



THE QUEEN'S
COMMONWEALTH ESSAY COMPETITION 2016

Senior Winner: Inessa Rajah, 17, South Africa

Dr. Congo-man

He might be dead.

It's dreadful but it's true. Bobby, my younger brother, pulls at my hand and asks again,

"Where's Dr. Congo-man?"

"I don't know."

He might be dead. But I can't tell Bobby that. He's four years old. His world does not involve friendly, Congolese car guards suffering violent deaths, killed in their own homes or on their way to work. But, then again, neither does mine. Or, it shouldn't.

I live in a democratic South Africa. A country praised for its diversity, famous for its ability to mend the wounds of the past with tolerance. The rainbow nation. We flaunt Madiba's name on our chest like it is our right. And then - this.

I am ashamed that I do not know the car guard's name. All I know is the bright smiling face, the colour of dark chocolate, and the strong hands that help my mother with her shopping bags every Friday. All I know is the kind manner in which he bends to greet Bobby - seriously, like he is a man - and how, when he high-fives him, Bobby giggles with glee. My mother - a studious, protective woman - does not so much as blink during these interactions. She trusts this car guard - instinctively, as if his goodness exudes from his skin. None of us know his name. I like to think it is because of the language barrier, but I am not delusional. I do not know his name because I have never asked what it is. Bobby has, but the man did not seem to understand the question. I have never heard him speak English. I don't even know if he really is Congolese or if I merely assumed this to be so. He would always accept the change my mother handed him with a sincere "Merci beaucoup", hands clasped over the few, loose coins as if he were praying.

If I see him again, I will ask him his name and make sure he understands. When - I see him again.

"Maybe we should wait for him by his spot?"

"We can't, Bobby, it's raining."

He puffs out his cheeks in exasperation. I smile. We are waiting for our mother to finish her shopping, standing beneath the awning of a restaurant, protected from the rain. It is subsiding but I do not want to risk Bobby's getting wet and catching a cold. I glance at the ledge across the car park where the car guard sometimes sits, on the few occasions when he is not needed. Something twinges in my stomach. It feels like guilt.

Once, my cousin, who speaks broken French, had a conversation with our car guard. We had been waiting for my mother again, and the sky was crisp and blue. When we entered the car, I asked her what their conversation had been about. She smiled sadly.

"He was a doctor in his country," she said. Bobby was elated. He started calling him Dr. Congo-man.

I've only ever looked at the car guard - properly, like he was a person, not a service - once. I had dropped my wallet and somehow, even whilst carrying two heavy shopping bags, he managed to retrieve it from the ground before I could. As he handed my wallet back to me, our eyes unintentionally locked. Instead of bashfully averting my eyes, as I usually would have done, I stood frozen - stunned by the desolation before me. His dark irises were a morose burnt hue, like somewhere- behind the fronts of his eyes; deep in the corners of his heart - a once effervescent light had been irreversibly snuffed out. The man smiled and moved to place the shopping bags in our car. He's sad, I realized, and immediately felt idiotic. His country is in turmoil, he was forced to flee his home, and he's a qualified doctor working as a car guard. Of course he's sad.

Bobby is bored- kicking a stone between his feet. A television screen above his head bursts with the colour of a cooking spray advertisement.

Turning on the television nowadays is a depressing affair. The news channels will greet you with events ranging from bad to worse. Currently, the cynical lenses of the world's news cameras are directed at South Africa, my home. It's unnerving, watching familiar streets - streets I've walked upon- enlarged on television screens, lined with violence and horrifying rage. "Foreigners are stealing our jobs," a furious, young man shouts, saliva flying from the side of his mouth. In the background, foreigners are yelling. Fleeing. Terrified. Refugees- people- shot in the streets. They escaped to our country in an attempt to run from chaos and pain, but instead found themselves running in a circle, directly back into the all-enveloping arms of injustice. The irony of it is cruel and shameful. It baffles me- how a country so scarred by intolerance and hatred could fail to muster empathy for those cast out of their homes for the same reasons. But wounds leave you bitter and sore, despite the rainbow-coloured bandages we wrap them in. It is 2015, and the lesions are resurfacing- raw and unhealed. So once again, refugees' homes burn before their eyes, their security vanishing in wisps of spiteful smoke.

I wonder if the Congolese man has a family; a little boy, like Bobby, or a daughter with his complicated eyes.

The rain has stopped. I am suddenly aware of the stillness beside me.

"Bobby?"

There is no reply. I whirl my head from side to side, searching for him. He is nowhere to be seen.

“Bobby?” I say again, my voice growing shrill. Intense panic grips me, yanking my heart to my shoes. My head is light. I duck behind pillars, searching frantically under tables.

“Bobby!”

Fear corrodes my senses. I’m on the verge of screaming for help, someone- anyone- when- I see him. He’s sitting on the ledge across the car park, his smile so big it is sliding off the sides of his face. The kind, Congolese man is standing beside him. I melt in relief.

As I approach them, admonishments directed at Bobby already lining up on my tongue, I catch sight of the atrocious laceration on the man’s arm. Words abandon me. The wound looks like a burn, and my eyes well with pity. I look into his eyes - for the second time- and see the eyes of a man cheated by life, a man whose inner light has been yanked from him, and trampled on, more times than fate should allow. My sympathy is useless. I feel inadequate beside him- his resilience immense, my futility rendering me small. What could we possibly have in common?

The man does not notice my guilt, or perhaps he does and finds it as pointless as I do. He is pointing at something behind me, to which Bobby turns his attention, his face breaking open in delight.

It is a rainbow- iridescent in the remnants of the rain.

“C’est magnifique, oui?” says the kind man.

Bobby laughs, enthralled by the rainbow’s beauty- and I smile at the sound of his laugh, a universally wondrous noise. I look at the man and we are smiling together.

Perhaps we do have something in common. Perhaps we all do.

I ask the man his name. His smile broadens - and he replies.



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