

2008-2009
CBC Writing Competition
Junior Level Entry
Category: Non Fiction
Author: Sydney Bader

Goodbye, America

There's an art to kissing on the cheek. It's no kiss really, pretty much just a touch of the cheeks, to say goodbye. Even so, kissing on the cheek looks a good bit like actually kissing to a ten-year-old. Which is why I completely botched it my first time.

Blame the ordeal on my mom. A Spanish major, she has always loved foreign cultures. She's the kind of person who would move to Iraq, just to go somewhere. But, stuck in Anywhere, America, my mother finds friends to suffice. She will swoop down on the faintest accent, armed with all the questions: "Where are you from? How long have you been here?" In a few minutes she'll ask them to dinner.

And thus comes the cheek-kissing. The picture-taking. Trips to Greece, Turkey, France, and Italy. Along the way, my family has learned many of the arts of foreign lands. The art of European hospitality for one: always start cooking after the dinner guests arrive. We've learned the art of understanding accents and playing French card games. Of saying Gute Nacht and not Gute Nackt.

My family loves the experience. Our friends the Verouds, for instance, hail from Europe. Our friendship began as a chance meeting in the library, but soon evolved into play dates, tennis matches, and weekly dinners. Our family would often stay at the Verouds's house until midnight, my sister and I laughing and playing with the girls while the parents talked around a bottle of wine. After a few years, the Verouds moved away. To Africa.

I was too young and ignorant to be devastated. Now, I know that the occasional postcards, e-mail, and Skype are never quite the same. And that's a challenge of making friends, not just with immigrants but with anybody. It's not all fun and games. For example, our friends, the Oyangos, arrived in America with a briefcase and a family of ten. Refugees from Sudan, they were provided for by an organization called World Relief. We became their caretakers.

It was difficult. They lived in Pasco, in a small, dark house, furnished with second-hand couches and garish odds and ends. The TV was always on, and the children always in need of attention. Piggy-back races, bubbles, and soccer games were fun, but tiring. I didn't connect with them, and sometimes dreaded our visits.

And then I heard their story. Our parents had already told us that Tobias, the father, had been targeted by the Muslims in Sudan because he could read and write. Tobias' first wife had been killed. They were part of Sudan's civil war; they had lived and died through it. But the Oyangos weren't emaciated. They weren't plastered on a wall with some statistic. They were Lamb and Josephine and little chubby Evelyn who always had to have her way. And though I might not have become fast friends with the family, I still could help. I could save Sudan with piggy-back rides. With a used laundry machine. The time we spent with them taught me more about Sudan than a hundred placards, a hundred textbooks. The Oyangos taught me that the Sudanese were people. They were people who mattered, who were far more than pictures, texts, or stats. They were people, and people inspire change.

Change. It's critical in the world where I'm the young, naïve American. I'm uninformed, self-important. An idol of wealth and a blind eye to poverty. I'm a tourist. I could walk barefoot across Afghanistan and still not change one iota of this stereotype. And before I connect with people, I'm still the American. I'm useless. Thus, before I change the world, I must understand

the world. And before I understand the world, I must learn the cultures that only people can teach me. I must meet the Verouds, the Oyangos. I must laugh with them, play with them, learn from them. I must make the time to make friends, real friends. Friends that challenge, teach, and change. And I can change.

In short, to revolutionize my world, I must understand the art of kissing on the cheek.