Amongst an orchestra of instruments, I’d consider myself a violin, not simply because it’s one of the few instruments I play and adore. Unlike other instruments with instant playability, only with the application of the rosin can a violin and its bow sound a melody. Despite this, the value of the violin in a concerto is nowhere diminished. It’s ultimately about how well the violinist is able to handle the stringed instrument and maximize its potential.

I was a child of strong inner values and morals, a stubborn one, yet timid and powerless. Consequently, being heard was out of the question. It felt especially suffocating when I couldn’t stand up for my loved ones. A shattering moment was back in grade school: I stumbled upon a simultaneous noise of my older brother’s muted sob, his palms tightly wrapped around his mouth, and a seemingly abusive reproach of an adult that dominated the commotion. I recalled the countless times the adult yelled and demanded my brother to stop crying, to “man up”. My blood boiled that my heart immediately pushed my body forward, ready to shield the poor boy. Faced with the beast at last, I froze. Everything became a blur as my soul cowered away from my frame. Until this day, I’m still uncertain of whether it was the height of the adult, or if it’s the intimidating demeanor, but I knew it was a part of me that direct speech was beyond my reach. My voice was hardly heard this way. Over the years, I have witnessed similar cases wherein my younger male cousin was rebuked at by his parents for enjoying a *Barbie* film with his sister, and my male friend got mocked for being soft-hearted.

Strong-willed, I did not want this to be the end of the story. There must be another way to fight for justice. An opportunity came when I took the chance to partake in a high school public art exhibition. It was finally time I put my artistic abilities into good use. Hoping to relay the issue surrounding toxic masculinity within, at the very least, my community, I aimed for an artwork to represent my brother and males alike who are victims of the matter. Starting off with a blank canvas before me, I discerned that I should step out of the comfort of creating realistic illustrations, the art-style I’ve spent over a decade impatiently, and finally mastered. I thought that depicting a realistic scene is unfit to represent the diversity in attributes of males worldwide, regardless of age, size, ethnicity, or culture. There was an urgency to convey a grand scheme, and after about an hour of thought, geometric art came into mind.

‘Bloom’ is the name of the piece. I nearly gave up on ‘Bloom’ as I noticed its flaws; its unappealing lines, the nauseous use of vibrant color, its overall mess of a clump. Time was against me, so I must exhibit the work I had before I could draft another plan.

The exhibition presentation occurred in a blink of an eye. A choir of claps filled the room. A mother of a male friend I know came up to me, sharing how inspired she felt. An unanticipated group of peers showered me with words of sincere praise. The art teacher requested to feature ‘Bloom’ in the school’s expo, as well as the school newspaper. It then struck me that it was the contrast in color, the inclusive symbolism of the male species, the elements fused together to put forth powerful emotion, and not the imperfections, that moved the audiences.

At this moment, I am barely specked with the white, sticky powder of rosin. Nevertheless, this is the mere beginning; it has only been one performance. It’s even more inspiring to find out that with age, the tune and resonance of the violin improves. Direct confrontation might not work for me, but that is not the only way out, just as instantly sounding instruments aren’t the only ones out there.

Hi Ashley!

This draft has good bones. There is a compelling story about your journey to finding self-expression, but I think it’s a little lost behind the story of your brother and the toxic masculinity. Remember, the prompt is asking about an experience that helped shape your character. In this case, I assume that’s the art exhibition, where you found your voice and your preferred medium of self-expression.

I’ve written comments throughout to reshift the focus onto this story instead of your brother’s, but here is a general structure that you can follow:

1. Your brother’s story as an anecdote – the focus is on you not being able to speak up. How did you feel afterwards?
2. What other attempts did you make (and fail) to express yourself?
3. You discovered art and found that you were able to voice your thoughts through that medium, but you had always just done it in private
4. The opportunity for the art exhibition arrived – how did you think to join it and to raise the issue of toxic masculinity?
5. The public’s reaction
6. Conclusion: how did you feel upon exhibiting your self-expression in public? What did you learn about yourself?

Good luck!

Chiara