



## Mercy

By Vedika Agarwal

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My phone screen lit up, reminding me of my routine 5 PM check-in with Mercy. I switched on my laptop and logged in, waiting for her to join me. We were going to discuss what the lockdown had been like for both of us. She was going to show me her drawing and I was going to read her my poem. I was excited to participate in this creative exchange with one of my brightest 11-year-olds, whose imagination never failed to dazzle.

Mercy logged in at 5 PM sharp. We chatted a little until it was time to share with each other what we had been experiencing over the last six weeks. While I sat on my comfortable bed, with the air-conditioning on in my private room, Mercy was sitting on the floor of her one-room home, surrounded by gas cylinders and buckets of water, under the drip-drop of damp clothes hanging across the ceiling. In front of her was a stack of books that she had piled up to lean her father's phone on, enabling her to work handsfree. Every evening, Mercy's doting father, a minimum wage earner, bore an hour's worth loss of pay so that his daughter could continue learning even as her school remained closed. As he was the only family member who had a smartphone, it was

crucial for him to make this decision. One, which I would later come to learn, he made against the advice of his wife and mother.

Mercy lifted her drawing and angled it such that I could see it through the tiny camera in her father's phone.

"Is it visible now, Miss?" she asked innocently, struggling to peep her head out from behind the drawing so that she could see my reaction.

"Yes Mercy, it's perfect!" I replied excitedly.

At first glance, I thought I saw a drawing of the sun and moon and a bird in a cage. However, after a few seconds of careful observation, I began to soak in and recognize the various shapes on the piece of paper Mercy had diligently been holding up. The sun and moon were actually her interpretation of the novel coronavirus and inside the cage was not a bird but a boy. Exasperated, I asked Mercy to explain to me what she was trying to depict.

"You see Miss, the sun is like the virus. It is always present around us and wherever we go, it follows. The only difference is that the sun leaves us at peace with the moon at night, but this virus doesn't even do that!" Mercy exclaimed.

I laughed and sighed, applauding her observation and probing her to go on.

“I drew the boy in the cage because I thought it will show how I have been feeling. Trapped. But I don’t know why I drew a boy when I am a girl,” Mercy giggled “but that’s not important Miss. What’s important is that...”

“What’s important is that you’re feeling trapped, Mercy,” I cut in. “I am so sorry that you have to feel this way. It must be so hard for you right now,” I continued teary-eyed with a trembling voice.

At that moment, I felt transported to Mercy’s street. I could smell the stench of dried and rotting fish lying on the sides of the tiny pathway leading to her home. While flies buzzed over these fish by my feet, my head bobbed in and out through the lines of clothing hung to dry in the humidity. As I saw myself enter Mercy’s home, I began to feel the walls of my room closing in on me, making me stuffy, the same way visits to Mercy’s home did. A house in which the bedroom, living room, and kitchen were all the same, with no source of ventilation besides the creaky entrance door. This space shared by Mercy and her family of five meant that the environment was always damp and congested. I could now feel the coldness of the cemented floor and the stickiness I often experienced on these home visits, as my clothes glued to my body with sweat.

The rumbling of paper brought me back. Mercy had tried of holding her drawing up to the phone's camera and as she placed it down on her lap, I was once again able to see her sweet, smiling face. To me, Mercy had this constant spark of hope in her eyes. I looked at her for a few moments and thought of all the limitations that prevented this child from spreading her wings and taking flight. Mercy had always been an exceptionally bright child. She read books assigned to children three years older than her and had a habit of quoting world events and leaders casually in conversation. However, Mercy's parents couldn't afford to send her to a school that ensured basic levels of learning achievements. Nonetheless, Mercy and her dad were on a mission to break the barriers of poverty and set themselves free.

Breaking the silence, Mercy said, "no, no Miss, it's okay. It is hard, but it's okay. Because at least I have a home and family! Think about the children who don't and have to live on the streets."

"And more importantly Miss, what you didn't let me finish explaining," Mercy continued as she picked up her drawing and pointed to something inside the cage "is that I have my books with me. I can travel the whole world while sitting at home. How cool is that, Miss?!"

Once again, Mercy had left me speechless. Innocently and unknowingly, she had taught her teacher one of life's most precious lessons, that of gratitude.

Due to the lockdown, Mercy's family was experiencing extreme poverty; with no income to buy food and water or pay for electricity. Despite it all, here was this child, who, well aware of these hardships, didn't stop counting her blessings. And through that one drawing was able to spark a lifetime of hope within me.

