“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.*

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

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 spent my time walking down mental hallways of memories, picking up and inspecting the hanging picture frames. I didn’t feel 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 school concert.

“Just bored of home.” She hesitated, seemingly wanting to say more, but I avoided opening that door. I got my answer on the ride home.

We rummage through compartments and overturn bags—nothing. Her face turns pale as it sinks in: she’d lost her phone. We’ve held up the flight for as long as we can. The plane rumbles and ascends. Like her soul had been wrung out, Kath’s head collapses onto my shoulder.

*Oh gosh.*

*What do I do.*

Just as suddenly, she shoots upright as if pulled by a string.

*What am I even supposed to say? What if she faints again? I have to say something though, right?*

“Kath, what’s wrong?”

She stumbles on her words, accelerating until the fullstops in her speech disappear.

*Oh no. Not good*.

“I mean, it can’t be worse than Brian confessing to you in the canteen yesterday,” I joke, calmly. Of course, in reality, I’m terrified.

*Please don’t let me be the reason she faints again.*

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

We continue talking as colour returns to her face. 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 shared feeling of much-needed serenity, and a sense that I’d made a small difference in her life.

Kath came from a foreign land. I’d never had to endure my mother’s passing, or seen it take its toll on those close to me. I didn’t have a temperamental father who couldn’t seem to get how he was hurting me. Having shut the curtains, it was my first time opening a window into the stories that defined someone’s actions. Helplessly frozen amidst the darkness that night, I realized how little I knew of the people around me. I wouldn’t be able to help them if they needed me; I was walking blind when Kath relied on me to be there at a vulnerable moment. Only then did I realize: I’d grown exhausted of coasting through without leaving a mark on those around me, or them on me.

Being on the same wavelength with someone—to instinctively imagine their laugh upon finding an internet meme, or know how a song would trigger memories of a breakup—makes me feel at home. Its those friends who know that cake gets me over a failed audition that I spend my time with.

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 that 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.

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.