

Emmanuel Randle
Durham University

Under the Night Sky

Abstract

“Under the Night Sky” is a personal narrative exploring the journey of a young Nigerian man from the slums to a prestigious university. The author recounts the challenges he faced due to socioeconomic disparities and the pressure to excel academically. Despite the odds, however, he perseveres and ultimately overcomes his anxieties to find a new sense of belonging. The narrative highlights themes of resilience, self-discovery, and the importance of support systems for first-gen students navigating life’s challenges.

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EMMANUEL RANDLE

Under the Night Sky

With my hands interlocked behind my head, I laid on the lush, verdant grass, embraced by the soothing silence that has always been my loyal friend. Above me, the night sky stretched endlessly, decorated by innumerable glistening stars shaped like freckles of dazzling wonder, piercing the darkness. The gentle breeze carried the sonorous whispers evoked by the swaying of distant trees, while the cool night air accentuated the scent of the blooming flowers around me. I was in nature's paradise, and for the first time in a long time, it mirrored my mind.

I grew up in one of the worst slums in Lagos, Nigeria, a place where violence, illiteracy and social decay were woven into its very fabric. Gang wars, burglary and many more crimes were my daily reality. My parents, determined to provide a better future for my siblings and me, became our unwavering protectors. They did everything they could to shield us from the grim realities beyond our doorsteps, keeping us indoors as much as possible, and investing every spare penny into sending us to the best schools within our reach. Despite the financial strain this often caused, my parents' convictions remained steadfast: "We might not wear the finest clothes or eat the best meals, but we will strive to provide you with the best education possible—a privilege we never had." This was their creed.

Unfortunately, it did not take very long for my young mind to notice the stark contrast between attending an upper-middle-class educational institution and living in the slums. I found myself caught between two worlds, neither of which I truly belonged to. I could not connect with the kids at my school who always had extra money to spare to participate in extracurricular activities or holiday trips to parts of the world I could only picture through the enthralling words of eloquent writers. Nor could I relate with the kids next door who taunted me anytime they saw my head buried in my books: "You think people like us can become successful by reading? You will just end up like my teachers in school, knowing many words but having only tatters for a shirt."

With no sense of belonging, I became a wallflower, adept at being present but not being noticed. Until my academic prowess started bringing me into the limelight. Being among the best-performing students in the class started drawing people's attention to my existence, gradually transforming me from the quiet, invisible kid to one of the intelligent ones. Finally, I had friends and a place where I belonged. Sadly, it also meant that I built my self-worth around being one of the smart kids. This was exacerbated by my family and well-meaning teachers who relentlessly stressed the importance of maintaining my grades, emphasizing that failure would sentence me to a dim fate often assigned to people from my "side of the tracks." All these laced relentless pressure into the very fabric of my being. The drive to excel, succeed, and avoid disappointing those who believe in me, became my constant companion. Yet, a persistent void lingered no matter how hard I strove or how many successes I achieved. I never felt like I was ever doing enough. This anxious feeling intensified whenever I faced failures or setbacks, always appearing as if my only identity was in danger and life itself had

lost its meaning. A silent voice was regularly screaming in my head, “You are nothing if you are not smart”.

When I finally gained admission to one of the best universities in my country, I believed this anxiety would dissipate. I had accomplished a remarkable feat that many people from my community longed for, a dream so big many never even dared to imagine possible. Yet, my anxiety morphed and became intertwined with the imperceptible cirrus of imposter syndrome. In college, it usually felt like I was surrounded by people who could not even fathom what it was like to be me. The regular juggling of academic commitments, part-time jobs, scholarship commitments/searches, and the responsibility of tutoring my younger siblings. With each passing day, my commitments felt increasingly like an unyielding taskmaster, demanding my time and energy with little room for choice or respite. I felt isolated and this seeped into a lot of my college experiences.

I remember many days when, in my rush away from class to one of many commitments, I would see students animatedly discussing their lives with each other, seniors and professors, effortlessly forming connections from their shared backgrounds. Or even plan to attend office hours, participate in research groups, and engage in the academic experience in ways I could only dream of. I felt like an outsider, trying to break into a culture that seemed ill-suited for someone like me. Academics were kind but busy; my struggles were hidden from their view by the sea of heads they had to interact with daily. The first few months of college, which were supposed to be filled with joy, became moments of struggle. My responsibilities weighed me down like an anchor, tethering me to the ground even as I fought to rise.

However, amid all these challenges, there were beacons of hope. A professor who noticed my struggles and offered a helping hand, or a classmate who offered a word of encouragement. These small acts of kindness pulled me away from the jaws of despair, making my days just a little better. Over time, I began understanding and accepting that although my path was harder, I was still in control of how my story would be shaped. Will it be a story of inspiration or a cautionary tale? Will I overcome my challenges or succumb to them? The choice was mine.

I began taking breaks, celebrating my wins, and being kind to myself. I overcame my crippling anxiety, embraced life and its moments, and developed great friendships along the way. My life was full, and my heart was even fuller. I had grown from the boy who attached his self-worth to accomplishments and accolades into someone more confident, happy, and at peace. I found people who understood my pressures; mentors who could empathize with my experiences and were willing to guide me through the college experience.

So today under the moonlight, a night away from my college graduation ceremony, I look back on my journey with pride at how far I have grown, and how much I have overcome to be here today. I came, I saw, and I conquered. I am capable and all my dreams are valid.