Golden Girl

She is the golden girl - academically gifted, hardworking, and a role model for her two younger sisters. She is everything her parents wanted her to be, everything they sacrificed for.

“She’s the first person I go to when I have a problem,” says Sandy, a friend of Mihret’s.

“I feel like she’s the type of person to volunteer first in class discussion,” says another friend.

She’s just someone who can make you feel like lifelong friends upon the first impression. Mihret Gebru seems like she has it figured out.

But not to her. There’s a dissonance in her life - a chasm between how she looks and how she feels. There’s anxiety and depression that lurks in the corner, coloring her perceptions and filling the moments people don’t see. Around men, her intelligence is routinely discounted. Around her parents, she’s reminded of her traditional Eritrean Christian upbringing. As an undergrad at Duke, there’s the overwhelming urge to compare yourself to others. Sometimes she’ll wake up feeling shitty, but nothing is prompting it. There’s no energy to talk to people today. No energy for class. But there are good weeks among the bad.

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In the Scramble for Africa, Eritrea was colonized by the Italians. During World War II, Britain kicked out the Italians and took control. After the War, the UN federated Eritrea with Ethiopia with the support of the US, ignoring the Eritrean wish for independence. And so began the 30-year long Eritrean war for independence. Her parents were both born in Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia, in the midst of the war.

“Growing up, they heard about America in the media - the land of opportunity, where you can become something from nothing. They wanted to escape to the US and start a new life for themselves.”

Her parents were both Protestants and active in the Eritrean church community. They were both waiting to win the visa lottery to the United States. By fate, they met each other through in a church choir in a Kenyan refugee camp called Kakuma. There, they lived in the camp for nearly a decade. Mihret recalls stories from her parents of the electricity cutting in and out, rooms that were never quite big enough, and how food was sometimes difficult to come by. Year after year they waited. At one point, Mihret’s mom won a visa for New Zealand, but turned it down. So they waited some more. In the year of ’99, Mihret’s dad won the diversity visa lottery. Her parents quickly married in a small wedding ordained by a friend. On Christmas Day, they arrived together to their new life in the US.

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Mihret grew up Protestant, actively going to the Ethiopian and Eritrean church near her family. She went to Sunday school, sung in the kids choir, the whole nine. As she grew up and became busier with school, she had less time for church. The odd comment here and there made her never feel completely comfortable with the church community. Older members would talk about modesty, crinkling their noses at the idea of a girl wearing a top with straps. She remembered her mom telling her to not listen to secular music, and if she was going to watch a movie, it needed to be about God.

“At that point,” Mihret said, “religion was just being shoved down my throat.”

She also remembered how gender roles were strictly enforced in Ethiopian culture. There’s nothing more that Mihret hated than doing the dishes - wet food was the stuff of nightmares. She’d much rather clean the bathroom.

“My mom asked me, ‘What are you going to do when you get married?’ I just said, ‘I’m going to get my husband to wash the dishes, duh.’”

She stopped going to church at 16. Now, she says she still believes in God, but it goes in waves. Sometimes there’s the urge to try and build a relationship with God, but other times she doesn’t think about it at all.

Shielded from pop culture, she started to rebel in secret. She started listening to One Direction. There was nothing she loved more than a good romance novel. One summer, she read 104 books, winning the $100 grand prize at her local library. She would watch rom-coms in her room, listening for the shuffle of a parent up the stairs. She remembers the anxiety and the guilt of her innocuous rebellions - as well as the lightning-fast speed with which she could switch to a dummy homework tab.

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Mihret thinks a lot about her childhood. As the older sibling, she was given extra responsibilities by her parents, often the responsibility of being the third parent. She was the role model for her two younger sisters - the first person in her family to apply to college. She had to figure out FASFA and puberty on her own. And as the only child who spoke Amharic, her mom would wake her up early in the morning.

“Mihret, I need to find a job. You have to come with me.”

At 11 years old, she was translating at doctors appointments and reading through tax forms.

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She remembers the need for academic perfection that her parents instilled in her, and how she still enforces it for herself. She had a reputation to uphold, to her teachers, parents, and herself.

Sophomore year of high school, two of her classes were teetering on the edge of a B. As the destined valedictorian, she had to ace her next two midterms. The night before the big day, she started spiraling. She felt like she couldn’t breathe. She eventually calmed down enough to fall asleep on the floor. Later, she realized it was her first encounter with, but not last, an anxiety attack.

Over quarantine, Mihret had to wrestle again with depression and anxiety.

“Everyday was the same, and after a certain amount of time, there’s just lots of emptiness and numbness.”

With two contact traced quarantines, a hellish pre-med schedule, and some punctual-to-a-fault teachers, Mihret felt that there was no end in sight. Therapy has been helping, but depression is always lingering in the background.

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For now, Mihret takes it hour by hour.

“Honestly, life can suck sometimes. I try to be optimistic, but it’s hard.”

She used to have a plan for everything. Married by 25, move to Boston, become a pediatrician… but things don’t work out exactly as planned. Now, she’s working on unlearning her perfectionism and going with the flow.

“Life is both long and short, you have to enjoy what you can and try your best not to be miserable!”

Fact Check

She is the golden girl - academically gifted, hardworking, and a role model for her two younger sisters. [✓] She is everything her parents wanted her to be, everything they sacrificed for. [✓] [✓]

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Sources

Mihret Gebru

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