It’s 2 a.m. I wake up to that characteristic Skype jingle. It was Kath: I won’t be getting much sleep tonight.

She opens her mouth to speak. Through the painfully pixelated screen, I just barely catch sight of a single tear breaking free, before she turns away to the darkness of her room. I can hear her staggered sniffling in between the audio breaks we’d come to associate with these midnight sessions. They’re quiet: she probably doesn’t need any more berating from her dad.

I muster a soft, “Hey?”

I’ll never fully comprehend what she feels, being one of the fortunate few who aren’t subject to the familial issues she endures. Still, when I see through her eyes—the culture around her that views parental authority as absolute, the attribution of any of her troubles to “teenager hormones”—I realise it's not pity she needs: it’s an ear.

I listen—well, as much as I can through the underlying static—as she describes the argument of the day, eventually sensing an incoming breakdown when the fullstops in her speech disappear.

Not good.

“I mean, it can’t be as bad as Brian confessing to you in the canteen yesterday,” I interject, in as calm a voice as I could put up. After all, we don’t need two panicky people, do we?

She responds with a mixture of crying and snot-filled laughter. Phew. Close call.

Coming into secondary school, I’d never viewed myself as shy—I wouldn’t be doing everything in my power to get out of that big party. Though, you wouldn’t have found me bouncing in excitement, either. Instead, I spent my time within myself, walking down the hallways of my memories, picking up and inspecting a few of the hanging picture frames. It was almost a hobby of mine, to peer inside and ask, “Why?” Why’d I pass off that invite to hang out? Why aren’t I bothered by that? I, admittedly a tad too self-absorbed, had never felt much need to interact with my classmates beyond, “How much homework do you have today?”

That changed with Kath aboard a plane three years ago—her deeming me trustworthy enough to answer a passing question, “Why are you so excited to leave town?”

As with her, I’ve since sought to learn from and about my friends. The hours spent dissecting my own actions have given me the tools to live through the stories and understand how they define others’ choices.

How Kathleen uses dark humour to cope teaches me to laugh in the face of adversity.

From Joanne, who adopts the persona of BMO the merry robot from Adventure Time, I learn to walk my own path and not derive my worth from others.

Keane’s encyclopaedic knowledge of trains and stations reminds me of the exhilaration of learning to simply satiate a craving for knowledge.

Those late-night Skype calls were invaluable to my role as Head Prefect. During projects, I look out for the tiny mannerisms that give away something more: how over-eagerness to keep finding new tasks—a frequent one from new members—may show insecurity about belonging and feeling out of place. I’ve tried to instill this same interpersonal awareness in others by proposing the Buddy System, where prefects help tutor assigned peers struggling academically. Having the lockdown put a brake to our plans as we were confined to our homes left us glum, but I continue to satisfy my yearning for connection by preparing for upcoming exams with classmates through Zoom and Google Meet.

Be it sharing tears in calls with my best friends when we should be sleeping, working with prefects long after the school’s ACs have been shut off for the day, or testing each other for cracks in our understanding of Math, my experiences have all culminated in allowing me to empathise with others. I still continue to visit that hallway I spent so much time in, except nowadays I’m glad to find newly added doors labelled with my friends’ names, and their photographs placed beside those dusty picture frames.