This is the most difficult jigsaw puzzle I’ve ever seen. I don’t know how many piece there should be, or what the final image is. It didn’t even come with a box.

It’s called “me”.

The very first piece, I was born with it. Mom told me I was a maverick even before elementary school. I insisted on having a ponytail in kindergarten, although it was required that all boys have short hair, because “same hair is boring”. I refused to fit in by pretending to like playing war with the boys. Instead, I would lose myself in the math books, which Ms. Chan got for me from the top of the classroom shelf. I called the police because the new nanny was trying force me to change the grass in my drawing from blue to green, which was “the correct color”, and erased my drawing when her persuasion failed.

When I was 11, grandpa was diagnosed with Alzheimer's. The man who used to teach me how play Ping-pong, beat me and later get beaten by me at Chinese chess, after getting sick, could only stare blankly and ask repeatedly who I was. At 11, I felt I was running out of time. So I started visiting grandpa more often. I would read poems to him, go through photos of us with him, and as his condition worsened, teach him to count. Grandpa was the one who gave me patience and companionship when I was little, and I did the same thing for him when he got old. I lost grandpa 2 years later, but he left with me the second puzzle piece about who I am. Besides being a free spirit in many ways, I realized that I’m so strongly connected with my family, where I received love and comfort, and to whom I also gave my deepest affection.

I discovered the third piece participating in the HIMCM in high school. I was assigned to a three-people team due to late registration, and the only task left for me was computer simulation, about which I barely knew anything. However, to make the deadline, I had to start teaching myself MATLAB immediately and run the simulation with it. Later, I found a mistake via simulation in an equation given by the other members describing the speed change when cars merged into traffic. The advisor was impressed, and suggested that I be the new team leader and be in charge of the modelling task, which I was good at and originally aimed to do. Thinking about it for maybe 10 seconds, I said no. As badly as I wanted this chance to shine, it was crystal clear that accepting the offer would be a disaster to the team. The leader already looked embarrassed and disappointed, and if I said yes, things would for sure get awkward in the team. And if this awkwardness turned into bitterness, our team wouldn’t even stand a chance in this competition. In that 10 seconds that it took for me to gratefully decline the promote, the third piece suddenly emerged. It was not me being a maverick, or being the very much loved child of the family, it was me being a team member, and putting the team’s goal first. The leader, shocked that I gave up the opportunity, later in the competition, along with other two members, tried his best to provide all the help I needed. Eventually, our team won first prize, and we all became good friends.

Now, if I get accepted by undergraduate school, it will be the beginning of a new journey for the puzzle treasure hunt. Cultural shock, life away from parents, learning about math, meeting new people, developing a career… Even thinking about these new experiences ahead makes my palms sweat, and I’m very much looking forward to an opportunity to hit the road.