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English 1A

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The Struggle for Hope and Happiness of the Unknown Americans

Everyone has their own unique experiences and challenges that they go through in life. Immigrants especially have their own remarkable story to share. *The Book of Unknown Americans*, by Cristina Henriquez, tells the stories of several immigrants that have come to America looking for better lives for themselves and their families. Many of them face their own hurdles to jump over in order to find that better life. They make several important decisions that can change their lives forever. The main characters are the Riveras, a family first starting their lives in America, and the Toros, a family who have already established themselves into American society. The novel goes into detail over the emotions and thoughts of these two families as they each struggle to find happy lives for themselves. The Riveras consist of Arturo, Alma, and their daughter Maribel, and come to America in hopes of finding help with Maribel's special mental condition. Knowing barely any English and only knowing of English culture based off what they've seen or heard on television, they struggle to fit into American society. The Toros made up by Rafael, Celia, and their sons Enrique and Mayor, struggle to find a middle ground where they can be considered both Americans and Panamanians. Their identities are always in question whether or not they're one or the other. The budding romance between Mayor and Maribel will also bring new problems for both families to face in the future. One which will leave a traumatic effect on them for years and years. In effort to try to find out more information

and to talk with some of them, I personally chose to write to Alma, Rafael, Arturo, and Mayor, in order from most frustrating to least, because I felt that each illustrated their own distinctive struggles that many people face in modern society, and each made important decisions in the novel I thought were either understandable, or completely misguided. I wanted to discuss with each of them why they made certain decisions and to try to give them some advice in hopes they can understand the importance that their choices have in the world.

Dear Alma,

I felt that I was able to learn more about how people struggle when coming to America and try to assimilate into American culture by reading your story. Your desire for finding help for your daughter Maribel, with so much at stake, and leaving behind everything that you knew and grew up with, showed how much willpower and courage you had. You always went out of your way to make sure that both Arturo and Maribel were happy and content with their new lives in America. You even went out of your comfort zone into a foreign land, looking for what opportunities were out for the taking. When you first went to the Community House out of curiosity and learned of the English classes available you decided, “Maybe I would even learn enough to be able to help Maribel with her homework” (58). This showed me how you possess one of the most important aspects of being a parent: having devotion for your child and always putting them first. This also reminded me of how my mom would always make me do math worksheets as her own summer homework so that I would never fall behind in school. However, she never did help me with my Chinese homework like you are with Maribel. Learning a new language at a late age isn’t the easiest thing in the world, yet you still went through it knowing how crucial it would be for getting Maribel accustomed to her new life. It’s also inspiring for how much hope you hold within yourself. This hope is what keeps you and your family from falling into despair and to try to find the positives in living in America.

Although you showed many commendable characteristics, you also had some frustrating moments that really aggravated me throughout the book. Many times when you were on your own you made some decisions that I considered to be huge mistakes. For example, you went to the Community House on your own and later got lost when you got on the wrong bus. Now I know it’s not entirely your fault with you getting lost since you barely know any English, but

you could've asked someone to go with you. I think you should've asked your neighbor Celia to go with you. I mean she's already introduced herself as someone friendly and kind, plus she's been through the long process of immigrating and assimilating into America. She has first-hand experience of what it's like in a new place so she would've been a big help. Another decision that you made that frustrated me was not telling Arturo about Garrett. Weeks after you found Garrett sexually assaulted Maribel you confessed, "I hadn't told him what had happened. I wasn't going to tell him. I didn't want him to know that I had failed Maribel again" (122). This blew my mind, I mean why wouldn't you tell him? I would've told someone right away if I ever saw a person being assaulted. What reason could you possibly have to not tell a father that his daughter is possibly in danger? I understand that you feel guilty over what happened to Maribel in the past, but this is a whole entirely different situation. In an unfamiliar land with a different culture, I feel that it would've been better for Arturo to know so that both of you guys can handle the situation together. I know that you are willing to do the best for your daughter, but you can't always do it on your own. Were you afraid that he wouldn't believe you or that he would just lose trust in you? Arturo is your husband, your life partner', he's someone who would always listen to what you say and believe you with complete conviction.

To finish off, I just want to leave you with some advice that I feel can be beneficial. My biggest suggestion is to know when to ask for help. Many of those terrible situations you had to go through like the one with Garrett could have been avoided if you asked help from someone. It's good that you're able to act on your own, but there are times where you're going to need some help. Everything doesn't have to be left up to you to fix. It would also be best for you to not worry so much. All the fear and uneasiness of what could be happening to Maribel just builds up more stress which just makes life suck for everyone. Just try to take a breather and keep

looking for the positives in life you have before. Having my own mom always questioning what I'm doing and asking if I need anything, I know how caring you are based off you always watch over Maribel. But just like I tell my mom, "I'm fine mom, just take a break and watch some t.v.." Life shouldn't be spent constantly worrying over things, it would be better spent by having some quality time with your daughter

Sincerely,

Edmund Nepomuceno

Dear Rafael,

You have proved to me that you are one of the most headstrong characters I've ever met. Almost every time you'd have to be the one who makes the decision for the family, and anytime someone wants to think otherwise, you argue back why your way is the only way. For example, why don't you allow Celia get a job? Is it some sort of pride thing where you feel that you're the only one who can contribute something to the family? I understand that back before you first proposed to Celia that you said, "I wanted to be able to take care of her myself" (21). This displays a more admirable side of you as it shows how devoted you are to make sure that Celia will have a happy life. It depicts you as a man who wants to know for certain that your family will be taken care of and happy. Having this mentality of having to be the sole provider for the family can only lead to trouble. It leaves you focusing primarily on your economic standing and if you have the money or job that financially supports your family. This forces the feelings and thoughts of your family to be pushed to the side.

Don't you notice how you put both Mayor and Celia down so many times? You choose to put what you believe is best over anything they try to tell you. Then when you find out Mayor was seeing Maribel outside the apartments, you had the nerve to tell him, "I know you might think that's unfair, but that's what the Riveras want for her, so you have to respect it" (213). It's kind of hypocritical for you to say this because you don't really respect the decision that your family makes unless their ideas correspond with yours. For instance, when Celia's sister gave the family some extra money it was you who got decide how the money would be spent, even though it should be up to the whole family on how the money should be used. The fact you also act like a brute sometimes, especially when you're drunk, poses you as a danger to anyone around. Though I can't fully blame you due to the tough childhood you had. It's just...you need

to think more carefully of how your action affects others. As a husband and as a father, it's not just your duty to support and provide for your family but to also bring love and compassion. You also need to understand that they both need their own freedom to make their own decisions for themselves, especially Mayor. I mean how do you expect him to grow as an individual if he's unable to make his own choices? You claim that you're now an American, but restrict one of the major foundations of American society, the concept of having the freedom to make your own choices and freedom of speech.

Hopefully, you're getting what I'm trying to say here, that you need to loosen up and look for a more loving and sympathetic relationship with your loved ones. If you continue down the path you're currently on, then there's the possible chance that Celia may leave you. And from my own personal experience, being the child of a divorced couple isn't the easiest thing. Don't let your kids experience the loneliness and sadness that I went through when I grew up with only one parent. I know you're not a terrible guy and you love your family because you work hard everyday to make sure that your family is provided for, but they need more than just money to keep them happy. They also need an attentive and caring husband and father.

Sincerely,

Edmund Nepomuceno

Dear Arturo,

I want you to know that both you and Alma are the best father and mother duo I've ever read about. You gave up so much when you decided to leave Patzcuaro in order to find help for Maribel's brain injury. Though you were reluctant at first when deciding to go to America, you finally ended up saying, "I want to do what's best for her" (107). Even with so little said, it left a profound impact on me as I've always heard that phrase coming from my own parents. My mom would always help me however way she could despite being disabled, and my dad spent hours at work to make sure we were financially supported. They always wanted to see me succeed in life to enjoy the world just like what you want for Maribel. Not only have you spoken that you wish for Maribel's happiness, but you've shown how far and willing you'll go to achieve this. After reading how you spent long hours in the dark picking mushrooms, with only one break, and little to drink and eat just to get barely any money to pass by with a family of three, gave me a sense of motivation. I want to strive towards being a man who works every day so that my own family is always supported and provided for.

Other than being a remarkable father, you also play as an inspiration for all immigrants as well. In the last few pages where you retold your feelings of immigrating and the process of moving you said "It took us a long time to be able to come. We applied and waited to approved. We traveled for days. We left a lot of things behind - not only physical objects, but our friends and of course our families, pieces of ourselves - all for the chance to see that light in Maribel's eyes. It's been difficult, yes, but I would do it all again. People do what they have to do in this life. We try to get from one end of it to the other with dignity and with honor. We do the best we can" (286). I can just get the sense of satisfaction and fulfillment coming from every sentence. You sound so proud that you were able to overcome the long and difficult process of migrating

to America, and satisfied with how things turned out. You serve as a shining example for others that want to come into America. You show them that moving to America is worth the trouble as long as you just stick to it. Many immigrants come knowing the risks they must face and that they have left all that they knew behind just, so they can see a glimpse of the “American Dream”. But in the end, they’re glad that they chose to go through those hardships knowing that they’ll ultimately come out on top. With all said and done, I just want to say again of how much of an inspiration you are and to rest in peace in the next life.

Sincerely,

Edmund Nepomuceno

Dear Mayor,

You are possibly the most pleasant character for me to read about throughout the book. Despite being one of the younger characters, you showed great progress and maturity as the book went on. You displayed over time your growth and development into an individual. Though you probably wouldn't have changed if it wasn't for a certain someone. Even though you weren't able to tell Maribel at the time, I think you should have told her your thoughts that "You shouldn't want to be like everyone else. Then you wouldn't be like you" (113). You're beginning to identify the importance of individuality and what it means to "be you for you". Being a teenager is difficult for everyone. It's a time where people try to figure out who they are and what they want to be. Both you and Maribel are no different when you think about how you want to be like everyone else. I even tried to fit into certain social groups when I was starting in high school, yet I later understood how different I was from everyone else. And if you were to be like everyone else then you wouldn't be able to love Maribel the way you do now. The way you see past Maribel's mental disability and see a girl who wants to be recognized for who she is, not for the injury that ails her. You've shown her the compassion and understanding that she needed, not the pity that everyone else gave her.

While you have made substantial steps to become a mature individual, you still have much to learn. You have already taken the first steps in becoming your person when you decided to stand up to Garrett and to see Maribel despite being told not to. You have shown that you're capable of making your own decisions. Growing up as the only child and with my parents divorced, I had to grow up faster than others so I could take care of my disabled mom. I had to learn that I how to make my own decisions and take responsibility for them. Thankfully you have your older brother Enrique, who gave you a helpful clue when he told you, "One day you'll

get out of here and you'll see" (135). Until you're free from your parents, you won't be able to see what the world is really like. Due to your timidity, you let your parents control so much of your life. You don't get to make many decisions for yourself, and even when you do make one you stop and change your mind due to pressure from others. You can't see the world through your own eyes because everyone else's thoughts and opinions take over your own. For now, you need to build up the courage to back up the decisions you make. Do not falter under the pressure of others to change your mind. You're the only one who can decide what you want to do with your life and how you want to do it. No one else should have the power to control what you choose to do. That's why you also need the courage to stand up to your father, to show him that you can make decisions on your own. And not just him, you need to be able to show everyone how determined you are and how you don't easily back down.

When all's said and done, you've really shown huge advancements as a young man. Just keep it up and continue forward, never look back. Other than that, I hope for the best for you and that you and Maribel will reunite in the future.

Sincerely,

Edmund Nepomuceno

I honestly learned a lot when I read the novel, and more specifically from each of these four characters. Though I only really liked two of them, all four brought up important topics still relevant to today's society such as freedom and responsibilities. The most meaningful concept I learned was how important family is to be considered whenever making decisions. Even some of the little and most insignificant choices can have a profound effect on others. All four showed similarities and differences based off the way they made their decisions. They decided what they felt was best either through thinking with their heart or with their minds. Some of them also possess room to grow into better people, as well as wiser and more understanding of the world around them. The main reason why I chose to write to Alma, Rafael, Arturo, and Mayor, from most frustrating to least, was to specifically highlight each of their unique struggles that many others experience in American society and to discuss several of the decisions that they made that I either agreed or disagreed with. I also wanted to consider why they made those choices, and to give them my own advice so that they may find that better life they were always looking for.

Works Cited

Henríquez, Cristina. *The Book of Unknown Americans*. Vintage, 2014.