



I looked out at the unfamiliar landscape, one great expanse of white, as the car cruised down the long, looping roadway. I still remember the sky, one wall of thick gloom, hanging grey and opaque above the dismal landscape. Where was the whimsical snow of my childhood memory? My last recollection of snow had been making snow angels and wearing medicated lip balm. I soon realised that this was hardly the idyllic scene from a snow globe. Those snow globes were just false advertising. They hardly depicted the reality of sludge and sleet.

I had left the comfort of the warm Caribbean sun, the smell of papayas and jackfruit, and the aquamarine waves – and was thrust into the bleak cold of southwestern Michigan. And, not long after my driver had deposited me safely inside the house and I had fiddled with the thermostat, I remember feeling cold – but not the cold of the icy wind outside. It was more like dread. I instantly wanted to return home to Jamaica.

Was it that I had arrived to an icebox without a stitch of my luggage, which was sitting somewhere in Detroit at the time, waiting to be found? Perhaps. Or maybe it was my sitting at the window near midnight, looking out at lightly falling snow and feeling like the only person in the universe in that unsettling stillness. I do recall thinking that even under the night sky the snow was beautiful, but it was an absentminded acknowledgement, sort of like noting that the wicked stepmother had perfect teeth. So I slept in all of my clothes and cried that first night, and my sorrow was vindicated when I woke to find that giant icicles had formed over the windows like prison bars.

When I thought about how excited I had been to begin this quest for higher education, I scoffed at my naïveté. Why is it that we never truly appreciate something until it becomes unreachable? I had lived



INTO THE COLD

Wandeka Gayle

in Jamaica for a quarter of a century and, except for the wild sense of pride I felt during the Olympics and the occasional trips to a natural attraction, I took a lot of my culture for granted. But I was in Michigan now and I had to follow through.

That bleak January morning, I trudged through the knee-high snow to my International Students Orientation meeting. However, my new-found surge of purpose would be subdued by one culture shock after the other – the obsession with sandwiches at every meal, for instance – but mostly, the seeming impoliteness of the American students to those outside their cliques.

I am a 'waver'. I smile and wave at strangers, more so to those who are walking on the same path, so close that our sleeves might touch as we pass. I was not prepared for the awkward emptiness when I waved and said hello and there was not so much as a nod or a murmur. It felt like someone had used his leather glove to unceremoniously slap me across the face.

Yet, time and time again, I would have the impulse to say hello and very often would be met with two-second, half-hearted smiles or glassy, vacant stares. I would enter a classroom and like second nature would greet my classmates, and then concede that I might as well have come in and sneered at them for all the good greeting they did me. I would console myself that perhaps they did not hear or maybe they were sick or deaf or sad or . . . something. But I had begun to see a disturbing cultural trend that felt more like disrespect than a mere tolerable difference. I had prepared myself for all the negative stereotypical traits of the American: loud, lazy, individualistic and defiant, but nothing could prepare me for this perceived coldness.

And the oddest thing was that many times we as students were thrust into groups for weeks, and one would think that if one sees

the said students outside of the class it would only be polite to greet them.

That was my biggest mistake.

I remember I had, by some miracle, gotten a job at the last minute as a custodian, and I saw one of my classmates from a literature class. The hallway, usually thick with people, was for once clear, but I remember she looked right at me, right into my eyes, and I looked back and I said, 'Hi.'

Nothing. No fake smile, no nervous laugh, no nod, no wave, no acknowledgement that I had uttered a sound. It was like I was nothing more than a poltergeist. So, I wrapped up the vacuum cleaner and put it in the janitor's closet, musing if my job had anything to do with her disregard. I knew there was no shame in it. It was honest work, and I had no problem with a job that called me to use more physical power than purely mental ability. But I still felt the sting of her rejection, as I did that day I first told a boy I loved him and he simply said he did not.

I used to find it annoying when tourists would exclaim about how 'warm' Jamaicans were, like most Caribbean people. It felt condescending, like when Virginia Woolf called the local people of the South American country she created in the novel, *A Voyage Out*, 'soft, instinctive people'. It felt somewhat patronising because Jamaicans are complex. We live, after all, in a strong class-system and thus live in a variety of ways, having to deal with everything from violence to inflation, but our universal characteristics are our hilarity, resilience and inventiveness: and they sometimes seem undermined by the inadequate label of 'warm people'. Yet I understand now why that struck a chord with foreigners. Perhaps it amazed them because these were not traits that many of them possessed, or maybe they were intoxicated with the pampered world of resorts and Red Label wine, and confused warmth with the hardcore business ethic of, for



© www.istockphoto.com/Angela Ollison

instance, the insistent taxi-driver or the craft market vendor.

On the flipside, we may hypothesise for a moment that this has more to do with the location; I am tempted to think that the closer

It was jarring for a Caribbean girl like me to acclimatise to the icy weather and the year-round seeming coldness of its nationals.

to the equator one goes, the warmer the disposition. We think of the phrase 'southern hospitality'. Yet, not having visited all the northern states, I cannot surmise that people are just grumpier where it snows and are more

susceptible to the Seasonal Affective Disorder, aptly abbreviated SAD, which is the medical name for being depressed during the winter months. It would stand to reason that people would be more responsive during summer, which has not been my experience.

I suppose I must chalk it up as merely cultural differences. Putting my initial recoil aside, I soon had to learn the fact that, when they do not enthusiastically smile and verbalise a hello or even acknowledge your presence, it does not have anything to do with poor social graces. I had to drum it in my head that they were not ruthlessly angry people stomping about with blinders on to each others' social needs. I also had to concede that it is quite dangerous to make broad strokes about everyone at my university, given that approximately 100 countries are represented here and, of this demographic, the Americans come from all over the country, with vast differences between their backgrounds. To be fair, I've met some born and bred Michigan citizens who are a joy and

exude such warmth it made my whole theory about climate-dependent behaviour seem downright ridiculous.

However, what I can say without fear of recourse is that it was jarring for a Caribbean girl like me to acclimatise to the icy weather and the year-round seeming coldness of its nationals. Now, it has been a whole year and I find myself admiring the cold sun causing blue shadows in the very snow that once filled me with such loathing. And, while I always will have an aversion to months and months of cold weather, I have learnt to adapt – just as I have learnt to accept that there are varying reasons why some Americans may not greet you every time you cross their path. ☺