

Diya Agastya

Basis Independent Silicon Valley

Grade 11

Broken Glass, Each Piece a Different Color

The warm lights of my Special Ed classroom hummed - a low, electric rhythm that vibrated in the marrow of my bones. The air always smelled faintly of sharpened pencils. I sat at a desk that was too small, my knees bumping the underside of the wood, while I watched my classmates.

Autism, OCD, ADHD - these were the various conditions we had, and all we were told to be.

My teacher's voice drifted over me. "Focus, Diya," she'd say. Her voice wasn't unkind, but at the edge of my mind, I could sense an exhausted patience.

I tried. I truly did. But a single word - perhaps '*power*' or '*sonder*' - would snag on my brain. I'd trace the curve of the '*e*,' falling into one train of thought, getting off at its station, then catching another. The rest of the room would dissolve. The scratching of thirty pencils would fade into a pulse. When my name was finally called, a rush of adrenaline would climb up my spine. The giggles from the back row weren't loud, but they were sharp. My brain often seemed to work as functional as multiple pieces of broken glass, each one a different color.

At my grandmother's home, the air felt different. It was heavy with incense and a medicinal bitterness. My grandfather was disappearing.

Parkinson's disease had turned his body into an iron cage. He sat motionless for hours. Strangers in coats spoke over him, frustrated by his "non-responsiveness." His frozen tongue could no longer provide. However, I felt like I could partially understand what it was like to be trapped behind a mind that refused to move on command.

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I'd sit on the footstool and simply watch. I watched the minute twitch of his left index finger. I saw the way his pupils would dilate when the television became too loud, a silent plea for quiet. When he wanted water, his jaw would tighten just a fraction of a millimeter.

"He's tired," I'd tell my mother, my voice certain.

My grandmother would pause, her hands stained with the flour of a dinner she'd fed into his mouth. "You understand," she whispered.

It was a revelation I couldn't immediately comprehend. The trait that named me a "problem" somehow made me a translator of his silent world. My brain refused to leave him behind in the shadows of his own illness.

Sadly, there was no sudden cure. He passed away on a Tuesday, the room smelling of old paper.

But in the passing years, I allowed the realization to seep into me - the idea that my disability could translate to a profound form of attention.

I used to wish for a mind that moved like a river - fast, shallow, and easy. Now, I accept that it's a deep, still pool. It is much slower down here, but it is where the truth resides. And if viewed from a different perspective, my brain of broken glass pieces, each one a different color, can oftentimes become a beautiful mosaic.