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Pride and Prose

I could speak two languages before I figured out how to tie my shoelaces, but only one of them felt like home. One of my earliest memories of speaking English was in kindergarten when I was chosen to be the official reader, going from class to class, clutching the little storybook in my chubby hands. The words flowed from my mouth with ease, earning the gleaming stares of admiration from my classmates. From that moment, English was more than just a second language to me; it was a bridge to a different world; each word was like a step to a new possibility. Filled with pride and praise, I strived to be better, and my passion for reading grew bigger each day.

By the time I was ten, I had finished all the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* and *Dork Diaries* books. No matter where I went, a book was my closest companion. My love for reading was like a double-edged sword—while it was my only way to escape on one side, on the other, it was the biggest reason I got into trouble. My parents started taking my books away at bedtime, but that only fueled my determination. I would sneak into their room, the floor creaking under my tiny feet, grab my worn-out copy of *Twilight*, and read it under my covers until I fell asleep.

I still recall the excitement that swept over me when I bought my first copy of *Pride and Prejudice*. Fingers fumbling to open the packaging, heart racing in anticipation of entering the world of Jane Austen. I turned the first page, but instead of being greeted by a new realm of prose, I was lost in a maze. A thick fog turned the words into a puzzle of letters.

Regardless of being in an Arabic-speaking school, speaking in English always seemed like a second home, a space where I wouldn't hesitate to express myself. I was thriving while my peers struggled with the language. Suddenly, English wasn't just a subject at school; it was a portal to a new world. It introduced me to books, something I loved more than anything. However, everything changed in Year 9 when I switched to a British school. How could a place that brought me comfort turn into the main reason for my struggles?

At my new school, they pushed me to the next year, leaving me in Year 10. I was suddenly thrust into the most advanced English class despite being a newcomer, feeling out of place from being surrounded by girls who spoke so confidently and fluently, while I stuttered over every other word. It felt like *Pride and Prejudice* all over again. Everyone else was running a race, but they all had a head start, and I was desperately trying to catch up. Even with my struggles with English, my love for reading never weakened, which led me to study English literature as an IGCSE. I was eager to explore Shakespeare, and when we read *Macbeth*, I immediately fell in love with it. I put all my admiration for the play into my essay, letting my emotions spill onto the page.

Being confident when speaking English has always been challenging for me, but reading and writing it gave me a sense of freedom. Books opened doors to worlds I had never imagined while writing allowed me to express emotions that I couldn't convey in Arabic. However, these struggles built a bridge between my English teacher and me; she stood on the other side of it, too far to see my struggles. How could someone who struggled to find her voice write so well? Each time I got pulled out of class to discuss my performance, a heavy weight of anxiety anchored me down. After I submitted my first *Macbeth* essay, the accusation of plagiarism hit me like a wave, leaving me gasping for air as I drowned in

self-doubt. I started to question everything I'd ever done. As the walls started to close in on me and the air became thicker, my identity was being stripped away from me.

Refusing to give up on myself, I turned to audiobooks of *Pride and Prejudice*, and like Elizabeth, I found the courage to confront my fears. I challenged myself to read for self-improvement, not just for pleasure, falling in love with Dickens' pages of descriptions and Orwell's captivating narratives. Each book was a step forward toward the finish line. When the day I was dreading arrived, instead of sadness, tears of happiness streamed down my face. I started my journey with the lowest grades, but I crossed the line with the highest. Two words that made me feel accomplished were "good job", but the way she said them—as if they left a bitter taste in her mouth—was what truly left me satisfied.

Later that day, I picked up my copy of *Pride and Prejudice* and started reading it. That's when it finally hit me: I had found my voice. The fog finally cleared up, and the puzzle slowly started to make sense. With the anchor that was holding me back gone, I was free to cross the finish line. This made me realize I can overcome any challenge that comes my way, which led me to choose a field filled with problem-solving. But I haven't crossed the finish line just yet. I'm still navigating my path to confidence in English, and I have so much more to learn. However, as long as I have a book in my bag—just like I always do—and a pen in my hand, I know I can keep writing my story, where each word is a step toward the person I strive to be. A person who feels confident in their own voice.