. Jean-Claude think I am funny. I teach him to say Hello My Name is Jean-Claude. He think he is funny now also.

We miss are friends. We stay in a room in there apartment when they get us at Boston airport but they need the room so now the shelter people put us in motel. We have two big beds and a bathroom. Soon we will move to apartment in shelter. Move move move.

I miss my old house. I miss the mango tree with my tree house. I miss you and my friends. I miss Papa and Olivier. Do you hear from Papa? Mama and I worry for him very much. I look out the window to see the stars. Les étoiles is much more pretty word than stars I think. You tell me before I leave home les mêmes étoiles the same stars look down on you and me and they take care of me like you take care of me. I want the stars to take care of you and Papa and Olivier. But I no see stars.

Why do you say I have to write in English? You can not read it but have to take my letter to my old teacher to read for you. Please let me use le français. I am very tired with English today.

Mama tell me to write hello. Hello.

Bisous,

Anaïs

September 15

Dear Oma,

Ok I go to my new school this day. Mama and Jean-Claude take me. I do not want to go. I stand outside and Mama talk to me. Talk talk talk. I not go in. A lady come. She open the door. Mama give me hug and push. I am not happy. Not not not happy.

In the BIG school I get lost. I know it. No one speak our langage. I meet my new teacher. Miss smile and say many words. Very fast. A long long river of words. Mabe English mabe not. I not know what Miss say. I say yes yes yes. One student think my name is Yes. I tell the class my name one two three times. The students say my name but it not sound like my name. No one can say

Anaïs. Miss say How Do You Spell That? Miss ask if she can call me Annie. I want to say no but the words do not come fast from my mouth. I am Annie now.

I am happy to go home and stop the yes yes yes. I am happy to be Anaïs again. It is good to be with Mama in the room at motel. I even am glad to see Jean-Claude. I am nice to him and play with him. Our friends bring us food and we eat with them. I do not eat the food in school. Do you no Americans eat fingers from chickens and sticks from fish? Now I no Americans are very very CRAZY. Complètement fou!

Do you hear about Papa? I hope he is safe. Mama say I can not write very much about him because it is not safe to put things in letters about him. In case a bad man see my letter. I hope Papa and Olivier come to America soon. If they come to America then you are all alone. I think mabe you need me to come live with you. Please tell Mama I can come. You are my Mama's Mama and she listen to you. I take care of you and cook for you and we talk together. I tell you stories of CRAZY AMERICA.

Bisous,

Anaïs

September 17

Dear Oma,

Ok school is no good. You no when I get first in English at my school at home? Tell my teacher Monsieur I speak English here but the teachers and the students look at me like I am crazy. Me? But I want to say I am not the crazy one. I feel like the baby of my auntie. So I say no thing. I look and look at the faces. I am like a big cat with yellow eyes. I try to read what the faces say but the words go to fast. The words go like the wind and I can not catch them.

I can do nothing so I go to the machine with a hole. It take pencils and make them good. It is fun and make BIG NOISE. My teacher tell me to sit down. But I have to raise my hand and ask for the batroom. Miss do not know what I say. I say I have to pee. The students think it funny. Now I do not like English no no way.

It is much much better if I live with you. Here in the motel it is no home. I do not have my friends or the little yellow and black birds in my mango tree. If I live with you I sweep and work in your garden and make you tea. Olivier is with you but he is 15 now and

is no good for cooking and making tea. I can tell you stories of crazy America and make you laugh. Do you miss me? Please let me come.

Bisous,

Ahaïs

September 20

Dear Oma,

I am very happy to get letter from you! And thank you to Monsieur for writing it! I am happy you are well. But you and Mama say I have to work hard and write you in English? And now you and Monsieur say I have to find one good thing about America every day? This is a very hard job. Or maybe impossible! It is much better to find good things about home with you like your bananas plantain that I miss very very much.

There are many many hard things about America because English is a CRAZY language. The letters we call voyelles are vowels here. They are a e i o u. They always are sounding different! And I am sorry to say they are in every word. Miss say they are tricky. They always are changing like snakes. The tricky vowels are in the

students names like Jayden Jaylene Januel Josiah Joshua Jordan Jenna Jayla Jacob. I think Americans like names to start with J.

Please write to Mama and tell her you want me to go home. Then I do not have to learn all these J names.

Ok I want to go home with you but I tell you one good thing for today. In America students wear no uniform. I wear my new clothes that itch. The students ware diffrent clothes and backpacks. My teacher give me a backpack today. She look happy when she give me the pink backpack. It had a girls name in it. I give it back to her. I hate pink. She look sad but then she give me a black backpack. It has a yellow and black bird on it. I remember the yellow and black birds at home when I see it. Jenna say the bird is called a batman bird. I love my new backpack!!!!

If you talk to Papa please tell him we are good. Tell him we miss him! Olivier too. Is Olivier liking his school? Tell Olivier to write me a letter. In English! Do not tell him but sometime it is a little bit nice to not have a big brother to tell me what to do. I am the oldest one now!

Bisous,

Anais

September 22

Dear Oma,

Today was a bad day. We have to hurry to line up for PE the same word for the gym and the same word for the cafeteria. Jenna say I cut her. I did not. I promise. My teacher tell me to go to the end of the line. I do not know why Jenna say I cut her. I had no thing to cut her with!

Jenna look mad at PE and recess. I look mad at her. At lunch she spill her milk and I laff. It is funny. So she hit me and I hit her. Jenna is not a nice girl. In the classroom Miss make us sit at Quiet Island. It is a table where bad students go.

I am sorry but I cannot think of one good thing about America today. But I will be a good girl if I live with you. I will be so so good. I will be good better best! If I live with you I never have to go to Quiet Island again.

Bisous,

Ahaïs

September 25

Dear Oma,

Miss tell me today I have the best handwriting in the class! This is one good thing for sure! I write the way Monsieur was teaching us. In America they call it kursiv. The students think it is hard. I say it is the way we write all the time in my old school. They tell me to write more but I dont know what to say so I write in French. But they can not read it so they dont like it I think. Jenna is still looking mad at me.

There is a table by the school door with clothes on it. It is the Lost and Found place. There are so many lost clothes! I tell Miss I can find them! I can maybe find jackets for me and Jean-Claude but Miss say no. She say the clothes are waiting for other students to find them. I don't understand. I tell Mama and Jean-Claude about the Lost and Found. Jean-Claude stops his playing and asks Mama if we are lost. She look at me and then smiles at him and we play a game. She tells me to hide in the motel room and she and Jean-Claude find me. Then Jean-Claude hides. It is funny. Every time he hides under the bed. It is our new Lost and Found game.

Mama go to her first English class today. It is a school for mothers and fathers and aunties and uncles. She put Jean-Claude in one room to play with the children and she go to another room. She say it is hard. She miss her work selling fruits and vegetables at the market in the city. She miss seeing all her friends. But here there is no work until Mama learn English and get the papers. Maybe nobody tells you and Mama before that America is a hard place to live. The only easy thing for me is writing kursiv.

Bisous,

Ahaïs

September 28

Dear Oma,

Thank you so many many times for the phone call! It is so so good to talk to you! Do not worry about Jenna. She is my best friend now. She is a nice girl. We play the game with string in our hands like I play at home! Jenna lets me cut in front when we line up. She is my good friend and the one good thing about America for today. But not Januel. I am happy to say I raise my

hand today and say one answer. But Januel ask why I talk funny. This is not good funny but bad funny. Miss talk to him but no matter. My English is no good. I will be a Quiet Island now even when I don't go there.

We are moving soon. We will go to the shelter to a room for us now. It will be good for Mama to have a place to cook. Mama tried to call Papa to tell him we are moving but Papas phone did not work. She will try to call him again but if you can please tell him where we are. Tell him I go to a big school and I work hard. Tell him and Olivier I will take the bus to school.

I like to write to you even if you make me write in English. I see you taking my letter down the road to my old school where Monsieur will read my words to you. Do you see my old house? Is my tree house still in the mango tree? I want to sit in it and listen to the yellow and black birds. No person say they talk funny.

Mama say we have been in America for one month now.

Bisous,

Anais

October 1

Dear Oma,

Here is one little letter before I go to bed. It is about one more crazy thing they do here in America! Every day in school we pray like in my school at home. But we pray to the flag. Over the loud box come voices of students and we say with them words about the God that is invisible. That is one word I know now. Invisible. Miss say it mean something we don't see. Sometimes I think I will like to be invisible very much. They do not say Amen. They say Please Be Seated Thank You And Have a Nice Day. Many people in America say Have A Nice Day all the time. Maybe it is the crazy America way for Amen. I do not know.

The way Jean-Claude say my name it sound like Nice! Tonite he say Nice Nice he say he want to play the Lost and Found game. I tell him he is learning English because he know the word for Nice! He don't understand what I am telling him.

Bisous et Bonne Nuit!

Anais

October 3

Dear Oma,

Papa calld!!! We are so so happy to hear his voice. He did not tell us where he is. He talk to Mama for a long time. Mama say to me when Jean-Claude is asleep that it is hard for Papa because the soldiers are looking for him because the mining company say he is a bad man and took something from them but we know he is a good man. The good better best manager! But they don't believe him and he is scared they put him in jail or hurt him. Mama say there are crazy things going on in our country. I ask again please please please if I can go live with you. Mama said no. Again. She say she will be so sad if I was in some other place and it is not safe. She say it is not safe for us to stay there. That is why we have to leave. Mama say America is our home now.

Mama say you and she want me to learn English and go to school and do things that she was not ever doing. She say she was sorry not to have many years in school like me. She even say it is maybe good to make my name Annie like an American girl. I do not think I can be an American girl. Annie in Crazy America is not me. Anaïs in Africa. That is me. I miss the smell of

your cooking fire. I miss the stars smiling and taking care of you and me. I miss your garden and my tree house in the mango tree and my home and my friends so so much. Here Mama does not let me to go outside by myself.

We live now at the shelter. We have a kitchen with the family Omar and the family Potter. The family Omar do not like the family Potter and the family Potter do not like the family Omar. There is a lot of cooking. We learn about the smoke detector box in the top of the kitchen. It makes a VERY LOUD bell sound. Now Jean-Claude is afraid to go to the kitchen.

Today I take the bus 23 to school at 8:05 for the first time. Mama and me and Jean-Claude wait on the street in the morning with the Omar family. There are two little Omar girls at my school. Noor is in 2 grade and Riham is in kindrgarten. They speak Arabic and a little bit English. I think Jean-Claude will like to play with Riham because she is only two years older than him. We are very early because Mrs. Omar say to Mama Giselle we can not be late because the bus will not wait. She showd Mama the 8:05 on her clock. Americans are crazy about clocks and being ON TIME.

Today I go see a new teacher Ms. Taylor for English. It was a different part of the school and I am lost. Again. A nice man was cleaning the floor. There was some crying in my eyes I think. He help me find Ms. Taylor. He speaks French! He is calld Mr. Dan. He was a teacher of languages in his country. I was so happy to talk French with him! Mr. Dan is the good better best thing about America today!

Bisous,

Anaïs

October 6

Dear Oma,

Ms. Taylor is my new teacher for English. I leave my class and go to see her every day. She help me learn English and I help her to learn to say Anaïs. She cannot speak French but she is very pretty. She is brown like we are. She say she is from an island called Road Island. Do you know it? Is it in Africa? Mama do not know it. Ms. Taylor say Cool! when she like something and Bingo! when I get right answer.

When I tell Mama and Jean-Claude about Ms.

Taylor at dinner Jean-Claude say brown people speak French and white people speak English. Jean-Claude has to learn very much before he can go to school.

Today Ms. Taylor give me a test to see how many English words I have. I tell her I was best student in English at my old school. The test was hard. I have to say words to a computer and write and listen. I want to do so so well. She say Good Job many times but I don't know if it was really good job. Americans in school say Good Job a lot!

Ms. Taylor say English is a crazy language. I tell her I think so too! She is trying to learn more Spanish so she know another language is hard. She make me feel better.

She get a map and we find Congo and we find Maine. She ask about my family so I tell her. She ask if I can draw a picture. I draw my house and your house close to ours on the big road on its way into the city. And your garden and the tree where you sit and drink tea. And my tree house in the mango tree. I tell her about Papa and when he was fighting with the army and hurt his leg but then the government got him a good job working for the mining company. I tell her he

was trying to help the boys and men who work so hard but the company didn't like what he did and call him a bad man and now they want to put him in jail. I tell her we don't know where he is now. I tell her about Mama and her selling fruits and vegetables in the market in the city. And about Olivier wanting to leave school to help Papa but you and Mama wanting him to stay with you so he can stay in school.

I talk so much to Ms. Taylor! I wish you can see her. I'm saying she is one good thing about America today for sure!

Bisous,

Anais