

Being the First

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Abstract: Samuela Domfeh is a young Ghanaian girl born in Italy who currently lives in the UK and studies Politics at Durham University. She is dedicated to giving back to her community, learning new languages, and crossing life's boundaries. She is an overthinker and a big dreamer. In this piece, "Being The First," she exposes a piece of her diary addressed to an imaginary friend named "K." She writes about what it's like to be a first-generation scholar in the UK and the pressure that comes with "Being The First." Her diary is presented in disconnected paragraphs to represent her mental and emotional state.

Dear K,

Being the first has not been easy; this is not something I had imagined. Fear, failure, rejection, the sense of not belonging, and not fitting in have gotten the best of me, revealing a new me I didn't know existed. Shame and guilt won't let my soul rest. As if dealing with external barriers wasn't enough, I also have to contend with internal ones. So, I write to you because I can't open up to anyone else. I can't speak. I don't know how to articulate myself here. A world I've known my entire life continues to be unknown to me. My intersectional identity causes me to question myself and my place in this world. But where do I look for answers and who will answer me? In any case, I can't back down, not right now, especially *being the first*. The mantle of the firstborn, of leader and of example, the pressure to succeed in the eyes of my family and in my own eyes, more importantly, scares me. I sit in a dark room, but I know where the switch is. Am I any closer to my answers?

I carry Ghanaian blood. I was born in Italy but I live in the UK. Yet I still ask myself, where do I come from? Am I not Ghanaian or Italian enough? Can I even claim to be British? Questions I can never fully and confidently answer. My secret affairs with Spanish have given me a place of refuge while displacing me further. I fit into neither and into all of them. Am I getting closer to knowing where I belong? The stares they gave rendered me a withdrawn girl. Their stares heightened my awareness. The awareness of how vulnerable my heart was. Others' opinions influenced my heart, for better or worse.

October 2020 meant a new beginning. I would be finally moving out to go to university in Durham. I was the first to leave my home for university, one of the most respected and competitive in the UK. This signified so many things: something that could help define me, a new world I could get deeply immersed in, a reason to do this other than the pressure from home. This meant new adventures, new friends, independence, and more. Like a caterpillar, I felt like I was stepping into a new season in my life. I was metamorphosing into a butterfly—a butterfly trapped in a bell jar because it is afraid of flying.

Little did I know that things wouldn't go exactly this way, and they would never be the same from here. I should've expected it, in a way.

Moving to Durham, I arrived with so much hope. Yet the new environment ended up frightening me and reaffirming my sense of displacement. I remember my first lecture and seminar; my body was full of different emotions as I sat in the classroom. Anxiety, pride, self-doubt, withdrawal, joy, fear...the list is endless. As time passed, I became increasingly aware of how outcast and marginalised I felt. This world is so different and strange, and I was just thrown into it, and drowning. Durham is different, with its collegiate system, matriculations, formal dinners, and other traditions, which can make you feel out of place at the start. I remember nearly missing my matriculation because I didn't know what it was and therefore disregarded its importance. I remember the countless seminars I skipped because I

was afraid of socialising, or even speaking with people again and not understanding a word they'd say. Their language, their accent, their mannerisms, and their culture were something I found hard to grasp and continue to struggle to learn.

Before this, I had no idea I was a first-generation scholar or what that would even mean for me. Now, I felt even more dispersed. My identity was even more defined in a way, but why did this come with a sudden heavy charge? Was this something bad? Was I to be ashamed of it? I mean, how many more people like me are there?

I remember mornings when my heart wouldn't ache, and my soul didn't doubt. I remember nights when the pain didn't feel like this—those carefree days feel so far away. This was because of the comfort and motivation I found in the presence of my family: my mother, my sister, and the innocent face of my younger brother. Their eyes told a story that words could never express. A single mother who never completed high school was raising three children on her own. The story of a young woman who traveled around the world in search of new hope and an escape from the life she had created for herself back home, as well as her family's rejection following her parents' deaths. The story of a young woman who ran away and refused to give up. Give up on the glimmer of hope that still existed in her heart. Hope that she will still be able to build a future and a life for herself. "My wish has always been for you to be able to do what I was never able to do and cross the borders I was never capable of crossing..." she'd always say, and it was a phrase that sustained the life that remained in me at university. Her desires, hopes, and faith in me became my source of motivation, rather than just an expectation. Having me and my siblings became her hope in human form after a failed marriage, something considered disgraceful for a family in our culture, particularly the one she came from. Her heart grew brighter as the times grew darker, and this reflected on us. Samuel(a)—I asked God for something, and He provided it. He provided her with the solution to her misery. She didn't come from a wealthy family, but a wealthy family would come from her. I found consolation in this. *Being the first* to realise this awoke something in me: a new sense of responsibility and pride.

Being the first reminds me of the opportunities and joy I'm providing my family, not shame or guilt. Without a guide, I jumped this steep slope alone. What am I unable to overcome? I keep pushing despite my discomfort. Fear makes me want to run and push harder, reinforcing my mother's sense of hope in me. My place was found precisely there, in the servitude I provided family through this. I'd be content if I made her proud even if I was nothing else in the world.

As I reflect on the journey so far as a first-generation student, I've realised that I can choose what defines me. Being the first hasn't been easy; it's not something I expected, but the support of my family, community, and the resources available to students like me have meant and taught me everything! Working toward a degree and being the first in your family to do it feels like a major accomplishment. My commitment and motivation have been renewed just by understanding why I am doing this and being intentional about it. The fight is not against me or anyone. It's against who I was yesterday. I fight for who I want to become, for myself and for my family. I can't wait to grab my next degree and one day be able to tell my kids all about it. Most importantly, constantly reassure them that there is no dream they can't accomplish and that my wish would be for them "... to do what I was never able to do and cross the borders I was never capable of crossing..."

I hope to see you one day, K.

Yours,

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