“Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realisation that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others.”

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

Through the painfully pixelated screen, I catch a single tear breaking free. I hear her staggered sniffling between the audio breaks we’ve begun associating with these sessions.

I muster a soft, “Hey?”

Kath had come from a foreign land. I’d never had to endure my mother’s passing, or seen it take its toll on those around me. I didn’t have a temperamental father who couldn’t seem to get how he was hurting me. Still, I did my best to learn her language.

Entering secondary school, I’d never considered myself shy—I wouldn’t be doing everything in my power to escape that party. Though, I wouldn’t be bouncing excitedly either. I found most comfort within myself, walking down hallways of memories, picking up and inspecting the hanging picture frames. I, admittedly too self-absorbed, never felt much need to interact with classmates beyond, “How much homework do you have?”

That changed four years ago with a passing question I’d asked Kath to fulfill the need for obligatory chit-chat, “Why’re you so excited to leave town?” We were flying out to perform in a concert.

“Bored of home, I guess.” A lie, but I avoided opening that door. I got my answer on the ride home.

I settle down, when I hear commotion behind. People frantically pace around while others rush to make phone calls. In its centre is Kath, whose pale face turns to me.

“I can’t find my phone.”

We rummage through compartments, overturn bags, and trace back her steps—nothing. We’ve held up the flight for as long as we can. The plane rumbles. I fall into the seat beside her. We take off and, like her soul had been wrung out, her head collapses onto my shoulder. My blood freezes the first five seconds she blacks out. I desperately use the next few to collect myself before she wakes up.

She stumbles through her words. I barely make out that she’s terrified of her dad, before the fullstops in her speech begin disappearing.

*Not good*.

“I mean, it can’t be worse than Brian confessing to you in the canteen yesterday,” I interject calmly. *After all, we don’t need two panicky people.* In reality, I’m terrified, walking a tightrope between lighthearted and insensitive.

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

She continues talking—of school, the concert, her family—while I listen. Colour returns to her face as we land. I melt with relief when we find her phone, before incredulity takes over as I realise where it’d been—under her seat cushion. With a guilty giggle, she hugs me. That’s when I feel a warmth—a feeling that I’d made a small difference in her life, and a shared one of much-needed serenity.

I was walking blind when Kath relied on me to be there at a vulnerable moment. Having shut the curtains, it was my first time opening a window into the stories that defined another’s actions. Only then did I realise: I’d grown exhausted of coasting through without leaving a mark on those around me, or them on me.

Be it working with prefects long after school ACs have been shut off for the day or tutoring my friends through Zoom, I’ve since actively sought to forge a meaningful bond with others—to understand the stories behind their answers to everyday passing questions. I still visit that hallway I spent so much time in, except I’m glad to find newly-added doors labelled with my friends’ names, and their photographs beside those dusty picture frames.

From fights to failures, it's my community that saves me from my lows. It’s with the hope of making their hardships slightly more bearable that I’m listening to Kath, sharing tears and giggles when we should be sleeping.