

**Angela Yang**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Indian Springs School, Pelham, AL

Educator: Renee Chow

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

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## Roommate

"Tuus, O regina, quid optes explorare labor..."

A storm of laughter hauled me away from the Latin lines of Aeneid. Someone must have told a joke in the suite commons. The sounds always wormed their way into my room from the two-inch gap below the sound-proof-less door.

Just ignore them, only five more lines to translate. I sighed and dove again into this ancient Latin epic poem.

"...' and it is my task to perform your command,' says Aeolus to Juno..."

I first met her on August 9th, 2018, the day of international boarders' move-in. She had just made her bed in the room in which we would be living together for a year. Unlike my bedsheets brought from home, hers was bought in Walmart. It was much easier to put on than mine: just wrap it around the mat and the elastic bands will hold the bedsheet in place.

"That was so smart," I thought, staring at that novelty with curious eyes.

For the rest of the year, my roommate was what I believed to be truly excellent. Her grades were good (all As, I assume); she exercised every day in the gym; she made friends with people from every grade level. While I was struggling to understand our ninth-grade classmates' discussions on pop culture and hesitating to download Instagram, she was already Snapping with a junior. I admired her joyfulness, her maturity, and her willingness to expand her friend circle. I wondered if I could be like her.

But of course, she was not like me. I liked heavy-flavored food while she liked sweets. I loved MOBA games while she preferred first-person shooting games. I was only one of her friends, not even the closest. "Roommates cannot be close friends." She once announced it in front of me. When I went back to my room during breaks, she was socializing outside the library. It wasn't a surprise when she was invited by friends to stay over for Thanksgiving, while I had to ask around for a host family.

Still, I admired her. I participated in more activities. I stayed in the library. I spent more time outside my room. Little by little, I was influenced by her to fit into the American culture.

When the dorm parents asked us to say one thing that we were thankful for before the Thanksgiving break, I said, "I am thankful for my roommate, Mary."

I came out of my room and headed to the bathroom. It was almost 11 pm and my roommate and her friend were still talking in the commons. As long as they didn't get too loud, I thought to myself, the current volume was fine. The 15-foot-ceiling in our dorm amplified every whisper right through the walls as if no barriers existed between the rooms and the hallways.

My foot landed an inch away from the edge of a laundry basket. I took a deep breath.

"Mary, can you take this back to your room?"

The same request was repeated for four nights. I already ignored the trash bag of her clothes next to her door. Maybe one day, the cleaning lady would accidentally throw it away. Maybe a cockroach would accidentally wander into it. Maybe I can drop a spider...No way! Shame on you for holding such evil thoughts in your mind!

She laughed, as her eyes drifted down towards her lap. Next to her, her friend seemed amused. Great, now my roommate was really embarrassed, and that will force her to clean it up.

"Yea, I'll deal with that later tonight."

Tonight? Did she say tonight? My satisfaction could barely hide behind my mask. "Alright then."

It was the second student concert of the Spring Semester in tenth-grade. Having successfully performed a Chinese song at the previous concert, my roommate decided to do it again. This time, she signed up for two songs.

A guy friend of ours would play the guitar for both songs and I would play the drums for the second song. Knowing the song well—or, as she believed to be well—my roommate did not practice with us until the day before the concert. Then we found that the original song was too low, the drums were too loud, there were controversies on where to enter for the second verse, etc. We had not arrived at a satisfactory run before the concert, so we gave ourselves over to luck.

The first song had to start over again because the guitarist forgot to tune up. Then it was okay and the audience swayed with the music. They received plenty of cheers before I joined them, confidently believing that fate was on our side.

I was so wrong. The main difference between a string instrument and a percussion is that the percussion instrument is much louder. I set the tempo of the piece, and unlike the guitar, I can't try to fit with the singer all the time.

The guitar was not in tune. The vocal did not come in after the interlude. She was on the wrong verse. She stopped the guitarist and they started arguing about chords. She waved and laughed awkwardly and hurried offstage, not even halfway through.

I sat in the back, played drums, stopped when the two people in front of me stopped, and followed them off when they started leaving. The light was so bright on stage that the audience blurred into a vague color patch and I couldn't tell their expressions. Were they discontent? Bored? Or amused that we just performed such a semi-finished song in front of the whole school?

And then I remembered my roommate only decided to do a song two days before the previous concert. We practiced for almost two hours together and still weren't all in sync during the concert. We had already used up our luck, yet were still placing our hope on a fluke.

But I had practiced! I had practiced drums every day since I requested to accompany my roommate. And I carried out my parts fluently on stage. I had fulfilled my responsibilities.

From that day on, I stopped admiring her.

We used to share a double room together for ninth and tenth grade. Our clothes were neatly stored in the drawers or hung on the racks. I would remind my roommate to make her bed, and she would urge me to take showers every day. Once in a while, we would sweep the floor and wipe off the dust on surfaces, doing it out of an instinct for cleanliness. Our room was always the cleanest and the tidiest in the dorm.

In eleventh grade, we started living in a three-room suite, and the scene changed. My roommate's books, sometimes laundry as well, lay idly on the armchairs and the small tables; her grocery bags were left unattended on the couch, and an unpacked container of her stuff hid at a blind spot on the corner of the commons. Our commons were often on the notes of dorm parents, but they knew not all of us were the source of the mess.

As the year progressed, my roommate spent most of her time in another suite down the hallway. She would eat, do homework, and even sleep over there, bringing her habits along the way. It has become common to find unfinished food on that suite's table.

When I witnessed the leftover food on the table for the fourth time, my friend in that other suite sighed, "She is sometimes...a little selfish."

I couldn't agree more.

Finally, with the help of dorm parents, my roommate moved into an empty room in that suite. But she didn't really "move out" of ours. Her things were spread out in both suites, with a third of them in the two common areas, and she would walk across the entire hallway to our suite to take a shower. The other suite complained that she kept her room clean by leaving things outside. All I knew was on the last few days of school, two dorm parents helped her to pack everything scattered around the two rooms, suite commons, and bathrooms.

A few days after, one night after study hall, I found my roommate's eighth-grade friend in our commons, quietly doing her work. The host's room was ajar and she was nowhere in sight.

I was about to ask her friend how her homework went, but she shushed me and explained in a restrained volume that my roommate was doing her homework, that she wanted absolute silence...

"Carla, can you be quiet?" an annoyed voice rushed out of the half-opened door. I narrowed my eyes. It was 10:00 pm, far past study hall, so she should learn to endure some noises. Yeah, how about more chatting, laughing will be even better.

Her friend tried to explain to the not-even-closed door that this level of sound should be bearable and received an even more irritated reply, "If you want to stay in my suite, follow my rules!"

"Ha! Should have told you guys this a month ago!" I smirked painfully. If only I dared to open my doors and tell them to shut up during study hall or after 11 pm. I could also keep my door open so that they would consciously control their volume. Maybe I could fake anger, maybe I could just yell...

Except that I can't. I would rather endure things or solve them from my side than ask others to do a favor for me,

let alone ordering them to do so. I'm not like her.

Maybe it's a good thing not to be her.

I still can't understand how it becomes this way, that I not only stop admiring her characteristics but also start to dislike certain traits. Has my roommate changed over these three years? Or, has my perspective changed? Maybe I am taking things personally. Maybe the shift from a once-esteemed figure amplifies my detesting of her flaws. Maybe I valued responsibility and respect too heavily. Or maybe, I used to believe that we are similar, and I hate seeing myself treading the same path.

But I do not hate her. I still enjoy her joyfulness and her energy. I still appreciate her popularity. But in these instances, I can still see the negative side of her lurking in the dark, evoking memories of the concert, the room... Immediately my smile freezes on my face.

I don't know the answer. I doubt that our friendship can return to two years ago. And I don't know if a friend of mine is similarly bothered by my personality defects.

But one thing I know: my roommate did take back the basket of laundry that night.

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## **Dreams and Abilities**

### **Preface**

Scientists state that dreams do not occur during deep sleep; I have consistent dreams every night. Scientists also state that people are unconscious about their dreams; I know very well what my dreams from the previous nights and can recall most of them by themes. Bring me to a sleep researcher, and he'll kick me out of his sample group as an outlier. Bring me to an oneirocritic, and he'll spend days laying out the elements and analyzing my dreams.

Owning this very special ability, dreams permeate my life. Many ideas of my stories come from a medley of dreams; familiar people and scenes make their appearances in my dreams, and their interactions with me can change my opinion of them in the real world. But, throughout my childhood, my dreams were suffused with monsters and ghosts.

### **I. The Era of Monsters**

Amid the darkness of my parent's bedroom, something evil was moving. I thought I'd seen a pair of eyes.

The windows of the living room were in an alcove next to the bedroom door. I took a large step away from the bedroom's hollow towards the windows. Luckily, they were open.

As soon as howling came from the bedroom and the creature inside lunged out, I climbed up the windowsill and leaped.

The master bedroom of our old apartment was a popular spawn point for all creatures, even me. No doors or curtains or adults could block them from entering the living room, and they moved fast, except me. I had tried hitting a spawned giant tarantula with a chair, but as soon as I lifted it up, my arms turned to jelly, my grip started to slip, my eyes flipped to the ceiling, and, ouch! I was stung on the right shoulder. I didn't die, as always, but getting captured by a tarantula was more awful than death. Since my dreams forbade me to fight back, I soon learned to run away with the quickest move: jumping out of the windows.

What does it feel like to hit the ground from the third floor? No idea, because I always fly up. It's simple: imagine the air surrounding you is the sea and the sky is the surface, then push off the ground and start treading water, as if you are rising from the briny deep; when you're about the height of a two-floor building, feel the winds around you and join the "currents." With plenty of practice, I could easily glide above the treetops and soar into the air even without fancy wings. When I lunged out of the windows, it only took a second to catch the wind and fly into the air, landing on top of another apartment building fifty meters away.

Flying seemed to come naturally to me once I started escaping. It saved me multiple times from the claws of bizarre creatures. Yet it was not so helpful indoors when the ceiling was only ten feet high and the monster was seven feet tall. After many failed attempts, I evolved again with invisibility, an ability that was harder to operate and depended more on your mind.

Suppose you are running away from a ghost along the corridors of a hospital, but as you turn around the corner and see that more ghosts are coming up the stairs in front of you. Immediately you retreat into a storage room, but there is no other way out.

You can feel the dark creatures hovering outside the door. *They can't see me. They can't see me.* Inside your brain, you repeat it as loud as you can.

The doorknob turns. *They can't see me, they won't see me,* you assure yourself.

The door screeches open, and shadows are at the threshold.

*They won't see me, I am invisible. They will not see me!*

You shout out the last few words in your mind as the swarm of ghosts rush in. They scan the limited space, see nothing, and rush out. Sitting ten feet away from the entrance, you let out a relieved breath.

Soon invisibility became another default ability I owned in every dream. Occasionally there would be cooler powers, such as controlling elements, but flying and invisibility would always come in handy when I needed to "cheat". Somehow it felt normal for me, when escaping in my dreams, to rise in the air and turn invisible. There were also some innate abilities that assisted my fleeing: the ability to detect monsters near me, the "Peter Tingle" when a ghost was about to spawn, the stamina to run for long distances...

Gradually my dream world realized that, with my powers, these stupid creatures were no longer threats to me. I needed a stronger, smarter, even crueler opponent.

So into the dream world, humans came, bringing tricks and wars with them.

## **II. The Era of Minds**

Starting from middle school, the dark creatures lost their jobs as villains in my dreams, and were replaced by people. This resulted in more realistic and daily-life-styled peaceful dreams, but also made nightmares more desperate.

To be honest, I usually won't count dreams of monsters as nightmares; I've grown used to them. However, when dreams become more relatable to reality, they leave a deeper impression on me and mingle with some painful memories to evoke intense emotions that linger around even after I wake up. It can be as simple as a dream of school life, except that there is a final pop exam, and I have no clue what all the questions are asking about.

Flying and invisibility fail before humans. First, they move around too much and love to check every corner of the room, sometimes bumping into me while searching. Second, they know how to find allies and use their brains, so I had to look out for ten people at the same time and to avoid moving in a predictable path. Third and the most frustrating of all, they like to keep hostages.

If you are lucky enough to become a villain in my dream, and right now are looking for the invisible me in a market, just yell that you would go after my family or friends. All at once, I would appear right in front of you and snap, "You'd better not dare."

It is foolish to react like that, but I would catch the hook almost every time and immediately disappear afterward. When my friends or family were captured, I'd always risk saving them and fail most of the time.

And here's another strange behavior. Theoretically, dreams are a free place to do whatever you want, unrestricted by society's norms and natural laws. However, if it is a school dream and the clock reads 7:55 am, I will be truly worried that I might be late to school, not even considering skipping classes. I always follow the rules of my dream world and only seek loopholes inside its structure. Only when the school starts at 4:00 am, when the story becomes too unacceptable, will I start ignoring its plot and going with my own principles. It could be that, for me, dream is just a version of reality that is weirder than daily life.

The memories of failed fights in early dreams reminded me to never resort to physical conflicts, so I turned to mental powers. Invisibility already opened a door for controlling dreams—when I spoke inside my mind, I was actually ordering the dream world to change accordingly—and all I needed was to find the right "spells." Like a researcher, I began to experiment with different commands in my dreams. The "I think I can go through the walls" bug, the "I don't

like this ending I should be winning" revocation, and the "time stopped" command worked out the best, but the process of calling them was even harder.

Let's go back to the hospital corridor where you are chased by several ghosts. Somehow one catches up with you and a bony hand grips your shoulder. You fall to the ground. While struggling to stand up before the others arrive, you think grudgingly, *No fair, I definitely run faster than a dead spirit. I was twenty feet ahead. I should be winning.*

Inside your mind, a video begins to form. You are ahead of the pursuing ghosts, but they are apparently slower. You can see the room numbers on the corridor passing in the background. When the clouds outside the windows become visible, suddenly you are in the video and the ghosts are twenty feet behind you. A brand new ending is created and you successfully switch into this storyline.

I am the administrator of my own dreams, but using admin rights is still extremely hard. My mind needs to be fully concentrated on commanding and my imaginary scene extraordinarily vivid to override the current plot. I also discovered that, sadly, my "Peter Tingle" was an indirect result of my admin rights; when I thought a ghost was about to appear, my mind unconsciously evoked the dream world to spawn a ghost near me. Anyways, mind power gave me access to almost every ability, but since this discovery was fairly recent, I would still rely on flying and invisibility under most circumstances, and only occasionally remembered my admin rights. I would be stuck in a tiny room with the entrance blocked, only realizing upon waking that I could either teleport, change my size, or walk through the walls to get out.

### **III. The Era of Swords**

After COVID hit, more violence-related scenes started appearing in my dreams. Sometimes it was a gunfight between mafias; sometimes it was modern warfare; the most frequent theme was medieval battles on an open field. My dream world lifted its ban on physical strength, so my body no longer feels like a noodle when fights happen, and invited me to join the conflicts.

As a child, I always wished I could learn sword fighting skills; that wish was accomplished ten years later, in my dreams. I still had no idea how to correctly swing a sword, but when the enemy charged towards you waving his weapons amidst a battle, whatever saved your life became the correct move. First, do a horizontal block that slows down your opponent's headward slash, then swing it to the right to shake off his sword, step to the left, and finally, swing back your sword for a deep stab into the stomach. Of course, it doesn't work most of the time, but since I wouldn't die in my dreams, I have more opportunities to try out attacks than my opponents.

When the dream world still restricted me from physical conflicts, I would be a sniper in unusual battle dreams. It was a clean and safe job; my admin rights ensured headshots, and I could always retreat first from the field. Nevertheless, when I found myself capable of fighting back, I switched to a warrior that can smash enemies in the frontline. Flying and invisibility increased my mobility and unlimited life made me unstoppable. It could be an act of revenge for all these years of disgrace running away from the villains, or an addictive thrill in surviving an imminent death. No matter what, I enjoyed those dreams like a Viking; I learned double wielding.

Even then, battle dreams were still a rarity, and most of the violence was actually from the common villain stories; except this time, the villain chose violence. I usually didn't have a proper weapon (a new form of restriction by my dream world), but, hey, everything could be a weapon if you were desperate. Therefore, in a defensive battle against some aliens, I stood at the door with two pencils, a rolled-up A4 paper, and a table leg, and the amorphous aliens had no weapon except a sting that would turn you into one of them. The outcome was kind of obvious.

I was already sixteen when the pandemic happened and my dreams were far more than just glory in fighting. In one of the war dreams, the enemy country conducted a surprise attack against one of our allies but fell to their strong defense. As a result, the allies poured their troops to push them back into their capital. But when I, an allied soldier, wandered into a courtyard hunting for two enemies, I saw a cradle at the bottom of a collapsed wall next to two slain bodies. Although his parents somehow protected him with their own life, the baby still starved in the debris. And as I searched around the house for survivors, the war ended with the surrender of that enemy state.

To this day, I still can't fully understand the meaning of my dream.

## **Epilogue**

Not all dreams are dark, but the dark stories are more memorable. They throw a challenge at me, watch me explore methods to solve it, and when that challenge becomes a piece of cake, come up with another one. Through my struggle with these dreams, I develop superpowers, use mind control, and finally pick up physical skills, but still can't promise full victory over the plots. It's like a game where you'll fight the boss again and again, but as you grow stronger, the boss evolves, too. To outrun the boss, you have to keep developing and keep thinking. Maybe, as I understand more about the boss, I will own more power over him.

Will there be a day when I can gain full control over my dreams and always win?

Well, that'll just deprive all the fun of striving for victory.

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Category: Poetry

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**The List**

**Rhymes**

Ate: hate, fate, great, compensate

Ay: day, say, may, lay, way

Ane: mundane, pain, slain, remain, stain, again

Ash: ash, clash, flash, trash, slash

Ad: dad, glad, mad, sad, bad

En: darken, frighten, broken, problem, forgotten

Ess: less, confess

I: I, guy, lie, cry, try, dry, sigh, belie, why

Ide: lied, belied, side, pride

Ine: line, define

Ism: prism, euphemism, pessimism

Tion: action, emotion, sensation, expectation

Ow: follow, low, below

Ost: most, host

On: commons, demons

**The List**

I have a list of all things I hate  
I keep it to myself so that, one day,  
When my anger rages like waves,  
I will know why I feel this way.

First thing first, the rudeness of one's action  
Provokes me so much that my face darkens.  
The words, the gestures, the nonchalance in one's eyes,  
And the reasonings one refuses to listen.

Yes, you might have a bad day;  
Yes, you might not know that he lied;  
Yes, I know my work is never perfect,  
And I should put down my pride.  
But, please, when you pour forth all your criticism,  
Can you not see the sadness I've belied?

Then "Disrespect" and "Selfishness" follow,  
Two things that I dislike the most.  
It could be leaving bags on a library table  
Or failing to be a hospitable host.

When your belongings break out of your burrow  
And find their way to the commons,



When you rely on the janitor to clean your junk,  
Even "carelessness" is a euphemism:  
Yourself is the problem.

Last but not least, bolded and underlined,  
A concept that phrases can't define.  
When you say a x but do a y,  
When your actions do not accord with your words,  
Even though you had sworn to the lords,  
That you would do it,  
And I had believed it.

Sometimes it is done unintentionally:  
The previous promises were simply forgotten.  
But how dependable can one be,  
If their own words can be broken?

The list goes on and on,  
Spelling out each abominable behavior.  
Some are simple, only one word, "unpunctual,"  
While others elucidate the definition of traitor.

But the list is born for one alone,  
Who has written down her agony,  
Just so that she will never commit such things  
What she believes to be a felony.

I have a list of all things I hate.  
I keep it to myself so that, every day,  
I carefully avoid behaving in these ways,  
Not letting others feel the gloom, if I may.

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Category: Humor

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## **Eccentricity**

"So, do you know why you are here?" asked the head of the Eccentricity Committee. I shook my head. I had done many quirky things, and I was not sure which one they had caught me doing. We were in a great court room, with me in the center and all committee members around me. I recognized several of my friends.

"According to our witness, during lunchtime last Friday, you went to the dining hall's ice cream machine, got yourself a vanilla ice cream, and then took a bite."

The crowd gasped. Murmurs rose and fell among the committee members. "Yes," I admitted, not understanding their astonishment.

The head of the committee sighed. "You know, Angie, you're not supposed to bite an ice cream. You lick it."

My somewhat stubborn nature immediately kicked in. "No, that's disgusting. You don't shape your ice cream with your tongue as if you were molding clay. In contrast, biting is more elegant, more sanitary, and more efficient, since you can take in a larger amount of ice cream."

"But it freezes your teeth." My friend, Katherine, tried to overturn my statement. She was a firm supporter of licking ice cream, and I was two hundred percent certain that she had reported me to the committee.

Nevertheless, I was prepared. "Not really. From my experience, teeth can't feel the temperature. It's your gums. As long as the angle is right, you shouldn't feel anything."

Reluctantly, the head of the committee waved his hand, and the court went silent. He flipped to the second page of the long accusation list.

"Someone has also reported that you enjoy pineapple on your pizza. Is this true?"

"Well, I do like pineapple, and putting it on pizza. Why not?"

This time the whole room was silent, dumbstruck. Soon an angry voice rose from the committee. "This is unacceptable! Pineapple will ruin the entire pizza!" Of course, it was my friend Sophia, who was of Italian descent and whose family cooked much more authentic pizza than our dining hall did.

"Really?" said John, the only person who seemed unsurprised. "Pineapple is good on pizzas. Its sweetness balances the sourness of the sauce and the saltiness of the meat, also adding more color to the plate."

Everyone else groaned as I raised two thumbs in agreement: "Exactly!"

A few weeks later, the boarders got some kiwi fruit along with other snacks at the Commons. I was not a fan of it, but my German roommate Emma seemed to love it as she immediately grabbed one and headed for the sink.

She came back later with the kiwi fruit in hand but without any eating utensils, and rubbed the hairy fruit a bit before taking a great bite from the top. As some greenish juice oozed out of her bite marks and dripped slowly toward the bottom, I heard someone draw a deep breath. Caught on the spot, then.

"Well, guess the 'Eccentricity Committee' will meet again tomorrow," I thought.

It's hard to define the right way to eat something. Cindy dislikes olives on pizza; Coby cannot bear the sight of anyone eating a KitKat without breaking it into rows; Corrie puts chili powder on Lays' original-flavored chips. When you think this is the worst you can get, there's someone who orders a bubble tea, eats the bubbles, and leaves the tea itself. And, believe it or not, that guy will have solid reasons for his behavior.

Having those little weird eating habits is just an idiosyncrasy, like when I look upwards while thinking, tilt my head to express confusion or curiosity, and use my hands to 'talk' as I stammer. These habits are part of my own identity that makes me 'Angie'. Even if getting caught ordering Hawaiian pizza is embarrassing, these small differences make each of us unique, and I accept my uniqueness. With good reasons, of course.

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## **An Indifference to Death**

On a summer day in my seven-year-old life, on the way back from the science museum, I was intrigued by a few quail chicks sold by the road. My grandfather couldn't resist my persistent pleading and finally agreed to buy two chicks from the vendor.

I went home full of ecstasy and released the chicks in our living room, watching happily as these tiny creatures explored my house.

On the other side of the living room, there was a bucket with a hole on the side: the home of a teenage-chick. He was the only survivor of a group of 4 chicks I got a month ago. One of my daily hobbies was to kick the bucket, poke my head over its edge on tiptoe, and watch him panicking in circles inside his den. Constant dripping wears the stone. Constant kicking wears the bucket so that there was now a hole on its side. The teenage-chick could poke his head through the hole I created, and I could have a game of whack-a-mole.

However, on this sunny afternoon, my attention was on the two new friends I got. They were so tiny that I could hold them in my seven-year-old palms, feel their warmth, and giggle as they stumbled away from me. *If I show them to the other chick across the room, maybe he'll welcome them into his house, and they'll become friends.*

I picked up one quail chick and dropped it into the bucket.

Many things can happen in a second. The quail chick screamed during its fall, drawing the teenage-chick's attention. He opened his beak and caught its neck in mid-air, then thrust it onto the bottom. With a few pecks, before I recognized what just happened, the quail chick was gone.

Furiously, I gave several hard kicks to the bucket, sending the teenage-chick close to learning how to fly. But nothing was left, not even blood. The quail chick was simply swallowed to its afterlife.

I was stunned, not because that cannibalism had just happened before my very eyes (which I only realized after a few days), but that even a young chick can eat meat.

I kept my distance from the teenage-chick until my grandfather came back. He frowned at the one remaining chick but did not say much before going into the kitchen. I stayed in the living room and, when it was time for dinner, called out to the remaining quail chick on the other side of the room.

After a few hours of playing, the chick was familiar with me enough that it ran towards my open hands across the living room, past the den of the teenage-chick.

It never reached me. The devil reached his head out of the hole and dragged it into the shadows.

I must have cried very loudly, for my grandfather rushed out of the kitchen and snatched the poor quail from the bucket. Unfortunately, its neck was already snapped.

I was full of sadness and hatred for the rest of that day, mourning the loss of my new friends and resenting the cruel teenage-chick that took them away from me.

But, when I think back upon this even years later, a chill still rises in my body: what was lurking in my mind when I was standing next to the bucket and leading the other quail chick towards its doom?

All humans are born evil, a legalist belief that I couldn't agree with more. There seems to be an innate cruelty that had accompanied me throughout my childhood. There's a difference between accidentally stepping on an ant and deliberately stomping on it; as a kid, I chose to tap dance on ant holes. Have you ever seen a cat climbing up a tree? I have, because I chased it there. I have had a lot of pets: two bunnies, two hamsters, a pair of parrots, seven turtles, eight chicks, a plate of silkworms, and countless fish. Almost all of them have suffered from my torture and some of them died because of me; most of the time, I wasn't even aware of the pain I had inflicted on them. I remember coming home from kindergarten one day, picking up a cocoon from the silkworm's plate, and squeezing the cotton-like shell because it felt good, until some dark brown liquid started oozing out from the inside, and I realized I had just made a kill.

Most of these deaths were accompanied by lots of tears, but as I became busy with school, these animals gradually faded from my life. I did not help take care of them too much, so their conditions did not bother me. After third grade, when our oldest turtle died at the age of 13 in his hibernation, I cried less and less.

After I came to the US for high school, my mom called me while I was in ninth grade, telling me that our turtle was dead. I only felt a little surprised, and the rest was numbness.

I was ruthless towards animals, but I was even crueller to myself. I refused to follow the stereotype of girls by making myself tougher than everyone. I took crying as a crime and treated wounds as if they were not there. When I learned to ride a bike, I fell so many times that my knees were black and blue for a month, but I would just get up and keep going, as if nothing had happened.

Once, when my friends and I were sitting on a rail by the stairs, I tipped over outwards, flipped in midair, and slammed my back hard on the side of the staircase. The concrete hit a certain acupuncture point on my back, and for three minutes I couldn't say a word as my friends panicked around me, asking if I was okay. After I explained that I was fine, we all went back to playing, as if nothing had happened.

In eleventh grade, I was jogging back from the gym after my physical and slipped in a muddy puddle in the parking lot. The rough concrete ground tore open the skins on my knees and covered it in mud. My roommate freaked out when she saw me hobbling towards the bathroom with blood flowing down my legs. The wounds were repeatedly festered and scarred for two weeks, but I just left them to themselves, as if nothing had happened.

My body could not take my nonchalant attitude, so it evolved to quickly heal whatever harm I inflicted on myself. Whether it was a sprained ankle or a mosquito bite or me pinching my arms unconsciously and leaving red nail marks all over my skin, they would all disappear in a day or two. Nevertheless, I used this as an advantage to care even less about myself, to not notice a scrape until a day later, and then to continue ignoring it.

As if nothing had happened.

When COVID struck, many boarders were constantly in fear of a COVID wave on campus that would take everyone down. Some disinfected everything in sight; some refused to leave their room; some washed their hands so often that the skin parched. It was reasonable, under such a pandemic, to be cautious and to take good care of oneself.

It was not reasonable for me to feel nothing and not care about myself.

I didn't really fear the pandemic. I wouldn't want to get it, of course, but it didn't scare me enough that I had to do something to protect myself. I still wore masks, sanitized my hands, and kept social distance, but only because I

didn't want to get COVID and pass it to my roommates. As for myself, it didn't really matter.

Once as a kid, when my dad broke my favorite toy out of his rage, I rushed towards the windowsill yelling, "I don't want to live anymore," before my mom grabbed me by the waist. I have no idea if I was brave enough to leap out of the building and end my life at six, but I knew at that moment, I was determined.

There is an innate self-loathing that usually remains buried deep inside of me. At night, when all memories of the day come back to me, when I remember all the silly things I've done, that hatred will awaken and hit me hard.

Although I don't seem to avoid death, I don't actively seek it either. *I don't like you*, I will commonly say to myself, *but get over it*.

One afternoon in late 2020, I went up the hill in the forest on our campus alone. The sun was lowering faster than I expected, and the woods were almost dead silent; all I could hear was the leaves crumpling under my feet and sliding down the incline. I reached the top of the hill, where a straight path extended along the mountain ridge, tempting me to continue my hike. But at that time, the shadows beneath my feet were almost twice my height, and with every second, the trees seemed grimmer.

A breeze blew through the branches, raising a rustling that slowly faded to silence. What if a coyote appeared behind that tree to my left and lunged at me? I began to think about how I would defend myself, how fast I needed to run, how long it would take for anyone to realize my absence...

I turned and walked back down the hill, following the leaves I kicked in front of me. When the fences of our softball field reappeared between the tree trunks, I let out a relieved sigh, then laughed. I finally realized that I still feared death after all, still could not hold my life so cheaply, and would still actively avoid danger to prevent my demise. I dared not risk my safety by taking the path at dusk; instead, I returned and left that part for another adventure. But that's a good thing: I treasured my life enough to make good decisions and lived for the future, not for the doom.

The pandemic has not ended. My self-loathing mind has not disappeared. I have not stopped digging my nails into my skin when I am bored.

But at least I know that deep down, I want to change my indifference to death, to fear it and thus savor each day, to understand the weight of life and to respect the living. And I'm not so incorrigible.

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Category: Short Story

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## **The Freaks**

When the alarm went off at 6:30 in the morning, Victor decided he and the world should sleep for another twenty minutes.

He finally went downstairs at 6:35, not without a lot of yawns and eye-rubbing. “Staying up late again?” asked Mom as he walked into the kitchen. “I’m surprised that you can still get up so early.”

*Not without a little trick*, thought Victor. “Unlike Oscar, I have a body clock.”

Usually, his brother would rush down the stairs ten minutes before the bus arrived. His parents would bring Oscar’s backpack to the door as he hurried off his breakfast. There would be hugs and nagging, and Oscar would wave back at them as he got on the bus.

Then he would turn around and ask Victor where to sit for today.

Although Victor and Oscar were only one year apart, their parents favored the younger sibling in every aspect. Victor couldn’t count the times he’d stayed at school till eight o’clock, just because both of his parents were at Oscar’s away game. They still cared about him, but whenever Oscar was around, Victor was entirely forgotten.

After lunch, Victor went to the library and settled down at the farthest table from the door, half-hidden behind bookshelves, his favorite spot. He was pondering over a math problem when someone drew out the chair opposite him.

“You’re late, Beatrice.”

“Only later than you, who never finishes his lunch.” The girl chuckled as she threw her bag on the chair.

Victor smiled. Him being antisocial, Beatrice was one of the few students who ever talked to Victor. Victor never knew why a friendly, caring, and smart girl like her would choose to become his friend, but there was nothing more precious than her presence.

A burst of rapid footsteps interrupted him. Oscar scurried into the library, slapped a stack of paper on the table, and babbled at Beatrice, “My essay! Office, locked, deadline by noon! Please!”

Beatrice let out a long sigh. She scooted her chair closer to the bookshelves and, making sure the library was empty, placed her hand above the stack of papers.

A second later, the papers were gone.

“Done.” Beatrice dusted off her hands, “Your essay is now lying right on top of the homework stack, and please don’t ask me to get them back if you forget anything.” And Oscar, who thanked her as if he might swear allegiance, ran off happily.

Victor frowned at where the papers vanished. "You know you should not show your power in front of others."

Beatrice shrugged. "Relax. I only use teleportation to help friends and neighbors, and it's not even a strong power like invisibility, flying, or, I don't know, controlling time."

Victor stiffened for a second. *Beatrice couldn't possibly know my power.* "But it's still dangerous. What if the people you helped rely on your power? Once everyone knows, you will either be treated as a freak or as the goose that laid the golden egg."

To his surprise, Beatrice laughed.

"You're not saying," she covered her mouth to hide her widening grin, "that your brother might force me to help him with every homework assignment? Oh god, what should I do—cry?"

*Maybe, Victor thought as he watched Beatrice giggling behind her hand, I should teach her about the darkness of humanity some other time.*

At 7:00, there was a downpour, and Victor, sitting by the gate, hoped his parents had not forgotten they had two sons. The school guard kept giving him pitying looks; thankfully he left Victor alone.

Off in the distance, the figure of Victor's parents' car appeared on his left, down the street. He stood up and walked hastily toward it, already planning out the complaints. *Next time Oscar has an away game, I will rather walk home,* he would say to his mom sitting in the front passenger seat.

A car whizzed by him from his back and almost knocked him onto the ground. Mud was splashed all over him. *Great,* grunted Victor, *just my lucky day.*

Suddenly, a chill ran over his body. Instinctively Victor's time-stop ability was activated. As he turned amid the hanging raindrops, his heart hit rock bottom.

There that car was, black and without headlights, on the wrong side of the road. Worst of all, in front of the car, within a hundred yards, was Victor's parents' little white Ford. Within a second, these two cars would collide, except that he paused the time right before it happened.

But Victor couldn't do anything. He couldn't move at all.

Yes, he did have the ability to stop time, but everything in the frozen world was unmovable, except the things he had touched beforehand. The fallen raindrops jailed him inside his umbrella. His stamina was running out due to maintaining the time stop. Besides, what help could he offer if he couldn't affect the world at all?

Powers were supposed to strengthen one, but now Victor felt even weaker. The rain watched him defiantly. The world derided his puniness. Let it happen, they said; things that are in motion can't be stopped.

Victor closed his eyes.

A second later, he heard a loud crash in front of him and smelt the smoke amidst the rain. Footsteps were everywhere, but he didn't open his eyes. He must have dropped his umbrella, for the rain was flowing down his face. And as some warm tears joined the raindrops, for the first time in his life, Victor felt his legs were too weak to hold him.

The door swung open. Oscar rushed into the house and pulled Victor into a tight hug. He sniffed at his shoulder.

"I'm so sorry. I should have asked them to leave earlier."

Victor slowly threw his arms over the sobbing boy and patted him softly on the back. It took him a long time to control his own impulse to cry.

Gradually, the brothers quieted down.

"The driver escaped," said Victor. "Our parents were lucky to be sitting on the left side. The right side of the car was...pulverized." He fell silent. The police said no one on the right side could have survived that extent of damage. *If Oscar had not stayed with his team but rode in the car instead...*

"When will our parents heal?"

"Their conditions are stabilized, but it will still take a long time before they can leave the hospital."

That made money a problem. Although the insurance could help out, they still had to live on their own without any income.

Slowly, Oscar pulled away and walked upstairs. When he reached the top stair, he murmured under his breath, "I wish it had been me."

Victor hunched over on the sofa, his head in his hands. The screaming of the crowd and the hissing of the fire kept coming back to his mind. There was nothing he could have done: it was too late to avoid the accident. *I can stop time. I should've done something.* But he only watched between raindrops and let it go.

*Why did I give up so easily?*

He was blessed with time-stop ability, yet he couldn't even use it to protect his parents. *And Beatrice has used hers to help as much as she could...*

Victor lay down and closed his eyes. In the darkness, he could see two cars frozen in the air, one second before they collided.

"It is my fault."

"That accident...how could the driver escape? Didn't his car plunge into your parents'?"

Trying hard not to picture the collision, Oscar explained, "His car plunged into our car from the right, so his driver seat was almost intact. I guess the driver just ran away in front of the crowd." He shook his head. It sounded absurd.

Beatrice pondered over the story and dropped her hands onto her lap. A loud metal crash echoed in the library. Oscar covered his ears and stared at her in disbelief. "Beatrice, how in the world...?"

Laying on her lap was a license plate, so deformed and worn out that the letters were barely recognizable. Without hesitation, Beatrice jotted down the numbers on her notebook and quickly teleported the plate back. Together they read out the plate number:

"QAFY693."

Oscar frowned. "Beatrice, you are not going to find the driver, are you?"

Beatrice gave an awkward smile.

"This is absurd. How do you find a guy with just a plate number? Even if you do, what can you get from him? He



fled from the accident!”

“It’s all right. I can get some information by searching that plate number, then I’ll just...”

“What, sneak into the house and take his money?” Oscar sighed. He grabbed Beatrice's shoulders. “My goodness, what chance do you have of stealing, for the first time, and from an unknown place?”

“It’s fine. I have a superpower, after all. Things will work out.” Beatrice moved her eyes away from Oscar’s glares. “You don’t deserve this plight, and *I* can help you.”

*No, you shouldn’t. We can handle it by ourselves. This is not your responsibility. You are risking your own safety.* All these thoughts rampaged in Oscar’s mind and they stumbled out together in one sentence: “It’s none of *your* business!”

The whole library went dead silent, and Oscar realized what he had said. “I’m sorry, Beatrice, that’s not what I mean! I just don’t want you to....”

“Nope, it’s fine.” Beatrice pulled away from his grip and looked straight at him with a smile that brought chills down his spine. “I am just a meddling freak.”

She swung her bag at his face and stormed off.

The adult world of deposits and insurance policies was complex and harsh, and Victor was already exhausted from it while his schoolwork remained untouched. Things shouldn’t have gone like this at all, he thought indignantly. That driver should have compensated them.

And then he remembered.

The scene before the crash had been engraved into his mind, every detail of it, the colors of the cars, the brand, ... the license plate.

Victor grabbed a pencil and jotted it down on a sticky note. Someday—no, tomorrow—he would go and visit that driver’s house. *To bring back the money we deserved.*

He pasted the note on the center of his table.

“QAFY693.”

Beatrice looked up at the house. The inside was too dark for 9:00 in the morning. Thanks to the license plate number, she had gotten the address and the name of this driver. *Somebody was right about me meddling in his business*, she thought bitterly. *Let him see what I can do.*

She opened her right hand. A small shining key was lying in her palm, still warm from its owner’s heat. Beatrice stepped to the door and, after making sure nobody was around, put the key into the keyhole.

The door creaked open. It was a big house, with an empty hall and a staircase leading to the second floor. Some of the rooms on the first floor were closed, perhaps locked. Nevertheless, the doors on the second floor were all ajar, revealing glimpses of mattresses behind them. It would take less time to explore the open rooms, thought Beatrice, as she softly closed the door and headed to the stairs. She frowned as her footsteps echoed in the hall: every corner of the house could hear her coming. *It’s just like what I did before, helping out with my power! I am giving my friends justice.*

The bedrooms were tidy but bare, and all the drawers and closets were empty. What was worse, the spacious room

seemed to amplify every sound she made. More than once, she swore she heard footsteps behind her, but they faded away when she reexamined the room.

Only one room was left: the farthest bedroom on the right. From the half-opened door, she saw an unmade bed near the window. *So the driver lives here*, she thought, reaching for its doorknob.

Suddenly, a wave of sirens pierced the window. Immediately Beatrice retracted her hand and backed away from the room. An ominous feeling hung over her: were they coming for her? But how have they found out?

All at once, the bedroom door flung shut right in front of her; its strength shook the whole house and added another layer of noise above the sirens.

There was no hesitation. Beatrice rushed to the staircase. Her brain ran frantically: there was still time for her to run out the back door and race through the garden, perhaps opening a hole in the wall; or she could risk walking out the front door casually, pretending to be a tenant of the house; or maybe she should hide in a cupboard...

She was five steps away from the first floor when someone abruptly pushed her from behind. She fell forward, hitting the stairs hard on her face, and blacked out.

Beatrice felt horrible. Her nose had been bleeding, but now the blood had coagulated and stuck under her nose. Her forehead was also tingling, and she might have twisted her left ankle. It was hard for her to focus her pupils with a swirling mind.

Then, when she finally saw her surroundings, she hoped it wasn't real.

She was locked in a police car on the other side of the street with her wrist handcuffed to the bars. All the police were outside investigating the house. No one would notice her if she teleported away, but she couldn't: her ability did not apply to herself. For once in her life, Beatrice felt incapable.

A voice rang next to her, "I see you understand the situation now."

The car was empty.

"Here, on your right."

At first, there was nothing in the passenger seats. Then, when Beatrice looked closer, the air seemed a bit distorted. All at once, a man popped up next to her with a smile on his face. Beatrice gasped and pulled back, hitting herself hard on the car handle. "You...you were inside the house! You pushed me down the stairs!"

The man's smile widened. "Well, I would rather call it 'legitimate defense'." He sat in such a polite demeanor like a gentleman. "So, what errands have brought a young lady like you here?"

His elegant words made Beatrice sick. "I believe some 'gentleman' was recently involved in a car accident and did not take responsibility."

The man leaned closer. He did not even attempt to hide a sneer.

"I see, so you have come for justice. I must say that your courage is incomparable, but you fail to think through your plan, and any actions without thinking come with severe costs."

"You see, I have only had a few drinks too many, and my car raced to the other side of the road. Luckily, my instincts activated my body and I successfully left the scene amid the chaos."

Beatrice's eyes widened. The man laughed. "So helpful, isn't it, invisibility and teleportation? To be honest, when my key magically transferred from my hand into yours, I was surprised that there were other freaks like me out there.

So, I called the police outside the house while you were rummaging upstairs.” He smirked, “Did you find enough compensation?”

“I have enough of your fancy language.” Beatrice glared at the man. “You drove drunk, caused an accident, and fled! Those powers are gifts, and you waste them on avoiding responsibilities? Now there you are, pleased with your deeds and fake politeness.” She couldn’t hold the flames in her eyes. “Where is your shame?”

For about ten seconds, the man’s face twisted between rage and restrained anger, and Beatrice feared he would lunge at her there and then. At last, after a few deep breaths, the man regained his manners with a stiffer smile.

“You might forget, my dear friend, that you are inside a police car. Do you understand what that means?” Beatrice froze.

“Did you know your parents had been notified of your theft? How disappointed and heartbroken they are right now, can’t you imagine?”

“And there’s more. You will be expelled from school. Your friends will know your deeds. Your name will show up on the news and people will remember you as a burglar. Worst of all,” his lips were within an inch of her ear, whispering, “the record of theft will leave a permanent taint on your record and affect your whole, promising, life.”

Beatrice had guessed the consequences of her action but had not prepared to face them. Now, she was utterly petrified.

“Unlike me, your ability is not for escaping. Normal people will treat all your noble deeds as laughable excuses. Besides, will your parents still trust you when all their common sense says otherwise?”

Once again, Beatrice felt helplessness submerging her. The man saw it, too. He gave his finishing stab.

“Now, when justice is unsupported, would you rather, ‘flee’?”

The car door swung open and shut.

Victor hadn’t seen Beatrice for the whole day. It was a pity; he planned to tell her his plan and maybe even show her his power. Now it seemed that he had to find the driver alone.

It was 4:00 in the afternoon. He had promised Oscar to cook dinner with him at 7:00. Enough time to get what he wanted. *This is my fault, and I am going to fix it.*

He looked up at the house he arrived at. It was dark inside. The owner was probably out.

The man leaned against the window on the second floor of his dark house to get a perfect view of his front gate. There, a teenage boy was looking around, his hand reaching for the doorbell.

He dialed a number from his recent calls.

Instinctively, Victor looked up.

Behind the window on the second floor, the air looked distorted.