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The Voices I Carry

Jamaica Kincaid's story "Girl" is one long, breathless sentence of a caring mother's voice, a voice full of rules, warnings, and expectations that pile on top of each other like laundry that never quite gets done. Reading it, I could not help but go back in time, then laugh a little, because I recognized something familiar in it. Growing up, I too was surrounded by voices telling me who to be and how to get there. My father's voice was urgent and driven, always pushing me toward a future he had already mapped out. My mother's voice was calmer, more patient, but no less firm when it mattered. And then there was my coach. A man who became something close to a third parent and taught me things no classroom ever could. Together, these three voices have shaped my sense of responsibility, my confidence, and my understanding of what it means to push forward even when the road gets difficult.

My father has never been a man of a few words, especially when it comes to my future. He is the kind of person who delivers motivational speeches and long stories at the dinner table, which sounds inspiring and interesting, until you are 13 years old and just trying to eat your rice and chicken in peace. His voice has always carried a particular urgency, like the urgency of a man who knows what struggle looks like and refuses to let his son repeat it. The expectation was never quiet or subtle. "Go to college and keep going even when it's hard, don't give up, Saul," he would tell me, and the way he said my name at the end of it felt like a period, like there was simply no room for argument, just a simple "Ok, dad" in return. In Kincaid's "Girl," the

mother's voice carries a similar energy. A relentless list of instructions that leaves no space for negotiation: "Wash the white clothes on Monday and put them to soak on Friday" (Kincaid). The daughter cannot get a word in, and honestly, neither could I. My father's orders came from love and from fear. The fear that without that push, I might drift, might settle, might forget that I was capable of more, and go in the wrong direction. Even when his words felt heavy, I understood they were carrying the weight of everything he wanted for me, and because I love him.

My mother, on the other hand, has always worked in a different way. Where my father is, let's say a 2000s Rock band, she is something closer to jazz, Quieter, softer. She gave me room to breathe in ways my father sometimes forgot to. "It's okay if you don't want to go to college," she told me once, and I genuinely had to check if I was dreaming and she wasn't being sarcastic. "It's your life, and you're allowed to have your own decisions, but you have to have at least a job." That last part landed like a gentle but firm hand on the shoulder, freedom, yes! But not without responsibility. Her version of tough love was wrapped in understanding, and yet the expectation of respect was never up for discussion. She raised me to treat people with dignity, to say thank you, to hold doors, and to look adults in the eye when I speak. These were not requests. They were requirements. In "Girl," the daughter tries to defend herself mid-lecture: "But I don't sing benna on Sundays at all and never in Sunday school" (Kincaid). I understood the impulse completely, the need to say, 'I'm not who you think I am, I already know this.' But my mother's voice, unlike the mother in the poem, always left a door open. She corrected me without closing me off, and that distinction made all the difference.

If my parents gave me roots, my coach gave me wings, and I realize that sounds like something off a motivational poster, but I genuinely mean it. He came into my life at a time right after COVID. When I was shy, quiet in ways that held me back, and unsure of how to take up

space in a room…He changed that, and now my room is filled with soccer boots and equipment. But he didn't just teach me the sport I now played for years and almost every week on Fridays; he taught me how to speak, how to carry myself, and how to build connections with people. He introduced me to opportunities I did not know existed and pushed me toward them even when I hesitated. He is the definition of family; you don't have to be blood-related to be family. Especially with someone who becomes so woven into your life that "coach" starts to feel like too small of a word for what he is. What I carry with me most is something he said directly to me, something I have returned to more times than I can count: "Saul, I believe you're going to do great in this world. You have a great mentality on and off the pitch, and it can push you to do great things." He did not say it casually. He meant it. And the strange, bittersweet thing about being believed in that fully is that it becomes almost impossible to stop believing in yourself, even on days when you really want to. His voice never meant empty encouragement… it means someone who has watched you struggle and persist has decided you are worth betting on, and that is a responsibility all on its own.

The voices of my father, my mother, and my coach are not always in agreement. My father wants me to charge forward. My mother wants me to be grounded. My coach wants me to believe I can do both. Together, they form something like a three-part harmony which isn't always perfectly in tune but always pointing in the same direction. Reading "Girl" reminded me that most of us grew up with someone's voice in our ears, shaping how we see our responsibilities and ourselves. The girl in Kincaid's poem could barely get a word in, and sometimes I could relate to that. But the voices around me did more than give orders; they gave me a foundation. They taught me that responsibility is not just about doing what you are told; it

is about understanding why it matters and choosing to carry it with you. I still hear all three of them, even when the room is quiet. And I hope I always do.

Works Cited

Kincaid, Jamaica. “Girl.” The New Yorker, 19 June 1978, www.newyorker.com/magazine/1978/06026/girl.