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Space Prize Submission

2/5/2022

Weight of the World

I gasped in horror and slapped a hand to my mouth. With my other hand, I placed the book on my bed. Face-down. It was the first time I had ever read a rape scene in a novel. I sat there for several minutes, eyes brimming with tears and a heart beating in agony.

My eyes quickly scanned the cover of the book and then immediately shot back to the floor. Honestly, I didn't even want to read any further. Why cause myself more pain when this past year-and-a-half has caused me more than enough?

For most people, the year 2020 was a year of desolation. Yet I had it made up in my mind that my struggles trumped all others. For starters, I had no hobbies and no friends. Virtual learning took away my love for school, and replaced it with a resentment that compelled me to skip most days. I had put all my hope into winning a pageant (unbelievable, right?) that I didn't even place in, which only exacerbated my self-esteem issues. And to make matters worse, me, as well as other Black kids all over the nation were witnesses to the murder of a man that could've been our father. It was just a bad year overall, and 2021 wasn't a whole lot better. In response to these tragedies, I had folded in on myself and stirred the pot of my own misery, without ever *truly* considering the misery of others.

So when I sat down in my bedroom in June of 2021 and thought, *Hey might as well get a start on my summer reading*, I never thought that I would read a book that could break my heart, change my ways, and challenge my perspective.

All in a span of thirty chapters.

The novel, The Girl with the Louding Voice by Abi Dare, follows a teenage girl named Adunni. Now Adunni and I, we're not that different. We're both fourteen, both Nigerian, and both female. For a long time, she was the first real "mirror" I had ever really read about, which totally prompted my automatic support for the character.

However, we both sharply differed in the battles we fought. Throughout the story, Adunni is constantly undervalued as she tries to pursue an education and survive in a society that won't allow her to. At only fourteen, she is sold to a middle-aged man, almost executed by villagers, and becomes a victim of child trafficking. When I read that scene... *that scene*... I felt like screaming in anguish and confusion; it made me feel totally helpless. It broke me to read that chapter, and all the other events that took place in the story. *How could one girl go through so much?*

But what killed me was the realization that... there are probably dozens of Adunnies. Hundreds of Adunnies. Thousands. Millions - all living a life that will only be seen as a vessel for children and nothing more. Kids that look like me that are oppressed and violated simply because they were born female.

And then my mind slowly went to my mother. *Yes, my mother*. A fearless woman born in Nigeria who might have faced these same barriers, but still managed to get an education,

immigrate to America, and become a revered nurse in her facility; a nurse who risked her health and her life everyday to help her patients.

Which led me to my father, an immigrant also from Nigeria, who didn't go to college, but never made excuses for himself and always put food on the table. And when the pandemic hit, and he lost his job, he went out of his comfort zone and into investing, to ensure that his children were always taken care of.

And that led me to those who died in isolation or in an ICU, without ever getting to see their loved ones for the last time. And then, slowly, to other kids whose lives were in ruin because of the pandemic; kids who lost parents or homes or access to food.

Which brought me back to me. A fourteen-year-old girl who has loving parents and a warm bed with her own room and her own struggles that are yes, important and relevant, but are not at all an excuse to ignore the struggles of people around her.

I had to realize that others were battling with their own problems and plights that I couldn't even imagine - only read about. That I had to reach out to others and not alienate myself. That life was too short and too painful to not count the blessings I do have. And I sure had a lot.

Of course, I didn't gain this enlightenment all at once. This understanding came after a significant period of reflection on my life and interactions. But it came after reading Abi Dare's book; a book that has come to have a special place in my room and in my heart.

That summer, I decided that I needed to work through my problems instead of letting them be the grounds for my self-pity. As hard as it was, I was able to become a new Janet, who was healthy and happy. I had taken up piano and reading and had regained connection with some of my old friends. I was headed to an advanced science high school, so I used those two months

to study and learn about new subjects that interested me. More importantly though, I was spending time with my family and soaking up every last minute with them before the school year began. Even now, as a freshman in high school, I still try my best to have empathy and warmth towards everyone I may encounter. I still try to live life to the fullest; as authentically as possible.

Because even though it may seem like I'm carrying the weight of the world on my shoulders, I'm not. I never was.