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.

When I’m able to, I advise her. Reality isn’t an ideal image, yet rarely is it entirely hopeless either. Somewhere in even the darkest pictures are smudged regions of uncertainty and traces of bright colour. While the unvarnished truth is hard to digest, and even harder to get across, my job is to help her accept the entire portrait as it is, while pointing out the details that—hopefully—make the experience just a bit more bearable.

In other times like this one, I listen—well, as much as I can through the underlying static—as she describes the argument of the day. I eventually sense an incoming breakdown when the fullstops in her speech start to 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? Of course, in reality, I’m walking a tightrope, terrified and teetering between lighthearted and insensitive.

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 when Kath and I were aboard a plane four years ago for a concert we were to play in. I asked a seemingly harmless question to fulfil the need for obligatory chit-chat, “Why are you so excited to leave town?”

As we spoke throughout the hour-long ride, I realised she deemed me trustworthy enough to allow me insight into a dimension of her personality and a vulnerability that she’d never shown, despite having known her for years prior. It was my first time being granted a glimpse into the stories that defined another person’s choices. As I continued to delve deeper into the fundamental aspects of her character, I, too, began learning to open my gates to her. We’ve continued to nurture our bond upon the foundations of communication and understanding.

It was only then that I realised: I had grown exhausted of coasting through without having left a mark on the people around me, or them on me. Being on the same wavelength with somebody to be able to predict how they’d perceive even mundane events—I’ve since actively sought to forge that kind of meaningful bond with others. The hours spent dissecting my own actions gave me the tools to navigate the labyrinths of my friends’ hearts, in search of something genuine.

When excitement turned into overeagerness, however, was an unpleasant time. I was so wrapped up with making as many “bonds” as I could that I deterred from my aim. It took two separate friend groups colliding and an overwhelming feeling of being lost to show me that I’d been moulding myself to suit whoever I was talking to at the moment. Again, I failed to find anything meaningful.

I retreated once more to my mental fortress to do some spring cleaning, keeping the traits I valued and discarding those that were purely decorative. This time, though, I knew those I had truly connected with would still come along when I walked my own path, instead of deriving my worth from others.

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 tutoring my friends through Zoom as we prepare for exams, my experiences have all culminated in allowing me to understand myself and empathise with others, understanding the explanations behind our answers to everyday passing questions. 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.