

## *Haiti*

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*Honorable Mention - Personal Essay & Memoir*

On July 1st, 2018, at 1:00 in the morning, my mom woke me up and told me I was going to Haiti. Instructed to pack one small suitcase, take no phone, no iPad, and no laptop, I left for the airport. I had heard stories of Caribbean parents sending their misbehaving children back home as a form of punishment for weeks or even years. I refused to believe this was happening to me. My parents decided this without discussing it with me. I took it as a joke and expected them to reveal this at the airport. Even though I am of Haitian and Dominican descent, there was no way my parents would ever do this to me. However, in a few hours, I was on the longest ride of my life. From my home in Brooklyn to JFK to board a plane on its way to Haiti. At 35,000 feet above-ground, I was at the lowest point of my life.

How did I get here? I began thinking about my first term at boarding school. I spoke to everyone on campus at least once. I made quick friends, grew in popularity and false confidence. The attention of the popular crowd made me feel untouchable; I started to measure myself by other people's superficial standards. I stopped treating everyone equally. I lost myself trying to make specific people like me. By the end of the first trimester, my inauthenticity caught up with me. All the attention, popularity, and people were gone. I felt empty, lost, and shunned from my community.

I woke up when the plane landed in the capital of Haiti and quickly picked up on the chaos! There were no lines anywhere in the airport; everyone was moving about randomly and speaking loudly. Outside of the airport, my mother ordered a rental car that arrived with no gas. We could only purchase gas from an underground market. We were suspicious that something was brewing in the country. These suspicions were confirmed when we arrived at our guest house. Haiti was in the middle of civil unrest due to the escalating price of gas. Unrest, protests, fires, and a curfew that stopped all traffic in and out of the city started right after we left for the countryside. Later, we drove to Lascahobas, a small town away from the chaos. The drive took only three hours but felt like three days. I became enchanted by the miles of lush, scenic views of mountains and valleys that planted a seed of interest in a career in Environmentalism. I grew to love staying at my great-uncle's farm, where he grew all types of food on his land. Every day we awakened to the aroma of the coffee, which

we would have with freshly baked bread for breakfast. Dinner would consist of vegetables from the garden, rice, and fresh meats. These Haitian dishes comforted me since they were the same favorite meals my family would cook in America. Even though I have eaten Haitian food all my life, I consciously made a connection between my culture in my country. I experienced the authenticity of my culture by picking coffee beans, harvesting vegetables, and preparing meals.

On July 31st at 11:00 am, I landed at JFK airport in New York City with a new attitude. Before my trip, I was numb and lashed out at my family, demonstrating my frustration. Stripped from all distractions, I discovered mom was always on my team and that we share the same foundations. On the trip, as I connected with my Haitian culture, I realized my relationship with my family was becoming more precious. I developed a new appreciation for family and culture; I now stand firmly in accepting that I am enough.