

## Prompt:

**(Common App essay) Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, please share your story. (650-word limit)**

## Essay:

With midnight approaching, our white Suzuki rental came to a halt at the gates of my grandparents' farmstead. I jumped out of the car and a familiar aroma caught my nose, guiding me to my grandmother's hut (also our kitchen). I ran into her arms and held her tightly until I saw *Ugali* and *Sukuma wiki*, a staple Kenyan meal, steaming up from her mud stove. I grabbed a handful of both, heaved them into my mouth, and closed my eyes as the two fused into a flavor that brought back memories of my early childhood.

As I indulged, my father shouted my name from another room.

*"Kimutai!"*

I entered and found that my father wasn't alone. An old man I didn't recognize motioned me over and said in a deep, raspy voice — "It's time for you to go in the bush."

"No!" I screamed, escaping fearfully to my room. The moment had come too soon.

In the Kalenjin culture, this moment represents a time when a father deems his boy ready to transition into manhood (usually fifteen; I was only eleven). The boy is taken in the bush where he is ritually cut and taught the ways of a Kalenjin man. We call it 'going in the bush,' but tradition and euphemism didn't make it any less frightening.

How was I, an eleven-year-old boy, suddenly ready to be a man? In an attempt to encourage myself, I meekly muttered in my bed, "It will be okay." The dark expanse of the room echoed the shrill pitch of my voice — I definitely didn't sound like a man.

The following evening, we trekked deep into the woods to a small house made of dried grass. I felt restless shortly after our arrival when the village's traditional surgeon clutched his ten-centimeter blade and approached me. I looked far into the distance, stuck in a trance, reminding myself that I had been through worse. If I could persevere through open-heart surgery at eight, I could do this too.

*"Eetii,"* the crowd of men erupted in tribal chants as the surgeon began. The sounds turned inaudible as the sting of the first cut shook my whole body. A couple incisions followed

before the surgeon rose mercifully from the table. I followed suit and shook his hand and that of the chief. I was pronounced a Kalenjin man and granted a new tribal name: *Korir*.

For the next two months, I spent time learning from folklore told by wise men from the village, each story emphasizing the importance of keeping my community and culture close — without them, I would be like a sheep without wool. Through these stories, I found my cultural identity and a source of inspiration. I was renewed and ready to open a new chapter in my life. No longer was I a one-man army — I was now one of many fighting to better my society.

On the eve of the final ceremony, my hair was sheared off. “A proper Kalenjin man is bald like Samson,” or so I was told. The following morning, my head glistened in the sun as I marched out of the bush toward a large crowd. Hundreds of people from surrounding villages were waiting to celebrate my achievement. As I took the microphone to address them, I saw my mother for the first time in months — she was in tears. I smiled, knowing she was proud of my bravery and the man I had become.

I took a deep breath and repeated from instinct the exact word that required my anguish to understand: “Jumuiya” — community. We do this together.