Heart of the Family

Flavio became the change he wanted for his family.

Muath Mana Aljohani
Instructor: Terri Silverberg

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Gordon Parks wrote “Flavio’s Home” after his journey to Rio de Janeiro to photograph poverty for Life magazine. In the essay, he writes about the unfortunate child, Flavio Da Silva, who lived in poverty in a favela called Catacumb. He wrote about Flavio’s home, which was a shack without any of life’s necessities. Flavio’s whole family lived in that shack: his seven siblings, his pregnant mother, and his father. He took on the role of the provider for the whole family; he was the engine of the family. Flavio lived a hard life and taking responsibility for the family made his life harder. Flavio reminds me of my father because they have many similarities; they both took care of their families, and shared similar living conditions as well as many day-to-day struggles. Many of us have a Flavio in our lives. My Flavio is my father.

My father’s name was “Mana” which in Arabic means “obstacle.” His life’s motto was “I am an obstacle for obstacles.” I was fortunate enough to live an affluent life. Most of us do, in comparison to Flavio. My father was not that fortunate and I have experienced the feeling of living a poor life through my father’s words. My father was born into a life filled with misery; his mother died while giving birth to him, but his father re-married and his stepmother raised him as her own. He did not have any brothers from his mother’s side, but he had eleven younger siblings from his stepmother, or his “second mother,” as he liked to call her. His father was an ill man, so when my father was twelve years old, he took on the responsibility of providing for the family. Like Flavio, my father was the heart of the family. As a child, that was a lot to take in, but my father managed to take care of his family of thirteen people until he died.

Flavio and my father were the providers and the keepers of their families. Flavio’s family would not have survived without their little hero; he brought wood and water so he could cook for his family, and he raised his siblings. Back in Saudi Arabia, my father practically raised his siblings as well. He also took special care of his father as his father’s health grew worse and his vision got weaker and weaker until he became blind. My father decided to take
his father to Jordan to find a cure. Since they had the money to buy only one camel, my father had to walk all 908 kilometers to Jordan. It was 1957 and my father was only fifteen and had just graduated from middle school. My grandfather and my father went from Aleaiss (an area near holy Medina), to Jordan and stayed there for three years. My father kept sending his family money from his work as a shepherd. After three years, my father graduated from high school with honors. He knew all along that his only chance of making something out of himself was through education.

Flavio and my father shared similar housing arrangements. My father and his family lived in the desert because of their life as Bedouins. As Bedouins, they needed to move from time to time, looking for water and for grazing land for their animals. They lived in a tent that did not protect them from anything except the eyes of the people. It did not protect them from wind, rain, sandstorms, cold, or heat. They did not have any utilities such as water or electricity, so getting water was not simple. My father had to walk for two hours and then wait in line for hours so he could get water. Flavio had to “[go] down the mountain for more water” (256). Civilized people take water for granted and a bathroom is one of the basics of life. Neither my father nor Flavio had that privilege.

Mahatma Gandhi said, “Be the change you want to see in the world.” Flavio became the change he wanted for his family. Flavio reformed himself to be the heart of “Flavio’s Home.” My father was also the heart of his family. Mana and Flavio lived on different continents, but they both shared poverty and they helped their families through it. On his journey to Jordan, my father realized the change he wanted to be and he realized that, if he wanted to make something out of himself, he needed to get a good education. So he did not stop studying until he got his Ph.D. from Indiana University. He became the Secretary-General for the World Assembly of Muslim Youth; one of its biggest concerns is to fight poverty around the world. My father also fought poverty as a minister in the Consultative Assembly of Saudi Arabia. Most people wait for something to change so they can change. Others change when horrible things happen to them, or their roles change, but the greatest change is the one that happens from a sense of responsibility.

Work Cited