

With Full Regards to Aristotle

'Your mother will come to look after you sometimes,' he says. 'She'll come around once a week or so and check up on you until I come back,' he says. I nod and smile to him, not sure what else to do or say, knowing that he really means - 'Sorry, darling, you're on your own from now on'.

"I'll go now," I say, and I shuffle off towards the security check so that I can get on the plane. I don't look back either, even though he's probably watching me as I leave, anxiety written all over his usually-expressionless face. I think I'll feel much too weak to carry on if I spared myself even one second, so I just tear my handbag and laptop off me and hastily shove it through the security check, going beyond the point of no return. It's easier for me to not actually get to choose the direction my life's going in, I guess, so that I just have to keep looking ahead because there's nothing else.

The year is 2009, and the month is September. I am sixteen years old and I'm a bilingual Korean student who wants to go on to study Archaeology in the UK. My mother is forty-three, a bilingual mother who studied Psychology, Hairdressing and English Literature in the UK. She's also been divorced from my father for about two and a half years and absolutely hates me for existing, and with that little bit of context it should be obvious to anyone why her looking after me is a terrible idea. But I'm completely alone otherwise, so it's not if there's a lot of choice.

It'll build character, father says. Everyone has to live alone at some point and you'll get used to it much earlier than most of your peers. Might even help you at university, he says. I agree, but university is two years away and who knows where I'm even going to end up? Moreover, what the hell are we both doing, thinking about uni when I don't even know how I'll manage college nor what I'd even do as a subject? These are very important questions that I should have asked my father beforehand; I had quite some days to think about this, and even mere minutes ago I could have had the chance - but it's too late. It's ten minutes to my gate and by then the plane will be boarding, so I've got to get a move on. This is why you prioritize things beforehand and learn to sort things out so that you can always *carpe* the hell out of that *diem*. I adjust my backpack around my shoulders and quickly make my way through the numerous walkways and stairs, making my way to the gate just in time for the people to start boarding, and I join the rapidly-growing queue with a weird feeling stirring inside of me. I would say that it's fear but it's not quite that. Instead it's an odd mixture of nervousness and what I think might be excitement, which disturbs me a little because I didn't see myself looking forward to any of this that much. But there it is, butterflies in my stomach, that fluttering *je ne sais quoi* that seems to speak of me of reassurance and a sense of adventure. Kind of like a heart attack, only in the stomach. It sounds a lot less romantic when you put it like that, gratuitous use of French phrases be damned. It's a honest description though, I like it better that way.

I've always chosen the window, but I don't this time around. Should get used to thinking in practical terms. If I choose the window I'll have to step over the man sitting next to me every time I want to stretch my legs or venture out to the corridor for whatever reason; and every time I ask for a drink, I'll have to stretch out for it considerably more. There's nothing to see outside anyway; after the flight takes off, within minutes it would have ventured too far up to see anything other than clouds and then it will be clouds for most of the journey. They're pretty, but they're not much to look at. Besides I know this is a long-distance flight and they expect us to sleep, which means they require the windows to be shut, and the view outside will be dark half the time. Might as well be staring into a mirror. I look away and flick through the in-flight magazine, finding nothing of real note, the man next to me peering outside the window with a blank expression on his face. I don't feel any envy, because I know that it's a pointless endeavor to stare outside, and I also know the uncomfortable truth: on the other side of the glass, everything is green.

English is a strong point for me. My prose and diction are all good and I'm also exercising a newfound love for poetry and drama appreciation, although I haven't written any yet. I spoke English for eight years before I started writing stories, then I had to improve for years after that, and I've needed every single second of it for sure - for now I'm fine with prose. This information isn't important to anyone, but it's what's rushing through my mind as I stand at the border control desk and stare determinedly at my passport as it's scrutinized to see if I'm safe enough to be entered into this country.

It's always the same every time I come in and yet I never get used to it. "Go," the man at the desk says gruffly, stamping my passport, and that's all the cue I need to leave for the baggage claim and out of the airport to meet my mother. She greets me politely and I do the same although I haven't seen her for over a month, and her way of speaking - mixed Korean and English, with a strange weird drawl on long words - is very jarring to me after having been in Korea for all that time.

"I go to college first thing tomorrow," I say as we buckle up and get into the car. Two-hour drive to the house. My house. Sixteen and already a homeowner. "could I get a lift to the bus stop?"

"Of course," comes the reply. "so was your stay in Korea any way interesting."

She doesn't tend to put inflections at the end of her sentences either so I can never figure out in time if she's asking a question or not. "Not too bad. Stuck for a week or so. That was miserable."

"You're so mi-shur-able [sic], daughter. Not surprised since you're a teenager. When's that father of yours coming to assume guardian duties."

Shrug. I don't have any answer to that so I don't provide any and stare out onto the horizon. The sun is setting slowly, bleeding out streaks of orange and silver into the sky. If you gaze for long into the abyss the abyss gazes back at you. If you gaze for long into a sunset you get sore eyes and a headache. Haha. Jackass. The sun is a perfect and a rare successful representation of a hubristic bastard: it's big, it's bright and showy and thinks that the world revolves around itself. And in a way, it's kind of true. "I've read your GCSE results," she's still rambling on.

"So what'd I get?"

"Not bad. Quite ecks-sep-tional [sic]. But," she pauses there before letting out a huff and starts scolding me. "I don't understand why you had a D in Information Technology. And a B in one of those tests too."

I turn my head to glare at her through my glasses. I don't like it when people judge before knowing the full context because it makes them idiotic. "That D stands for Distinction," I say through gritted teeth, "and the B is the highest grade because that test was not a subject, just a booster for Maths and English. That's as high as it goes in the first place."

"Hahaha," she laughs shrilly and I just want to leap out of the car. Slam on the brakes. Slap her. Anything. "I was about to say, in my humble oh-pin-yun [sic], failure runs through the veins."

That horrible pun about grades never happened.

Sorry about that. I'm not an optimist and I'm biased because I'm narrating this thing. I'm sure my blood type isn't even B. But forget all that business, listen to this because this is important.

Peripeteia is a word of Greek origin and a literary device. It was used often in Greek tragedies to illustrate a 'turning point' in the protagonist's life; indeed the word itself means 'reversal in fortune'. By definition it happens quite suddenly. Aristotle said that the change should be an event that occurs when the audience is not expecting it at all, but nevertheless it has to be fully relevant to how the hero has acted in the past. It can't come just randomly out of nowhere - that would be more like a *deus ex machina*. And this point also has to influence what the hero of the story does next.

My current situation, in literary terms, would thus be an example of peripeteia. Family one moment, no family the next. I didn't see it coming, nobody else saw it coming, but when I sit down and really think about it, it was inevitable. My parents divorced because they were too far apart all the time; my mother taking care of me, my father sending us money to live on, and my mother was never the one to be content with that sort of life. She just got so tired of the whole business that she walked out on us, leaving my father to stay with me,

requiring a change in jobs and increasing periods of staying in the UK. And his English isn't too good and he had trouble with visas, so the problems still persisted anyway. The divorce is not known to my relatives back in Korea at this point in time, but it will not be long before my mother tells her side of the family. Considering this is still rather a taboo thing back in Korea, I will then be promptly disowned from the maternal side of the family and lose half of my relatives just like that. The paternal half isn't too bad but I'm the black sheep of that family because I've been away so long, because I don't really know half as much about Korean culture as I ought to and apparently because I speak like a child. So really, from the moment it became legal for me to live on my own, it was for the best for me to carry on alone.

I was the one who pestered my parents to study in England. I was the one who couldn't take the pressure and the high suicide rates amongst Korean students back where I come from, even when I was only about ten or so. I can't help but think that this was all my undoing.

But the above description of peripeteia only really applies to tragedy! And I'm not tragic. For one thing, I'm still alive and kicking and nobody is dead. And besides, this really isn't the first time that such reversal of fortune has happened to me. It will most certainly not be the last. Human lives are a lot more complex and certainly a lot longer than a play. Aristotle also believed in spontaneous generation. Would you trust someone who thought life springs out of absolutely nothing? I don't think I would.

Peripeteia is all around us. It just happens so often that it's not really peripeteia anymore. We just collect those changes and call them achievements, horrible luck, or milestones in life. That's the point of this story.

I sleep quite well that night and even manage to get to the bus stop in time for the college bus to come. Pretty good for a girl who's not really been alone to look after herself, ever. I manage a wistful smile as I emerge from my first Chemistry lesson; it wasn't too difficult, and although things will be getting a lot harder from now on, it's a start. The beginning is always the most important step, and so far it looks like the learning curve will be smooth. Maybe I'll be okay. A male friend of mine back from secondary school is waiting for me outside the door and we walk down the stairs together.

"You seem kind of down," he says as we emerge into the sunlight. I blink and shield my eyes with my hand, looking around nervously at the still-unfamiliar surroundings. But that's okay, give me a few days and I'll get used to all of this as well. "what's up?"

"Nothing," I lie. He's a close friend, but not that close, and certainly not a person who would be able to handle it if I spilled the about my current situation. Not that he'd not care or anything, but there are just some friends you make in life who you can *sense* aren't that interested in investing their time on getting to really know you. He's one of those people.

Nevertheless he says that I could do with some cheering up, and seeing as neither of us have anything else for a few hours, we walk out of college and ten minutes down a long slope and into town. Lord knows how he already knows where to go when both of us are having our first day at a college that is forty minutes away by bus from where we live. I put it down to him being able to connect quickly with people, someone who lives around here might have told him their favourite haunts around town. I envy that, really. People are incomprehensible to me.

His idea of cheering me up is buying me a Cornish pasty, which I then stare at and ask what it is because I've never had one before. His response is to look at me as if I've spoken in Greek, so I just keep quiet and eat the pasty; it's much too dry in first bite, but at the same time there's something oddly very calorific and comforting about the whole business. Delicious, sure, but I wonder if it's considered an unusual thing that I've never had a Cornish pasty before, even though I've lived in England since I was eleven and considered myself to have experienced a lot of its cuisine. It probably is - to be honest I can't think of a time in the past year when I actually went out for dinner with friends or bought a snack from a shop, as utterly bizarre as that sounds. Just breakfast at home, packed lunch after, and then dinner back home again. I never went out not because I didn't have any friends but because I don't know much about the geography of my own town. I wouldn't even be able to name the nearest bus stop from my house.

I've been pretty much sheltered all my life and I'm suddenly not sure if I should blame anyone but myself for this.

We walk back to college and it's not long before the bus comes to take us back. I lean back on my seat and feel for my headphones; it takes me three seconds to find them and at least ten times as long as that to get the wires untangled. Put on some Chopin (Nocturne no. 20, Op. Posth) and watch the world outside pass by. Yes, I know, the entire angsty-teenager-listening-to-classical-music thing is an old and tired cliché, but it's what I have and life sometimes just works like that. Chopin was a Romantic composer so it's not even technically classical music anyway, so whatever. The ride lasts about an hour, and I get off on my stop and walk back with my hands stuck deep in my pockets. The beginning of September but it's freezing already.

Unlock the door, pause to pet the neighbor's cat, step inside the house (without the cat, sadly) and take my shoes off. I then proceed to head upstairs and put down my bag and walk into my father's room, calling his name, and finding it profoundly perplexing that he isn't there before realizing that me being alone is now the norm.

"My day was okay," I say out loud helplessly, just to feel like I've talked to somebody. I've got to think of something to have for dinner.

My cooking experience isn't that extensive. I remember Food Technology lessons from Year 7 to 9 in my old secondary school, but that was mostly just following recipes that I seldom cared for. Biscuits, pasta, stir fry, and a pizza. That's all I can really do, and that was two-three years ago. But I tell myself that I'm not too bothered, it's never too late to

pick it back up. Taking off my coat and scarf, I go into the kitchen and take out a few mixing bowls, a whisk, a cake tin and a wooden spoon, delving deep inside my memories for things that I vaguely recall as baking supplies. Butter, sugar, eggs and flour then follow, and I'm ready to start. One layer of sponge cake, to test the waters and reward myself for having survived my first day alone.

I don't have a recipe book in hand. Looking back on it, a five-minute search on my laptop would have helped a little. But I just jump straight to it anyway; cream the butter and sugar together until fluffy, that being a technique I miraculously remember from about five years ago. Then beat in the eggs. This is where I realize that I haven't heated the oven, which is a problem that I rectify immediately after realizing this fact. Then I pour the flour in, mix until smooth, pop the whole thing in the tin and stick it in the oven without thinking too much about it. Twenty-five minutes before cake. I'm so pleased with myself that I keep checking to see if it's doing okay, opening the door once or twice every five minutes or so, waiting for it to rise.

But of course the cake doesn't rise properly. There are a lot of things I did wrong there: you need to whisk quite hard to get an acceptable spongy texture, for one thing, and not pre-heating the oven was also a mistake. Crucially, much later on I will go on to find out that opening the oven door prematurely will cause a cake to fail - it's one of the first things anyone learns about baking, really - but I'm not really thinking straight at the moment. All I can see is a cake tin filled with a vastly unrisen and slowly burning failure, and the timer goes off as I fall to my knees on front of the oven and start wailing 'Oh Jesus Christ please just *rise already*'. I know it's too late to save it, that I should just clean up and shrug it off as an experiment, and focus on getting some actual sustenance. But I think of how funny this might look, all this melodrama for a stupid little cake, and start helplessly laughing before my laughter turns into sobs and then I'm crying so hard I can't even see the timer to shut it off through my tears, and I think I'm babbling something like 'get a hold of yourself already' in several languages (I can't really tell) because it only hits me then that I'm sixteen years old and have never really cooked anything before and thus my failure was completely predictable from the beginning but I'm a perfectionist with unrealistic expectations trying to be brave and I just can't accept that.

But that's what you get for being so sheltered, so I should just man up to it. And if my suspicions are right, then it is at least partially my fault that all of this (divorce, visas, studying in the UK in the first place) ever happened and led to me being alone in the first place, so it's really not as if what I'm going through is, like, completely undeserved or anything.

This is your life now.

First full day spent by myself, success. First real cake attempted, failure. But milestones are not synonymous to success, so it's worth noting. I write off an email to my dad about how my first couple of days have went, detailing my failure in the process and also asking for some advice. Then I take out the half-burnt and half-uncooked mass from the oven and throw it away, wash the cake tin, then call a takeaway for some chow mein that arrives on my doorstep after fifteen minutes, and then proceed to eat the whole container full with some ready-cooked rice because I bloody well can. Being considerably more composed by this point, I pull out one of the beginners' recipe books from the bottom drawer and place it meaningfully on the counter, vowing to start soon. But not right now. It's over ten o'clock and I'm tired and there's college tomorrow, so I should do the sensible thing and go to bed. I'll start tomorrow, when I'll hopefully have a slightly more optimistic outlook on things.

Hopefully is the key word there, because for a long time, hope will be all that's keeping me going. Days will turn into weeks, weeks into months; nights will get longer and colder and I walk alone. Months I spend in this dazed frenzy, going to college by bus, getting on with work, sitting January exams, coming back every day and sitting around with constant feelings of malaise. They're not agonizingly drawn-out, long periods of loneliness unlike what I expected - time actually flows by quite quickly, but I don't know what exactly I'm learning with this experience nor where exactly I am going with my life. I still have dreams about my father coming back and settling in this house again as family, which just goes to show that I am capable of living alone and yet I'm not actually learning a damn thing from my situation. I'd even dare say that I don't start until one frosty evening in February 2010.

It's a Saturday and I'm cleaning the living room when my mother shows up. She's been complaining to me over the past few weeks about her visa requests taking too long to process, that she was just thinking of changing over completely to British citizenship, and recently she confided in me that her request was rejected outright by the officials and had no idea what to do next. Her appearance seems to suggest that she's finally got an answer to this conundrum, even though I can already guess what it might be, so I let her in.

"I'm going back to Korea for my visa," my mother tells me as if I didn't know before, sitting on the couch. I make her a cup of coffee and offer only a nod as my response, which isn't good enough for her. "I might be gone a month or more. Your lack of concern is simply astounding."

I want to turn around and tell her, in all honesty, that I have problems expressing sympathy towards her that I do not feel in the slightest. Only the thought that this might be my last encounter ever with her stops me doing so. She carries on talking while I'm debating with myself as to whether I should be keeping the conversation going: "So what do you plan to do when you go to uni? Surely they've asked you about things like this in your college, now that you're in the middle of your AS year."

"I'm still going with Archaeology."

"How profoundly unsch-tyul-lish [sic]. It's not too late for you to pursue something else. Maybe a more physically active job. Or medical school, that might be an idea. But not anything common like, *Literature*."

"It's a respectable occupation, mother."

"You sit on your backside. In fact, you're sitting on your backside right now. That's all you do, and in a few years' time you'll *still* be sitting around on your backside in university," she snorts as she sips at her coffee, then tosses the rest of it away on the sink. "and that'll be the only thing that you'll ever be good for. How is that res-pec-tuh-able [sic], might I ask?"

"At least I'm striving to make my education worth the time and money invested in it."

It's a feeble retort, even I can see that. But showing her that I'm willing to return the ball every once in a while will just rile her on even more and that's really what I'm going for. It's working, from the way she glares at me and pouts with her lipstick mouth. "Hmmmph [sic], hu-uh [sic]," she mutters. I know these aren't words, but this is a faithful report/transcript so they still deserve to be recorded here. Then she does speak up properly: "I just don't understand what happened to you over all of those years. You used to be the living proof that it was possible to be hardworking and carefree at the same time. Now you just go around pretending to be responsible and being so *depressing* all the time. I can't stand it."

I don't answer. But she's suddenly dropped her weird drawl; this is bad, it means she's being serious, and by serious I mean inches away from being verbally abusive. And I like my mother even less when she's in this mood, for reasons that should immediately be obvious.

"You were such a nice girl when you were little. Never gave me any trouble at five years old. Then you grew older and you started to do things like lying and getting the occasional C-grade, and you didn't even bring any friends over. What's the best way to put it? You - you stopped acting like *a normal girl* and I didn't know what to do with you."

"So from the moment I started growing up proper I wasn't convenient to have around as a human prop anymore?"

My mother actually considers this question *seriously* and it's sort of hilariously tragic. Emphasis on the hilarity. If I didn't already know that it would probably push her over the edge, I'd totally laugh. "It's not that you were a prop," she speaks up slowly. "you were my *daughter*. Always will be. I know you don't like me and I was never too keen on you either, but that's an irrevocable truth, that we're mother and daughter. You simply didn't become the daughter I thought you would be."

"So that's my fault?"

"Can you just let me finish. Yes, it is, but I've probably done more wrong in that department than anything you've ever done. I haven't been the best mother I could have been to you, and even though I don't want to try any more - I recognize it and I'm sorry for it. That's what I want to say."

So there it is. The apology that I've been waiting for all of those years. Another significant event to add on to my life, especially seeing as I didn't think I'd ever get it. But it doesn't satisfy me that much; I look at my mother and there is nothing there. Blood is thicker than water and all, but for that moment it doesn't actually seem to matter. Her apology has erased something between us forever - it's almost a business contract, I forget about all the stuff she put me through and she'll forget about the times I made her miserable, and eventually we'll only vaguely remember that the other existed and that we were once a close family. I have a feeling that I should be resenting her for this, but I don't feel anything, and not feeling anything makes me a little sad.

I almost feel like giving her a hug and calling her 'Mama' like I used to when I was very little and telling her that I love her, just to see if she'll respond in kind.

"Why did you have to turn out to be so difficult?"

But somehow, I don't think that she would.

The last thing I ever say to my mother is: 'Text me at the airport'. In the coming months I will ponder on this continuously and berate myself for saying something so completely lame, but for now all I see is her walking to the car. She doesn't wave or look back. As I watch her back up my driveway and then turn the corner, out of the road and out of my life, I feel a sort of emptiness; I don't know yet that I will never see her again, but I feel something is different and for that one single moment, I hate her and love her and miss her a lifetime.

That was two years ago, during the first four months of college. A lot of things have happened since then. That phase of my life ran its course and faded away, as most things ought to do. Nothing in life is ever permanent except for death and Christmas fruitcake and I'm not sure about the absoluteness of death. Two years, and even though it really wasn't the smooth ride I thought it would be (stupid Chemistry), I came out of it with excellent grades, a significantly increased amount of wisdom and the ability to cook my own goddamn chow mein whenever I want. A lot of foods, in fact, and specifically most baked goods except maybe for macarons.

So I've made it to university. Good job and all. But I still have lots of things to work out. I'm now so paranoid about things like money and appearance and eating, the small things, that I feel like my life is being unsettled whenever things don't go right for me. That makes

me sad, that I don't see the good in my life. And then I get angry because I'm just so sad all the time without having any real right to be, and because I don't see the bunnies hopping in the snow, the flakes of frost decorating a bare branch, or the people who I could really connect to and would be willing to help. Because I only seldom see the beauty and joy in life like a German dictionary that costs four-fifty being on sale for one. One little thing wrong, no matter how little it may be, and it just flies all out of the window and it takes days and weeks to build it back up. Kind of like mental Jenga, only you can actually stop playing real Jenga and that doesn't harm anybody.

I've probably become *less* likely to spill out my problems to people because people who listen to my past life think I'm crazy and nobody wants to be near crazy. Probably think it's infectious or something, and to be honest I think that's a good point there. There's only so much darkness and angst the human mind can take because it becomes apathetic to everything. Of course no one would ever know me, really know me and accept me for what I am because that would mean I got a break for once, would mean that I had it easy, and of course that can't be allowed to happen when life seems dead set on making it so hard all the time. When I tell things like this to my boyfriend (how I managed to get one with my high-nonexistent social skills is still astounding), he gives me a sad look and tells me that I should talk to a therapist or a counselor. Or at least, that I shouldn't be concealing my feelings all the time because it makes me miserable. I don't know how to tell him that I don't really *feel* anymore, not in the way that he and most people can, and that I don't think counseling will work in the slightest. As mentioned above, a lot of people don't handle other people's angst all that well, and I don't think counselors are exceptions to this rule. They're very likely to end up depressed themselves because of all the terrible things they listen to. Why would I want to add on any more to what already seems like a precarious balance? Besides, my only real problem is that I don't understand people and that I don't really know how to emote. I'm not emotionless, I can be happy or sad, but there's never this long-term feeling of satisfaction or anything like that that people seem to talk about all the time. If something doesn't go right, I temporarily feel perturbed until it's resolved then never feel anything towards the event again. That's not the point. The point is that my problem isn't really a problem of any significance.

"You're eighteen," he says. "that's still too young to be cynical about things, isn't it?"

"Mentally I'm not," I say while letting out a giggle. "mentally I'm probably as old as the hills. I'm practically dead." I then laugh again. He doesn't seem to find this funny but I can't for the life of me understand why.

I've also taken up German which I love to bits - can't think why I never did it when I was younger - and the extra challenge gives me motivation to carry on. I can see it's going to be awkward when we go onto families though because I don't think there are any beginners' language courses that teach you how to say: 'I'm eighteen years old and I'm a student; my father is X years old and he's a rocket scientist; everyone else in my family might as well be dead.' Just a bit of a downer right there, eh?

Smile! It doesn't matter to anyone else how you feel.

It's a field trip I'm at now, along the ruins of Hadrian's Wall, where one of the professors has gathered us all around. He's telling us about a particular type of structure present on the Wall and I perk up and listen, although it's very cold and windy and I can't hear him all that clearly.

Milecastles are Roman constructs, small forts built along major frontiers like Hadrian's Wall. As their name suggests, they are placed at intervals of roughly one Roman mile each. From what I can understand there are about eighty of them along the entire length of the wall. What I find fascinating about them is not that they were a form of border control, nor the fact that they are built to the pretty much same sort of layout as others, but the sheer fact that the Romans built them at all with such regularity and conformity. Infinitely more fascinating is the fact that they always have two gates, one alongside the wall and one coming out behind it - regardless of whether that second one leads off to actual flat land or not. Some milecastles have gates that lead right off the edge of an abyss, and there could be no earthly way that anyone could proceed through that particular fort. All to conform to standards. Milestones with a sinister twist.

A lot like living life, really. Achievements in life are not necessarily benign. Some will let you through, some shows you better prospects and some just want to send you pirouetting right off the edge. I think about this with some wonder until I realize that I'm meant to be taking notes and hastily ask the person in front of me as to what needs to be written down. The look of confusion and mild distaste on her face is what brings me back down to reality and the thought that perhaps I'm not a good Archaeology student. This field trip is meant to be a summative as well, can't I just pay attention?

The voice in my head tells me no, and much to my subsequent horror and disgust, I don't see *anything* wrong with not paying attention. Hours later, we're back at uni and everyone is leaving and this opinion hasn't changed any. I buy a Cornish pasty from Tesco and it tastes mostly of grease and nostalgia. And then I go back to my room and cry because I feel nothing, nothing at all.

It's six-thirty on a Tuesday morning and I haven't slept for a long time. But I feel awake so I decide to go and do my laundry while the place is empty. Slipping on my jacket and jeans, I put on my gloves and drag the laundry basket over to the washing machines. And then when that's over and done with, I leave the building and decide spontaneously to climb the mound because I can. Not the wisest decision for sure because it's godforsakenly dark up there, there's no lighting illuminating my way, but I want to climb it and if I don't climb it now I think I'm going to regret it, so I awkwardly hike my way up, pausing at points to figure out whether I'm following the path up properly.

The top of the mound is flat and a lone bench sits on there with an empty vodka bottle on it. I go over to sit on the bench, which is frosty, and orientate myself so that I'm facing the Howlands Building and then proceed to watch the washing machine that's got my laundry in it for the full half hour. This sure beats waiting in the laundry room itself, or even up in my own room. A catering van is packing up next to the shop; the driver gets on, shuts the door and starts driving away and I wave at him. I don't think he sees me, though. I don't think anyone sees me. But that's okay. I'm okay with a lot of things.

It's about ten past seven when I drag my laundry back upstairs. Everyone is still asleep and the flat is dark and I try to be as quiet as possible. I'm considered the early bird of the flat as it is because I'm often up at ungodly hours; does this make me a bad flatmate? Only if I make a lot of noise, which I'm always reassured that I don't. Dad chooses that precise moment to call me, which is bizarre because he doesn't often call at this time - it's around four in the afternoon back in Korea and he should still be at work.

"Just wanted to say I love you," he says when I pick up the call. "got the email you sent me about your summative... ninety percent, you're doing well... I thought you were still asleep."

"I got up early."

"Good girl," he sounds pleased. "don't overwork yourself though. Eat well and be healthy," he pauses there for a few seconds. "I'm proud of you."

He's not a very emotional person, and I can see that even that was probably too much from the way he hangs up rather abruptly. But seeing as he's the only family member that matters to me and whom I still have a connection with, I'm happy with that. I see that my German teacher's sent me an email about being allowed to partake in the Asset exams come May, and another friend from Archaeology has asked me to go to a seminar together, which makes me happier. I'm actually quite cheered up for the first time in a long while, all for things that aren't that important at first glance, and I'm reassured that I'm still capable of seeing the small things in life. So I bring up WordPad and type up the rest of this story until the sun rises and everyone starts getting ready for their day.

Come March, I will have been living in England for eight years, and will have spent three of those years on my own. I still prefer alone. But every now and then I run across a flatmate, and when they see me their eyes light up and they smile and then I think maybe I'm good for something after all. It's not a bad thing, because it's taught me that humans are far too lonely creatures to let their individual selves be the only one that matters; eventually one goes out to seek company. Certainly a very good development and an assurance that the complete one-eighty turn that my life took has all been worth it. This is where I look back, drop another marker, and say out loud: *it's going to be okay*.

Unless the world does end in December 2012, of course. But at least we'll all go together when we go.