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How it feels to be American

I was born free. Nevertheless, I never earned it. My life has been marked by the comfort of living on a quiet street in the suburbs of America, with a loving family, warm dinners, and yearly summer vacations to carefree destinations. A middle-class white 19-year-old girl from New Jersey is now studying as an elementary education major, following in her parents' footsteps. To many, my life is ordinary and predictable. However, in my eyes, I see 250 years of resistance, sacrifice, and progress that those generations before me had built upon.

When I hear "America," I hear country music on the radio, ketchup-covered hot dogs at summer barbecues, and fireworks booming in the sky on the Fourth of July. I see red, white, and blue flags hung proudly on my front porch and folding chairs lined up on the lawn to watch the Memorial Day parade pass. Being American means attending the high school football games on Friday nights and cheering as loudly as possible when you hear "The land of the free, and the home of the brave."

Being an American is standing during the pledge of allegiance with my hand to my chest or aweing at a real bald eagle found in nature. Being an American means watching your grandfather wear his Air Force veteran baseball cap as a badge of honor. This is what being American looks like to me, but I understand my identity does not look the same to others. When I walk by, no one clutches their purse or locks their car doors. Nevertheless, they do not ask where I am from or if I struggle in my "perfect" privileged life.

It is a bit confusing – some Americans claim they hate this country, but then cheer with full hearts if we win a gold medal in the Olympics. For a moment, we are unified; we paint our faces in red, white, and blue paint, and chant "U-S-A" repeatedly. However, when it is done, we return to our split: red and blue, neighbor against neighbor. "One nation under God," but we act like enemies even though we are on the same team. America is a leader that would not want to give up the American Dream. The foundation of this country is full of claimed freedom and claimed injustice. Instead of repairing it, we continuously pile on hatred, disagreement, and noise.

In the US, having a political opinion as a woman should come with a warning label. I need to be a feminist, but I do not want to come off as too "woke." If I vote democrat, then I am too radical, too emotional, and too soft. I am thinking with my feelings instead of my brain. "You care more about pronouns than protecting our country."

Nevertheless, if I vote republican, then suddenly, I am turning my back on women, I am selfish, and I only care about white people. Accused of not caring about my body and being a traitor to my gender. I do not understand oppression, and somehow, I am anti-choice, anti-progress,

anti-everything all at the same time. Politics is something you are told not to bring up at Thanksgiving dinner. Not because it does not matter, but because saying what you believe might "ruin" the night.

Therefore, you laugh, nod, and pass the potatoes. Keeping the peace is sometimes better than rocking the boat. In a country, that promises freedom and voice, it is as if we are scolded for using it. Even if you follow every rule, you will always offend someone.

Politics is just one puzzle piece of this country's giant identity crisis. Being a woman in the US extends way beyond who you vote for. It is the impossible standards you are expected to live up to every day.

So, what does it mean to be a white woman in America today? It means hosting a constant tug of war between expectations and identity. I have to be soft and follow traditional roles, but also dedicate my life to the grit of ambition. I need to be nurturing, preparing for the underappreciated life of motherhood, and becoming a "boss lady" and "trailblazer." How do I climb the ladder with my hands while juggling societal pressures in my palms? America shouts, "Settle down! Have babies! Get married!" However, sarcastically notes "Do not let it interfere with your career." Be intense but not intimidating. Be pretty but not vain.

Step outside the box, but do not call attention to yourself. If we say, "We don't need men," then we are bitter, but if we do, we depend on them. When you overeat and you are disgusting, but if you skip a meal, "You need a burger." Make sure to smile, even when you feel broken, and wash your hands from the mistakes of others. How do I win the balancing act of being a woman in America? ...I cannot, no one can.

However, even when you manage to play every role perfectly, the faint voice still whispers, "You have it easy, remember?"

I have the kind of privilege that does not feel like privilege. I wonder what the word even means. I know I have it because I have been told I do – and I believe it. I am not forced into marriage, I can vote for whomever I choose, go to school, and wear what I please without punishment. I know women in other countries would trade places with me in a heartbeat.

Nevertheless, sometimes, I do not feel like I am "winning." Here I am, privileged enough to have parents who work hard but are insufficient to qualify for financial aid. I am privileged enough to attend a dream university, but will pay it off until I am 45. Privileged enough to have a voice, but afraid I might misuse it. My privilege got me into the room, but it also lets in pressure, burnout, and anxiety of not living up to expected standards. When I speak about my struggles, I wonder if I can.

Therefore, I stay quiet because others have it worse. I do not want to come off as ungrateful, unaware, or dramatic. However, in my nineteen years in this country, I have learned that privilege comes with confusion, guilt, and shame. This does not mean my story does not matter but is my truth.

As yes, I am privileged as a white woman is. Nevertheless, it does not mean I am not tired, it does not mean I do not deserve to be heard, and it does not mean I am not trying. America has a funny way of handing out opportunities, but it punishes you for using them. In addition, no one warns you about that part. Privilege does not shield us from falling short – it just masks the struggle and glorifies a

battle victory that was never truly mine in the first place.

Still, through all the noise, contradiction, and pressure, I believe in America. With all her flaws and patriotism, it is the place I choose to call home. I love being an American, not blindly but boldly. I get to live the American dream, not because my life is perfect, but because I shape what that dream becomes.