**5. Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others.**

I don’t know how long have I dreamt of real acceptance, real love and a real friendship. Throughout middle and high school, I’d make my way fearlessly into the world - I’d talk a lot, make tons of new friends and generally exist in the world. However, almost every friendship ended with anger, argument and miscommunication, and I’d run away in embarrassment and guilt each time. So, to my real friends — please help me hold onto you; please let me stay close to you.

Meeting new people, learning new subjects, living through the classic adolescent angst that underpinned most high school romance movies. Those were the expectations I had of middle school. I remember the pride swelling inside like never before as both of my footsteps entered the classroom. Silver desks. Beige ceramic floors. Every single item I could see was buffed to a shine. However, the blacks and whites on my classmates’ uniforms were the colors I eyed the most. They were people. They were “friends”. Or at least, the perfect idea of a group of “friends”.

At the time, it felt like I had everything. I promised my “friends” personality, so they promised me popularity. Even when I had the opportunity to show my so-called “friends” who I was like, I chose to mold myself to fit their ideal persona of a “friend”. I didn’t know that there was only so much faking I could do, and when that did end, my “friends” chose to see me in a different light.

It took me so long to realize that this wasn’t such a mutually beneficial agreement, and when I finally did, that’s when I lost everything.

I didn’t have the appealing looks of a crush-worthy boy so they chose to ostracize me in their memories at the end of the day. I didn’t have the enormous popularity or the charm of the body that a jock possesses, not to mention the ability to surprise spike so neatly like Ran Takahashi, and thus I wasn’t cared for anymore. However, since I had the grades, they chose to ask for my help everyday anyway. Intelligent enough maybe for 1+1 questions, but was I intelligent enough to discern their treatment of me? No. Not in the slightest. I figured that it was normal. That it was normal to help people altruistically whenever they ask and never ask for anything in return. When people choose to wrong me, I should just remain silent, because obody believes me when I say I am not okay, so who else should I process everything to? Instead of comfort, my emotions got dismissed, downplayed by my “friends”. It hurt the most, because all of my enemies started out as those friends.

I found it so hard to believe that at one point in life, I smiled everyday.

In hazy stillness, I was forced to mature faster than everybody else. During a time where I was supposed have fun, I didn’t have that luxury of being with people, thus I

learnt to be independent. Headphones on, with a hoodie every now and then, I’d read books, tons of them. I studied mental health, which became an avenue for me to understand the human psyche and relate to myself more. Most importantly though, I started writing, because a writer’s power is in his words, and no more in the hands of the people who misunderstood me.

In this teenage hellscape and these past two years of isolation, I had the happiest time reconnecting with my childhood friends, while making new friends in a new school that offered me a scholarship which I had never expected to receive. As we grow, many relationships will also be outgrown. I’ve slowly grasped the strength of letting go, because life’s too long to be sad over personal tragedy for the next 50 years.

I used to be intrinsically insecure, but now I am slowly learning how to be vulnerable again. I stopped fitting in and chose to focus on the things that I love, not what people want me to love. Now, I write love songs about my crushes. I write fiction. I write about depression, amongst all things, because writing helped me process my challenges, my emotions and my life more easily. Through my writing, I advocate, for the values that I firmly believe in - universal love. And for the first time, I listened and supported my friends who are experiencing anxiety, fear and uncertainty, all of which had befallen me at least once in my life. Writing healed me and I started working on healing others too.

The truth is, I’m still scared. I’m afraid of the possibility that one day I’ll hurt the ones that I love. I wish things could just end where life hits its peak, but life is more convoluted. There will always be people who will judge you without reason, so why not just be yourself in the first place? You will inevitably trust the wrong people, and hurt the people who didn’t deserve it. So make these mistakes, learn from them. Rinse and repeat. Most importantly though, you have to learn to be kind to yourself. Treat people with kindness, but don’t forget to treat your real friends even more so.