

In my childhood, when I was but a small girl who just wanted to climb trees, I felt like Atlas. Forced to carry the world on my shoulders, the life, hopes, and dreams of my mother. My future and hers decided by one move, a chess piece moving across the board, to a new land with different opportunities, better opportunities. Looking into the mirror, I wasn't just a child, I was my mother's future, my family's future. I was constantly compared to the rest of my older cousins and relatives. "Don't end up like them," my mother would tell me as she added another five pounds to the world I carried on my back.

Everything I did, I did for her, to make my mother proud and to prove I wasn't like the rest of my family. To prove that I could make a better future for myself, to go to college and get a decent job so that I could one day repay my mother for all that she sacrificed for me.

Eventually the world I carried became too heavy for the 11-year-old version of me that could no longer handle her own emotions much less the feelings and expectations of others. I became lost, emotionally, and spiritually. I had lost my motivation, my ability to function and persevere decreased as the weight clung to me and dragged me down to the point where I could no longer look up and see what lay ahead of me, my future was clouded in shame and guilt for feeling like I had failed in my life's goal.

Every word, every comment from my family, every action I thought made me a disappointment added a pound to what I carried. For years, the weight was unbearable, so heavy I would forget to breathe properly, forget to be happy and share in the joys of others. I closed myself off from the world, from my family, as if they could not free me from the load I carried.

The turning point was when it became too much and not even I could hide the pressure, cracking like fragile glass. I was forced to move forward, to give some of the weight to others, to my mother who had only ever wanted my happiness, I was always her priority. With that, I could move again, to be happy with my life and my future. I felt stable enough, stronger, now able to carry the world like I once could, so that I could work hard and achieve the goals my mother had set in stone for me. So that I could be the first in my family to receive higher education. And so, I will be the first, so that the child who looked into the mirror and only saw expectations would know that her efforts were not in vain and that she will make her family proud.