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# GROWING UP

*A Collection of Short Stories*



WRITTEN BY STRATHMORE SECONDARY STUDENTS

*Growing Up: a collection of short stories written by SSC students*

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# Her Garden & Myself

By Rachael White

In 1976, my grandmother arrived home, tired, and clutching a small bundle of clothes.

What I can never really understand is that she was 19, fresh out of high school and already married with a baby. When I talk about this with her or my mother, the common phrase of “it was just another time” will always recur.

My grandmother’s house is yellow, almost orange-bricked, old and quaint. Ivy creeps up its walls, and a small ramp leads to the doorway, just left of a concreted garage covered in small chalk drawings. The inside of her house is warm and carpeted, with a cosy living room that usually features the quiet talk of some weatherman.

The most treasured area in my grandmother's house is her garden. Large, filled with any plant she should possibly put in it. Cabbage, lettuce, tomatoes, and thousands of every flower imaginable. Her very own ‘Echoing Green’.

Grandma’s garden was soft, beautiful, and pretty old school, just like her, and my memory of it was that it served as her solace: her pride and joy preened into something she could return to in every moment.

In Deniliquin, a small town dotted in New South Wales where my mother grew up, everything is so hot you can see the heat bounce from the floor and form waves in the air, and you can smell the smoke from wherever direction it flies in from. Because of this, my grandmother’s garden had its ups and downs, and so too did her life.

If I had to describe my grandmother during my mum’s childhood, I would say she is the proverbial Atlas, holding the weight of the sky on her shoulders. One day in 1986, my mother, grandmother, and uncle -who had been presented to the house only a few years after my mother- were informed that my grandfather had passed. I could not tell you their reactions, or how it happened exactly, but I can tell you that my grandmother had to work twice as much, and my mother had to grow twice as fast.

This is not to say my mum’s childhood was in any way miserable, she still gives me the games she enjoyed and songs she danced to, we still watch the shows that played every night at 3- all this to say that her childhood was not robbed. Just that there are things you become aware of when you experience something like this.

In 2010, my mother returned home with a bundle in her arms to a similarly warm bricked, concrete paved house. This one was bigger and filled with 3 older boys, but carried the same feeling.

The bundle in her arms was, of course, me. In my childhood, there were not many things I believe I can complain or entail about, but there are many things I can forever think about.

For example, there have been many, many, many times I have felt annoyed with my mother, but hasn't every child?

I would say this is mostly due to how similar we both are. My mum is stubborn and opinionated, and I would describe myself similarly. I would also, however, describe my mother as someone with a garden of collected knowledge, and while she never did pick up *her* mother's gardening passion, I suppose the paper from the books she read were supplied by my grandmother's trees and plants.

There will always be things I don't understand about her, and she me. One memory of this is something I often think about, when it was 35° and I was too hot to walk up 3 hills in the heat to my piano lesson after school, so she picked me up and dropped me off.

I had said, teasingly: "couldn't have parked a little closer?"

She replied, in a similar tone, "you should be lucky I'm even dropping you off, my mum never would have."

This came across as one of those sayings that every parent preaches, that "back in their day" they walked up three mountains and six rivers, all to get to school. These phrases every child listens to and it intends to remind them to be grateful.

It hit me that I had heard my grandmother say the same thing, and I'd bet that her mother had and her mother had, creating a whole generation of the same sentences and lessons. Was it that my mother had said that purely from exaggeration? Or because she thought of a time that she had wished for someone to pick her up? This is what I believe parenting is about: fixing the cracks that spill your childhood into your adult life.

To myself, I am aware of my privilege, I am lucky to have my loving father and mother, not so lucky to have my 5 brothers, and I am grateful to live in an area closer to the city, in a nice home.

Would I be the same person I am without my environment? If I had grown up like my mother, would I be less like her? Would I make the same comments, argue the same? Would I parent the same?

In 2020, my grandmother moved from her house deep in the country to a small place in a retirement village. The house is orange-bricked and usually filled with myself or my cousin's laughter. Her garden has persisted, though at this time it appears smaller than it was when she was in her old house, but the main species still remain. Because of her physical job, my grandmother is not very mobile, and uses a walking stick. I believe this is some divine payback, the mother who held her family on her back becomes hunched and supported by her children.

In 20 years, I understand that maybe I won't have the same personality or even relationship with my grandmother and mother, maybe only then will I have a firm grasp on who I am. But for now, I am content in listening and learning from my mother, and feeling and thinking from my grandmother.

# The Thief Of Innocence

By Zandalee Veneziano

Dear the world that hurt her,

Before your whispers seeped into her innocence, before you bent her mind to the shape you wanted, before you scared her into thinking she was never enough. She had the potential to be everything and more. That girl had a mind so young and fresh, full of rich life and purity. Her childhood, the best years of one's life, could have been so bright, uncontrolled, exciting. But you just couldn't help it. To you she was your next victim, to her you were someone she thought she should embrace. A poisoned perception on life, a tainted pain on her own identity. You took vulnerability and distorted it into something sharp and tormenting. You're the monster who hides under a child's bed, the mysterious figure in the shadows, the one who whispers nightmares into fragile dreams, convincing those safety is a lie and fear is the only truth.

That girl was once ten, and there you were. Ready. In action, to prey upon her young and influential mind. As she laid in her mothers lap encapsulated by the warmth of her endless flowing love, her eyes were fixated on the motions of scripted, planned, photoshopped lives of public TV influences. Living the life that seemed so much better than her own. The fireplace sparks danced around the pile of burnt logs, beside the bookshelf of life long stories and photos of memories ever so old. Those four walls were a blanket of safety, full of love and endless support. Yet the birth of insecurity, first doubt and setback. As the TV displayed wealthy, fortunate, ever so better people living the life you could only dream, nothing but envy and self doubt ran through the thoughts of that poor little girl. The cogs in her mind churned and the seed was already planted. She felt herself shrinking, as if the world around her was growing too big for her to ever belong. Their fancy sports cars, her rusted family van, their ongoing walk in wardrobes, her two wooden doors would open. One shirt. Two shirts. Three.

'Mamma.' Those words ever so engraved in my mind.

'I wanna be like them. Their life is perfect.'

Maybe perfect but a perfect illusion. The brainwashed standards created by a society of selfish, money craving individuals clouded that girl's judgment of reality and show. She felt inadequate, not enough at the ripe young age of ten.

That girl was then sixteen, and still couldn't catch a break. This time your plan to diminish the way she viewed herself and steal all elements of her self esteem. Her eyes a pool of their own confusion; her mouth a droopy rainbow. Pelting sobs like waves crashing against a rocky shore, each one pulling her deeper into the storm, wept. She was curled up and buried into a lap of shame. The graffitied walls of the bathroom stall towered down over the helpless teen, suffocating her within their shadows. The reflection of her phone stared right back at her as if an evil face was chuckling at her tears. Skinny waists and tall bodies danced, tanned skin and blond hair smiled, an image nothing short of perfection: so far and so out of reach. The extremities and lengths that girl had taken to achieve a standard that was forever unattainable ruined her self confidence. You pushed her away from herself, away from her potential, away from the fulfilling, embrace-full teenage years no one should ever be robbed of. As she glanced down at her arms, it seemed as though a museum of purple scribbles showed. A home where sharp edges had collided with fragile flesh. Her stomach was in knots pulling tighter and tighter by the second, eager for nutrients and energy to power her body. But no, she couldn't allow herself to fulfill her basic needs because you took away that thought, that sense of normality. The cold breath from the concrete floor engulfed her body with a rush of chill, each inhalation sucking more of her self esteem. 'Why can't I just look like them?' She thought. As much as that girl felt alone in this battle, the walls of that stall seemed to hold the silent echoes of countless others who had experienced the same suffocating dread. The dread of always being the second option, someone lost amongst the crowd of thousands, being unlovable, unwanted by anyone in this deluded society.

This girl is now an adult. Someone who is speaking with experience, growth, understanding. That girl is and always was me. As I sit myself down at my brown oak desk, my eyes dart to an array of vibrant, lush plants outside my circular window. The fresh scents of tulips and roses tickle the bottom of my nose and fiery rays of sun beam onto my joyous face. Growing up and navigating teenage hood is hard enough without expectations, standards and stigmas that you, the society, pose. I was too much yet never enough, a paradox you placed into my mind and told me to live with. Countless insecurities, struggles, setbacks stemmed from the thoughts that you provoked. Reflecting back on a time that should have been filled with fun, freedom and simplicity was clouded by conformity, suppressant, hindering beliefs on myself. My heart sings to the exuberant giggles of my children I hear in the distance. I never want them to experience a childhood like my own. I won't allow you to steal their precious years. A person born in a burning house believes the world is on fire. So let's extinguish that flame and encourage a world where society has a positive light for children to shine.

Signing off, with deep enthusiasm

From the girl that you hurt.

# I Will Die Your Daughter.

By Anonymous

Dear Nana,

I would normally just give you a ring, but Mum said it would be nice to send you a letter. Papa told me your knee has been hurting a lot since the surgery. Hopefully you have a fast recovery and feel better soon. Mum said it's been causing you a lot of stress, but when I try to pry for more information; she just hits me with her usual "don't worry about it, sweetie." I'm excited to see you this weekend! School has been a pain recently, it will be nice to have a breath of fresh air with you guys. Hopefully, Alex and Theo will be able to come as well, maybe they'll also bring their new puppy, Bob.

Looking forward to seeing you,

Mary xoxo.

Dear Nana,

Thank you for writing back, I enjoy reading about your days. I'm sorry to hear about how lonely you've been feeling as of late, I hope writing to you can help you feel less alone. My holidays were a lot of fun, thank you. However, I haven't gotten up too much. I've spent the majority of the past few days looking after My little brother, Benny. Mum hasn't been waking up a lot, she spends most of her days sleeping. It's okay though, I understand. She says I've been a lot of help, and how she's very sorry that I'm spending my holidays 'babysitting'. I honestly don't mind looking after Benny, and the weather hasn't been the best, what else am I supposed to do?

Lots of Love,

The very bored, Mary

P.S. I am up for suggestions of activities to pass the rest of these two weeks.

P.S. When's the next time you think we can come and visit? It's been a while.

Dear Nana,

The weekend was a lot of fun. Despite the long, boring road to Geelong, It's so worth it to get to see you and Papa. You and your sister looked so pretty and happy in the photos-not that anything has changed over the years. Mum said that you were pretending to remember a lot of the memories, is that true? It's okay though, I also forget about things easily, my assignments, homework, and charging my iPad...I understand.

Last night I overheard Mum and Dad talking. I always get called a "sticky beak" for listening in, but I can't help it! Their loud voices boom through the hallway. I'll be in my room, quietly reading and they talk so loud. I can't stop myself from listening in on a sentence or two. They confirmed my suspicion of you not being able to remember things, but I didn't think it was that bad. My mum said that you didn't remember that she was your daughter and that you think that there are now multiple versions of Papa. I honestly don't mean to sound rude, and I'm sorry if I have upset you. But will you forget about me too?

Love from,

Mary.

Dear Nana,

As I was eating dinner, Mum interrupted me to tell me how you had a really bad fall that landed you in the hospital. As she was telling me, I could tell she was trying her best not to cry. Maybe she was waiting for me to cry? I don't know. It's not that I was trying not to cry, I was sad but...I don't know. Sometimes I think I was just processing the information. I'm writing to you now because I honestly don't feel all that hungry now.

Mum and Dad have been arguing a bit recently. I try my hardest to not be a "sticky beak," and mind my own business, but they don't make it easy for me. You'd think my dad would be a bit more understanding and careful when it comes to my mum's grief, would it sound all too strange for a teenage girl to be more emotionally intelligent than a sixty-something-year-old man? At times, the arguments he makes are far too cruel for me to just stand on the sidelines. Don't get me wrong, I love and care for my Father very dearly, it's just that things have been so confusing as of late.

Lots of love from,

Your only niece, Mary.

Dear Nana,

I don't know if there is a real 'point' in me sending you these letters, but it feels good to have someone to talk to. As if a weight I didn't realise I was carrying gets lifted from my shoulders. You've gotten a lot worse after you were discharged from the hospital and sent to the nursing home. The day me and mum went to see you, I didn't fully know what to expect. I knew it would be a long drive, I knew it would be confronting, and I'd desperately try not to crumble down standing in front of your bed.

A memory I hold close to my heart is when my brother was going through surgery, I got to spend a week with you and Papa. The way the birds woke me up with their song once the sun wrapped its fingers over the horizon. Sometimes it feels like the last week we were ever able to truly enjoy each other's company, without the overwhelming barrier of your loss. I feel as though your presence burns at my soul. Old memories of your laughter get replaced with images of your food-stained clothes, confused eyes, and cold skin.

Love from,

Mary.

# The Age of Regret

By Anonymous

The scene unfolded like a well-rehearsed play: same faces, same plot, same inevitable ending. I watched on, envy engulfing my entire being, as all my older cousins shared a secretive exchange out of earshot of everyone else. My yearning to be older and more mature only grew stronger.

Being the youngest of them all felt as though fate had marked me for misfortune. All I wanted was to be older, included, regarded as something other than the baby of the family. So I crept and squeezed my way into each conversation, an act of pure desperation.

“Go away.” I knew exactly what would follow. “You’re too young for this.”

“No, I promise I’m not, I swear,” I would plead. “Just tell me.”

Granted a hesitant benefit of the doubt, they finally let me in on the secret.

My sudden realisation that I was, in fact, too young left a gaping hole in its wake.

“See, this is why we don’t tell you anything” - a snappy tone I had become all too familiar with.

The words ripped into me like no other, like I was being ruthlessly grabbed by my pigtails and thrown back into my cell of solitary confinement. And there, I would wallow in my salty, melodramatic misery until the tears streaming down my face seeped into my lips, the taste of sorrow clinging tightly to my tongue.

I sat on the front steps, watching intently as my cousins rode their bikes without the aid of training wheels, a milestone I had not yet grasped. I hugged my knees close to my chest, swallowing the lump in my throat and blinking the sting in my eyes away. I wished I was out there with them. I wished I was them: taller, faster, free to go wherever they wanted without the accompaniment of a large hand tightly gripping theirs. But that dream was far out of my reach.

I stood on my tallest tiptoes in the bathroom mirror, my eyes barely able to stare back at me over the wooden frame. I imagined what it would be like to be older, even if it was only by a little bit.

My mother's advice was no consolation.

“One day you will be older, just enjoy being young.” A forced smile and a quiet, unconvincing “I know” were all I could offer in response. I knew I would never catch up. It was like trying to find the end of a rainbow; the closer I got, the further away it seemed.

I wished away my youngest years, my crippling discontent with being the youngest in the family only fuelling me more. I put on a mature façade, suppressing standard emotions for anyone my age. A testament to my anguished desperation to be perceived as anything but sensitive.

Instead, my cheeks were squeezed between countless thumbs and index fingers. I was called adorable. I was antagonised with seemingly harmless questions, but laughed at after any answer I would offer. I was provoked with nicknames I had a deep-rooted aversion to, then dismissed and made fun of when I requested not to be called by them. I was treated completely opposite to all my older cousins.

I was merely a puppet, getting my strings pulled for everyone’s amusement. I hated it.

In retaliation, I made it my purpose to be discerned as equal to them, to appear older, to not be a child.

Consequently, my childhood slipped away like sand in my fingers, vanishing long before I could grasp its glory.

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**I wish I had known how fleeting those years were.** I was always preoccupied with what was next, what I didn’t have yet, and what the future held. Any fond memories I should possess are misplaced in my mind or clouded by relentless regret and melancholy. A time with no responsibilities that should’ve been savoured while it lasted.

How much of a difference would it make to me now if I had recognised those experiences as affection and care, not resentment and disrespect?

However, time doesn’t work in my favour. It faded away much too fast to realise that what I once had was worth cherishing.

# Catcher in a Catastrophic Mind

By Elliot Smith

For too long now have I spent valuable time scouring my empty head for an appropriate way to begin this tale. I've seemingly produced nothing in the elapsed time, so I will simply state the facts you probably never intended to know. My name is Chris Smith, I am sixteen years old and have a fraternal twin brother identifiable as Gordie Smith. I promise not to spend too long on meaningless descriptions; all that's important to note is that I was once taller than him. However, it should be noted that for what seems like the majority of our relationship he was bound to the clutches of a wheelchair. It's only recently that he's been healthy enough to stand on his own two feet, although we still do make attempts to keep the walkways clear. I know it probably sounds like a cliché to claim that for most of my life I've spent even more valuable time worrying for his safety, but it's the truth.

In fairness to myself, I have gotten better particularly with the help of those pills the doctor recommended. For an extended period of time, it seemed as if I'd bested my various anxieties that I won't bother to bore you with. It was an event that happened rather recently that feels as if to have terminated the windscreen wipers of my reasoning that the medication had worked so tirelessly to keep running. Allowing the raging thunderstorm of worry to freshly taint the windscreen of what I know to be an actuality.

Following the completion of that specific day's homework, I decided to accompany my mother on a walk which I so occasionally do when the promise of food from the local market is involved. I can't say much about the walk, it was probably fine. Bearing in mind that no walk in Melbourne is ever really fine when one has the purgatory of the sky above to remind them of their own inevitable mortality. I'll skip straight to the part that has any semblance of meaning, for I am sure that me and my mother's most probable conversation of nothing important is anywhere as interesting as reading my descriptions of greyness.

We were approaching the service station, where an icy-pole sour yet delightfully sweet had my mother's income name on it. That was when I was stopped. They were dressed in all black and retained the type of skin that I regret to inform reminded me of a smocking packet. He was situated at a bus stop, and as I walked by, his head twisted back with what seemed to be all his might and muttered the just audible words of "can you help me get on the bus." I kept walking. It took some time to register what had just occurred, as dull as it seems to stop my mother and inform her of the man dressed in all black by the bus stop. We headed back, and my mother approached the man with a voice halfway between dominance and a gentle kindness that now as a scribble upon these frivolous pages recount has often been used against me and my brother in our youths.

I can't recall the exact back and forth, whether there was a back and forth and what my barely educated diagnosis of the man may have been at that moment. However, I do recall quite clearly the man dressed in all black by the bus stop peeing himself, demanding that my mother remain where she then stood in that same raspy voice that he had first approached me with, before my mother responded assertively yet kindly "sorry bud, we've got to go."

That was it. I know it must feel anticlimactic, because that's how it feels actually writing it. For whatever reason this stuck. We walked away and yet I still found myself peering over my shoulder towards the man dressed in all black by the bus stop. It was as if my chin was physically glued to my right shoulder. The bus arrived, and I watched a similar back and forth ensue between the man and the driver of the vehicle. From across the road, I struggled to decrypt the exact dialogue yet I imagine it most probably followed a similar course. The bus driver begrudgingly returned to his driving position and left the man sitting alone just as me and my mother had done not two minutes before.

Upon my return home, I had dinner, showered, and yet still couldn't help but fixate on the man dressed in all black by the bus stop. Despite my greater reason constantly announcing my lack of intelligence, I couldn't help but wonder if he was still there.

I went to bed that night with my stomach seemingly a witch's cauldron of mixed feelings. On one side I was filled with this almost insidious anticipation to return the following day and observe his either absence or presence. And on the other side a worry, one that I had not felt in the longest of times. The image of the man dressed in all black by the bus stop flashed in my head like the lightning of a stormy night. However, instead of skin akin to rusty metal that is too stubborn to allow the natural processes of corrosion to take its hand I now saw the soft and chubby cheeks of no one else but he who sleeps below me every night. I saw the warm blue eyes and thick brown hair that had seen so many compliments from family and friends. It was and could be no one else but my darling brother.

He was accompanied by nothing but the darkness of the night sky above and the wheelchair that he had been forced to grow so close to. I saw him call out "mummy, daddy..." A flood of tears rolled down his face and over his mouth that supported that same particular droop he's worn for as long as I've known him.

Another image. It's dark, darker than before. This time we were inside and the light from the top of a stairwell exposes my brother tied to a chair. It's too blurry to observe the state that he may be in but I know one thing; the lowest of all lowlifes sits upon his custom made Harley Davidson nicknamed what you'd typically expect a dirtbag to title his motorcycle, 'Grace.' He's pointed in our direction, and Bruce Willis ain't here to save the day.

Goodness gracious. I turn on my side and try desperately to suppress the image with happy thoughts. Yes that's right, happy thoughts will do it. Boy are you in for a shock when I tell you that happy thoughts don't in fact do it.

I return to the image, this time by my own accord or at least that's what I tell myself and will continue too. He's still there, tied up and helpless. I try to search the image, accompanying myself with all the minute details. I'm distracted when my brain produces the sound of my brother wailing aloud similarly to how an infant ape may react following an experience misplacing a foot and falling from a large tree. I move closer, and in the clouded vortex that is one's dream he turns to me and spits out bitterly "you couldn't save me." In the stairway two figures emerge. One dressed in the livery of a security guard and the other a crude Hollywood stereotype of a 'hillbilly.' They begin their descent, and soon are positioned in front of my brother. The security guard turns to the hillbilly and I hear the infamous lines of "bring out the gi—"

"Get up" my mother probably yells as she makes her routine attempt to disrupt both me and my brother from our slumber. My brother rises first, and I am delighted to hear the distinct sounds of his play most likely with monkey. In that moment I see his beautiful thick brown hair, those faded blue eyes that all in my family retain, and that same drooping mouth.

But this time I'm not immediately brought to the man dressed in all black by the bus stop, nor am I drawn to images of Gordie tied up in that dark room somewhere. Of course as is natural, the thoughts do come. However, when they come I see that they are nothing more than chemicals manufactured to reflect love and passion. What may be a first in the entirety of our relationship, I saw that he was alive and well. In that instance, I stepped back from my once firm position in that field of rye and was unburdened enough to observe that the sun was shining. I knew then that it was there to stay and stay a while.

That's my tale. I hope you enjoyed it, I know it may have sucked all the way through particularly towards the ending. Was it too rushed, too short, both, or some other combination that I am too dense to notice. It's your choice, farewell reader.

# A Colombian in Australia

By Fernanda Calixto Briceno

Since 2022, I had been scared of moving to another country. The fear of knowing that one day I would leave, until that day finally came...

My name is Fernanda Calixto Briceño, I am 16 years old, I speak Spanish, and I am a Colombian in Australia.

In 2022, my parents decided to move to another country, even though it wasn't certain. In 2023, we started applying for the visa, and on Saturday, 9 March 2024, we got it. That day, I felt empty. It was like I was falling into a deep hole. Every day, I asked myself: How will I tell my family? How will my friends react? These thoughts took over my mind, and I felt terrible.

A few days later, we told the people closest to us. The hardest part was when they asked, "When can we see you to say goodbye?" Those days were special, but also sad, because I knew I wouldn't see them for a long time.

The last day before flying to Bogotá, we said goodbye to our family. Every hug felt like a part of my heart was breaking. The trip to Bogotá was three hours, but it felt like the longest hours of my life, knowing I was leaving everything and everyone behind for a better future.

Our flight was six hours from Bogotá to Chile and then 17 hours from Chile to Melbourne. It was too exhausting to even realise that this was real. When we arrived in Melbourne, I couldn't understand anything at the airport. It was devastating, and in this moment, I knew this wouldn't be easy...

We explored Australia, and I admit that everything was new and beautiful, but it wasn't like Colombia. A few days before starting school, I was nervous and still felt like this was a dream. But when I walked in, reality hit me. The first day was one of the difficult moments of my life.

People welcomed me kindly, but honestly, I didn't understand a single word. Besides that, no one spoke my language, so it was very hard to communicate. Days and months passed, and I kept going home crying because I didn't understand anything and I compared myself to my classmates, who knew more English than me.

The months went by, and I felt like I wasn't learning anything, as if my brain was blocking it all. I kept thinking about Colombia, asking myself, What am I doing here? or was this a good decision?

I was also a very shy person, which didn't help me improve. I was too scared to make a mistake or to be judged. That was a BIG MISTAKE. Outside of school, being in Melbourne felt strange. I liked it, but I still wanted to go back to my country. I experienced a lot and had unique moments, but it didn't feel like home.

Another thing that really affected me was not having friends. In Colombia, I was very social, but here, my fear stopped me from talking to people and I became very quiet and lonely.

I spent the whole year crying and feeling terrible about missing important moments with my family and friends, like birthdays or celebrations. Seeing them on a video call felt empty like trying to hug a shadow.

During all this time, my best friend Mariapaz was my support. Honestly, even with the distance, she was the only one who could make me smile, even when my world was falling apart. (I just want to say that she is an amazing person, and I am so grateful for everything. Miss you.)

Not to forget my parents, they were my support every single day, even though they had their own struggles with English and adapting. But one good thing about this travel was that we became closer, and our relationship as parents and daughter became stronger.

And my little sister, Isabella, did everything she could to help me feel better. She was my motivation to keep going to school, even when I started hating it.

Another important thing was the Scouts. Since I was 10 years old, I had been part of the Scouts in Colombia, and when I arrived here, it was the first thing I looked for. It wasn't the same as in Colombia, but I met amazing people who helped me feel welcome and comfortable.

I also faced cultural differences, like going to parties or events and feeling like I didn't belong. So, I always tried to find Colombian activities and places where people spoke Spanish.

Then December 2024 arrived. I think it was the most chaotic month I had, as it was my 16th birthday, Día de Velitas (a Colombian celebration), Christmas, and New Year's Eve. During those days, I felt deeply sad because, yes, I was with my family, but what about the other people in my life? It was hard to compare the years when we were all together to now, only seeing them through a screen.

On 31 December, I cried like never before, but I promised myself a better beginning and to have a more positive attitude. As a Catholic person, I spoke to God and asked for the best for the people around me and especially for myself. And that's when everything started to change...

Thanks to my teachers and classmates, I learned to let go of my fear of making mistakes. That's how I started speaking English. Thanks to my family and friends, I learned to be brave, face my problems, and be happy again.

I also learned that everything good comes in its own time. Maybe I wasn't speaking perfect English yet, but it was beautiful to realise that at least I could speak. And I understood that knowing two languages is amazing because it means being strong and intelligent.

And in the end, everything got better. I made amazing friends, I could speak English, I joined a volleyball team, I got a job to earn money to help my parents and myself, and I learned to drive...

Even though I still missed my family, my friends, and my Colombia but I was proud of the young woman I had become. And I knew that I would see them all again very soon.

Thank you to all the people in my life. Without all of you, I wouldn't be who I am today. Los amo a todos (I love you all).

# The Dingo and The Sheepdog

By Anonymous

I still remember the first day at my new school, how the air felt too dry, how the sky stretched too wide, and how the students watched me with a quiet curiosity. I was the newcomer, the city kid, the one who didn't quite belong. My shoes were too clean, my accent too sharp, and I had stories that didn't match theirs.

Lunchtimes were the worst, I lingered on the edge of the schoolyard, watching the others kick a footy back and forth, their laughter carried by the wind. They moved with an ease I didn't have, fitting in with the landscape as if they were stitched into it.

Then there was Lucy. Lucy was everything I wanted to be. She fit in perfectly, would surf before school, played footy during breaks and always knew what to say. At first I would hover near her, close, but unsure if I belonged. She never tried to exclude me, she didn't have to. She moved through the world as if it was made for her, while I felt like a dingo trying to pass as a sheepdog, close, but not quite right.

The town itself felt the same way. At home the streets were alive and pulsing with movement, while here the silence pressed in, interrupted only by the occasional crow of a magpie or honk of a ute as it sped down a gravel road.

Then came the camping trip, it was school tradition, something everyone had done many times before, except for me. I had never pitched a tent, never built a fire, never gone days

without my phone or reception. I had hoped that it would come to me naturally, that my tent would be perfect and everyone would appreciate me that little bit more, but like so many things since the move, it didn't work out. As I struggled Lucy came over and offered to help, I had wanted to say no, but how could I. She had done nothing wrong, not on the camping trip or even the entirety of my time here, it just seemed so unfair to me how everything had worked out.

That night the cold cut through my sleeping bag and the distant howl of a dingo threaded through the darkness. It was a unique sound, one I lay awake listening to.

The next morning Lucy was already up, having gone for a surf by the time I left my tent. I envied the way she seemed perfectly at ease, while I struggled to adjust to my new life. I continued to feel the same throughout the day, as she mastered every activity, while I felt left behind. Every night for the rest of the trip I would hear the now familiar howl of the dingo. I had once read that dingoes don't truly belong anywhere, that they roam and make a home for themselves wherever they end up. I felt a sense of companionship with the dingo and its howl became a reassurance that everything would eventually work out.

Long after the camping trip I continued to think about the dingo. Slowly it helped me come to the realisation that instead of trying to become my own person, to belong in my new home, I had been trying to become another Lucy, fearing that was the only way to be liked.

Eventually, I stepped out of her shadow and stopped attempting to wear the town like a second skin. I realised that I could never become Lucy, just as she could never be me, and instead decided to learn what I truly enjoyed.

I started learning more about my new home, its history and everything it had to offer. I started surfing, allowing myself to laugh when I fell off, and celebrate every time I managed to ride the wave back to shore. I joined the school's track and field team after realising that I much preferred it to footy. I still remained close friends with Lucy but I also made my own group of friends, who I often camped and explored the town with.

One day, standing on the beach shore, surfboard in hand, I realised that I no longer felt like an outsider looking in. The town hadn't changed, Lucy hadn't changed, but I had. I still thought about the dingo, thanked it for helping me realise that despite the differences to my city life this could still be my home.

As I look back I've learnt that belonging isn't about erasing yourself to fit in or trying to fit into a pre-cut mold, but instead carrying yourself forward and learning that, like the dingo, you can belong to multiple places at once.

# Red Centre

By Janey Phu

I grew up in Australia with two Chinese parents while not being able to speak a word of the language. Well, I knew a few words. Hello, goodnight, delicious and apple. My mum always tells me how good I was at Chinese when I was younger. I used to know more, back when I went to Mandarin school, but that only lasted for a couple of years. When I was 6 I moved houses, and my parents told me that Mandarin school was too far. At the time, I didn't think much of their decision to withdraw me from the school, only focused on the friends I wouldn't see again. It wasn't until I was 11 that my lack of Chinese skills started to draw my attention.

I was lying on my grandparent's couch, cheek pressed against the cool fabric, limbs splayed wide and in danger of falling onto the carpeted floor. If I focused my ears, I could hear the aircon whirring quietly in the background, but it was drowned out by my younger cousin's obnoxiously loud YouTube videos. My grandpa had swept through the living room earlier, insistent on opening all the windows to let some fresh air in. I still don't know what he was talking about. It was the middle of summer and the air was muggy, sticky, and definitely not what I would call fresh.

It was at that moment as I was lying there like a dead fish that my grandma had walked in. She saw me and laughed, speaking in rapid Mandarin that I couldn't understand. The only word I caught was my Chinese name. But my cousin laughed at whatever she had said and replied in the same language that felt so foreign to me. The realisation hit me like a truck. My seven year old cousin could speak Chinese. He could converse freely with my grandparents without a care in the world about a language barrier between them. The same language barrier that suddenly felt like a gargantuan wall looming over me, my grandparents and cousin on one side, and me on the other.

When my grandma left to finish making dinner, my cousin looked at me strangely. "Did you not understand what po po said?"

"No, mamà talks to me in English. I can't speak Chinese."

"What, you can't even understand it?"

I know my cousin didn't mean anything bad with all his questions, he was only seven, but I was starting to feel doubt and insecurity creeping up on me. That night while I was tossing and turning in bed, trying to find a comfortable position to sleep in, the conversation floated back to the front of my mind. I couldn't speak the language that my relatives so often casually slipped into mid conversation, or while texting, or over dinner. Did this make me less Chinese? Could I

even call myself Chinese at this point? These kinds of questions kept bugging me for the next few years of my life. A nagging, ever present voice in the back of my head, piping up to question the legitimacy of my cultural identity every time I told someone I was Chinese

It happened when I was 14. The revelation wasn't sudden like an explosion is, but rather akin to the lazy current of a placid river, slow-moving and almost unnoticeable. It started with the cleaning of my great grandparents' graves at the cemetery. It's a Chinese tradition that we've always followed, and suddenly, it felt validating to be included as a part of it. The next domino to topple was at yum cha. The surrounding chatter, the aroma of spices and sweet soy, the clanking of the servers' metal trolleys. The boisterous laughter of other families celebrating the new lunar year. It was chaotic and loud, but it was familiar. It made me feel at peace. The final piece of the puzzle fell into place while I was playing mahjong with my aunts. The answer to the question that had been haunting my mind for the past few years.

Who am I?

I picked up the final tile and smiled. Red centre. The last card I needed to win. I opened my cards and accepted my congratulations. I chuckled at my aunt when she burst into a flurry of Cantonese that I couldn't understand. After years of agonising, the answer seemed so laughably simple. I am Chinese, but I'm Australian too. These two sides of me can coexist, and no one can take that away from me. As I sat there basking in the glory of my win, all I could think was 'this is where I belong.'

## Glossary

Po po - Maternal grandmother

Mamà - Paternal grandmother

Yum cha - Literally translates to 'eat drink'. A Cantonese tradition of lunch with Chinese tea and dim sum.

Mahjong - a traditional Chinese tile game

# Days Away

By Lucy Doran

Water churns as the boat hums, gliding across the clear water as if it were glass. Excited morning chatter breaks through the calm, I'm nudged against the railing as a sea of bag and towel flaunted bodies move to the side, in awe of the dolphins twirling through the low waves. Sea spray and cool air embrace my face as the island comes into view, a warmth spreads through me and the feeling of freedom brings a smile to my face. Blue turns to teal as water clears, replaced with pristine whites and steep, sandy banks leading up to lush plants that surround pale yellow houses, their paint peeling like skin. The air is fresh and salty, broken up by the sweet smell of treats. Bikes and people dot the singular street as we make our way to the crowded bakery. Sliding cabinets open and shut as fingers reach for sticky treats. My hands pull apart a scroll as sweet cinnamon fills the air. Gardens are invaded as small hands chase quokkas, laughter and pure glee fill the air when leaves are transferred from one small hand to another. Desperate to swim, groans escape when routine pictures are taken against warm orange walls. Elation jeers when coins are handed over, my small legs run through the store as animal doors against my calves. Sugar hits from the time consuming treat choice as sunscreen is slapped on hastily, eagerness etched across my sister's face as she speeds off, tiny legs pedalling crazily as I follow.

We speed along scolding asphalt roads, the busy commute subsides, replaced with bush filled silence. Our tires fly through tunnels of trees. Brief shaded breaks from the sun are filled with wonder as pink lakes and towering lighthouses pass by me. Brakes screech and thonged feet make contact with burning hot ground as my sister yelps, stopping and reaching a small hand out towards an unsuspecting quokka. After minutes of encouragement, our parents guide us back on our bikes and we race around corners. Hot, stuffy air changes as the breeze hits my face. Bush opens up onto a vast blue ocean and a bright, uninterrupted sky. The peak of a hill offers a wide view of a white sand beach and a curved road winding through the bush like a river. Wind slaps my face as we ride down, following the bends as the flashback of skinned raw knees encourages balance. Sand flies as bikes are locked and our feet run down to the beach, thrill hits the water as a cool relief washes over us. Goggles are slapped on wet hair as our parents' smiles widen with memories. Pale legs face the sun as the ocean is explored, the struggle to control my breathing is forgotten as I enter the new world. Clear water reveals arrays of coral and shimmering fish, curious gasps bubble as fingers point and imagination runs wild. My ears throb as we pluck shells and corals from the vast underwater sand, gifts for waiting parents. Wet bathers and chaffed legs drip on the road as we pedal to the next swim, happy greetings are exchanged between passing riders. Snacks are consumed greedily as waves roll, hitting my squealing body. We perfect our dives as the pristine blue beaches are visited. One, two, three, four. We listen in wonder as memories and stories are told, the deep connection to the island etched in the curious eyes and beaming smiles.

Our small, now pink feet pedal round the last corner, blinking to try and capture the moment as we ride back through town, weaving through orange cabins that shine in the late afternoon sun. Waterlogged bathers are peeled off and salt crusted hair is tied back as we make the final stop. We push our parents along the roads and winding sand paths. The cool air hits our faces as we step out onto the beach to an array of pinks and oranges like paint on a canvas. The towering lighthouse is basked into a golden glow, illuminated by the slow diminishing sun. Knees sink into ruffled sand, sandcastles are formed as we collect seaweed and shells from the crashing waves, yells escaping as splashes meet skin. The small sand builds of quokkas represent the adventures of the day. The sun falls below the horizon, casting the island into blue shadows. Our feet slap back along cool roads, bikes left behind for the day as we make our way to dinner. Sharp pains shoot through me as we cross the oval from prickly bindis underfoot. We play on the sand, watching in awe of the swimmers brave enough to brace the inky water. Scuttling back when called, pizzas and cool iced drinks are shared as smiling faces pass stories around the table, reliving the moments of the day. A hush falls on the island like slumber as we walk to the cabin, excited squeaks let out as quokkas are spotted, awakening as the island sleeps. Exhilaration packs up as fatigue comes in waves. Sun kissed faces and rough, sandy feet lay down on thin sheets. Drunk on sunlight and sugar, we fall into slumber, ready for tomorrow's exploration.

# The Letter

By Ola Krzton

Dear Mr P and Mr M,

I hope you are well.

They say that the most effective way to face your fear is to confront it. So here I am.

I have spent years living with the effects of how you treated me and the others. Your beliefs and actions changed my life, in some ways, good, but mainly not in a good way. You changed the way I saw myself, and how I saw the world around me while growing up.

You took something that I loved and twisted into a monster, haunting me throughout the years I spent being your student. I believe you think you made our lives perfect, like you were our saviour and that you never did anything wrong. But we all know that it is not true. Not one bit. I remember, from the age of five, how you would sneak little comments about each of us to each other, in a language we did not understand. I remember how you would make us stand in front of the mirror and how you would point at which part of our bodies needed “fixing” or “working on”. I remember how you would cut class short just to talk about “healthy” eating habits, which was just cutting food out in general. I remember how you both, when we complained about the boiling Aussie summer, would joke about “taking our leotards off”. We were eight years old. EIGHT FREAKING YEARS OLD. I remember how you would step on our back while we were stretching, trying to mold us into the perfect little dancers who were thin and flexible and successful, just so you could brag about all of us to your friends.

From a young age, we were all told that the stuff you would do to us was to make us the best. We all wanted to be the best. We all craved validation from the both of you so that we didn't feel useless. I fought all that pain and suffering that you put me through, just for the both of you to tell me that I was not good enough. Because that is what you do. You take a little girl's dreams and aspirations, and turn it into something she slowly starts to despise. The amount of regret I felt when I didn't leave earlier still haunts me, as I could've escaped the nightmare you put me in. I wanted to dance and to sing and to act, and you knew that. But you still decided to make my life a living hell.

I was too young and naive to notice what this was doing to my body physically and mentally. I would dance for such long hours every week, with small breaks, that my body was slowly hating me. The agonising pain that I commonly experienced, that shot through my back and legs would not let me out of my bed. My immune system was taking over my body, making me feel so ill that I was missing other events. Because of you, mirrors became my enemies, replicating your

comments about my body whenever I danced. Because of you, teachers were always saying how I was not confident in anything, mainly because I lived off validation from people, whether it was performance related or not. Because of you, any compliment that someone made to me was never accepted, as the repeating comments that were made about me in the past still tormented me, glued to me like my shadow. All my friends slowly disappeared throughout primary school, mad at me because of how dedicated I was to your school, because I was so afraid of you getting mad at me if I left.

Ever since I left your school, after you told me I was terrible, I have never felt better. I joined what is actually a supportive and friendly environment, and I felt happy I was doing something I enjoyed with teachers who actually wanted to help me. When I joined, I immediately got moved into a higher group. I went through that year, being awarded compliments that I didn't think I deserved, and praise from teachers that I never thought I would receive. I got moved to the front and center in every number, a place where I never thought I would see myself. I got promoted, and had to experience it all again. Teachers would use me as an example in everything, comparing me to others, which made me feel bad as I remember being in that very situation with you. I got moved up again, and am having more fun than ever in my life. But yet, I still feel lost.

So I wanted to say thank you, for everything. Do what you want with that.

Kind regards,

Me

# Letters Mak Yeay Can Never See.

By Pich Reach Moeun

Reach Moeun  
Phnom Penh  
Cambodia  
3rd of March, 2016

Dear Grandma,

When I say I am full, I mean it. F. U. L. L; full. “Full” does not mean to put more rice on my plate. “Full” does not mean pour more soup into my bowl. And “full” is not an invitation to ask me, “Do you want more food?” To which, when I say no, do not ask me, “Are you sure?” And, most importantly, when I respond, “No thank you, I’m full!” do not disregard what I just said and put a mountain of rice on my plate, coupled with a bowl filled to the brim with beef lok lak anyway. I don’t understand why you’re obsessed with making sure I’m “well-fed” (which, to you, means stuffing me until my belly bulges and I have to try not to barf—also, I apologize for that one time I couldn’t hold it in anymore and sort of ruined dinner for the family, but if you ask me, it wasn’t my fault).

I understand I am skinny; lanky; as you put it, “all bones and no meat.” I understand that you are trying to “put more meat on my bones.” But adding extra food to my plate will not magically make me more plump, or taller, or smarter (if only it were that easy). I’m a six-year-old kid—I have plenty of time to grow! Also, I would highly appreciate it if you stopped scolding me when I don’t finish all the food on my plate because, if you forgot, you put the food on my plate! It’s not my fault if I don’t finish it. When you yell at me for something you did, that’s called being a hypocrite (I learned that word in school yesterday).

So, my beloved grandmother, the next time we eat dinner together, please listen to me when I say I’m full. Don’t yell at me when I don’t finish my plate, and refrain from calling me skinny every five seconds. This will make dinnertime a lot more enjoyable—not just for me, but also for you.

Best regards,  
Your overfed grandson.

(P.S. I’m not saying your cooking is bad, but...I would eat a lot more food if you ordered pizza every day. Or fried chicken. Fried chicken works too.)

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Reach Moeun  
Phnom Penh  
Cambodia  
7th of June, 2019

Dear Grandma,

You have many habits that I don't understand. Such as the way you clean and keep plastic containers so that you can "reuse them" (say that to the kitchen cabinet that's practically dedicated to your plastic container collection). Or the way that you keep my old toothbrushes, using them to clean the little crevices of your bathroom (there's a brush for that). Or the way you keep my old clothes to use as cleaning rags (it pains me to wipe up a spill with my previously beloved Ben 10 shirt). But the habit of yours that perplexes me the most (and quite frankly annoys me the most) is your absolute obsession with stuffing me with food.

I'm not a skinny, lanky kid anymore. I've gained more weight and I've grown taller (I'm almost as tall as you now), so I don't need to eat that much anymore! It's annoying when you try to put more food on my plate after I repeatedly say, "Oh, it's okay, I'm too full to eat." It's annoying when you make me finish all the food on my plate and get mad at me when I don't. You're the one who gave me the food. What are you getting mad at me for? I seriously don't understand. Then you get even angrier when I call you out and say that it's your fault. Don't get so defensive and angry at me for trying to reason with you. Just because I'm a kid and you're an adult doesn't mean that you're right and I'm wrong.

So, moving forward, Grandmother, please stop force-feeding me—and also please admit that you were wrong.

Best regards,  
Your grandson, who is in the right.

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Reach Moeun  
Phnom Penh  
Cambodia  
11th of April, 2022

Dear Grandma,

I hate it when you get angry, and I hate it when you yell. The way you yell—it's hurtful and annoying. I hate it especially when you're in the wrong but won't admit it, berating me for something you did!

At dinner earlier this evening, you put too much food on my plate (it was practically overflowing, like you always do), and you got angry at me, calling me "wasteful" when I didn't finish my food. It's not my fault you put too much rice on my plate! When I called you out, you got defensive and started yelling at me even more.

I also don't understand why we have to argue over something as simple as food! Why are you shouting at me, chastising me about not finishing my food, when I leave barely three spoons of rice left? Well, guess what—when I'm full, I'm full. You don't get to decide how much I eat; I decide.

Sorry for accidentally dropping and breaking my plate while storming off. Not sorry for slamming my bedroom door (dramatic, yet necessary to prove a point), and DEFINITELY not sorry for leaving my food unfinished.

Regards,  
Your fed-up grandson.

---

Reach Moeun  
Phnom Penh  
Cambodia  
13th of April, 2022

Dear Grandma,

I don't know what it was earlier that night. I don't know what made you come into my room. But all I know is that I'm thankful. I'm thankful for the way you gently knocked on my door, as opposed to barging in like you always do. I'm thankful that you didn't lecture me for playing computer games in the dimly lit room, which you blamed for my bad vision. And I'm especially thankful that, for the first time, you said sorry.

I don't know what made you apologize. Maybe it was the way I started to put food on my plate myself instead of relying on you to do it. Maybe it was the animosity between the two of us ever since the fight. Maybe it was the fact that it was the eve of Khmer New Year, a holiday meant to celebrate the new year by feasting with family (how ironic).

For the first time, you actually said sorry. But I should've been the one saying sorry.

You sat on my bed, the warm ambient lighting casting a shadow on your face, darkening your wrinkles which hung from your eyes—a reminder of your countless years battling exhaustion under the heat of the sun. It made me feel guilty. I felt even guiltier when you spoke.

Instead of the strong, confident, bossy tone you always used, you spoke in a tone I rarely heard. I could hear the pain in your voice. Your somber tone contrasted with the cold, no-nonsense grandma I characterized you as.

The way you described your life under the Pol Pot regime—how you had nothing to eat and would scrape the bottom of bowls for leftover rice, how you were overworked day and night, causing you to be so skinny your skin practically stuck to your bone, and how you could barely walk, requiring a stick just to stand... It made me realize why you are the way you are.

You went through a genocide. You were forced to slave away in rice fields under the boiling sun, with little to eat. And to survive, out of pure self-preservation, you grew layers to protect yourself. But under those layers was still a vulnerable woman who had to suffer through so much without anyone to support her. I'm sorry for not acknowledging that part of you.

I'm sorry for not finishing my food—and the way you finished my leftovers when I didn't. I'm sorry for the way I threw out my old toothbrushes as soon as the bristles started to wear, for buying new shirts as soon as the old ones got stains, and for throwing away the takeout boxes when I could've used them to store food. I'm sorry for being wasteful. Most importantly, I'm sorry that I never recognized what you went through.

You went through a time when you had nothing, so you made sure I had everything.

Thank you for your sacrifices and ensuring that I never had to know the feeling of an empty stomach. Thank you for giving me more than I could ever need. Thank you for being the best grandma in the world.

I love you and am grateful for all that you've done for me.

I promise to never leave another plate unfinished.

Sincerely,  
Your grandson.

# Storms and Sunshine

by A.G.

“Mum, they were laughing at me and making fun of me, ‘cause my teacher put us across from each other in the seating plan”, I explained, teary eyed. My stomach was in a knot, and I was trying my best not to cry. My throat hurt from choking back sobs.

“Sweetheart, I’m sorry that happened, they shouldn’t be treating you like this. But do you think that talking badly about them was a good idea? Look at what’s happened!”, my mother replied gently. My eyebrows furrowed and I looked down. She was right, I shouldn’t have talked about them, but I wish she wasn’t. I shook my head defiantly.

“But she’s so rude and annoying”, I told my mum, desperately trying to justify my wrongdoing. “That may be true, but don’t you think the way you said that was silly?”, she asked me calmly. I sighed. “I guess”.

“Look, it will be ok. Right now just go to bed and we can keep talking about this tomorrow”. I nodded and hugged my mum. That night I went to bed with a sick feeling in my stomach.

For the last three months of Year Seven, the sick feeling in my stomach remained. Every time someone looked at me, or saw me and then turned to talk to their friends, I felt sick. My head would spin and my stomach would drop, and I would worry. I couldn’t bear the thought that someone was making fun of me. I still had my friends, who understood why I worried, but I somehow felt alone. Sometimes the girls who talked about me behind my back would sit with my friends and chat. I worried that they were talking about me, saying awful things about me to my friends. On those days my heart beating was the only thing I could hear, and my stomach churning was the only thing I could feel. I didn’t want to be at school anymore. I stayed home and left early, more than I should’ve. I wasn’t focused on my work during class, because I was too busy watching what others were doing, seeing if they were laughing at me or talking about me. It was all I thought about.

One day at the end of the year, I messaged my mum to pick me up from school early. I had just been confronted by a group of angry girls, threatening me. That day I sat in the car sobbing, while my mum listened to my sorrows. How scared I was to go back to school. How everyone was being mean to me. How unsafe I felt. I told her that I thought it was unfair. She explained to me that I was just as much in the wrong as them. “You can’t come home every time you have to confront something hard.” She told me gently. “If you want to move forward, you have to face those things”. I kept crying, shoulders heaving and stomach at my feet.

I started Year Eight feeling the same way. I continued to feel like people were talking about me, laughing at me, calling me names. In the middle of that year, my anxiety became more severe and irrational. Each night the sound of tree branches scratching my window would keep me up. I would lay awake in my bed, listening to the howling of the wind and the sound of things falling to the ground outside. I worried about what was out there, my mind coming up with terrifying possibilities that haunted my every waking moment. At a point I don't remember, my worries overtook every thought in my mind. Every morning when my parents left for work, my mind told me of all the awful things that could happen to them. Every night I sat in the dark of my room, listening to my mind tell me more terrifying stories of things that would never happen. Yet I still believed it. My stomach dropped over and over again at each terrifying new thought. When I walked to school my eyes were filled with tears ready to escape, mind spinning like sand in a wave. Each new possibility my mind would come up with, left me more crippled each day.

Anxiety had taken control of my mind, and then my life. It left me paralysed, unable to escape its cold hands. It made me think I was alone, but God showed me that I was not.

In Year Nine, my best friend helped me to reconnect with two old friends, and make two new ones. This new friendship distracted me from my thoughts, and caused happiness, peace, and joy to bloom within me. Over time, my mind slowed down, anxiety began to fade, and I started to become more focused on my work during school. My best friend inspired me to put in more work, and I saw it pay off. She listened as I opened up about my past anxiety, never judging me, but patiently listening and understanding. She was there for me, and started to bring me out of the storm of anxiety.

My mum watched as the year went by, seeing me make new friends and do well in school. Her prayers were answered. Each day I would tell her what I did at school, what I felt, what my friends were doing. She listened carefully, hearing me, helping me, guiding me. My mind was light and at ease, taking in each moment as it came, not rushing to the future. My eyes were rarely full of tears, and my stomach stopped sinking when I saw people talking or laughing.

Now in Year Ten, I don't feel that sick feeling in my stomach anymore. Sometimes I worry, and it feels like the cold, merciless hands of anxiety are gripping my mind, but the sunshine of my friends and family always chase them away. My worries do not control me anymore. My friends have stayed by my side through good and bad, and our memories together are some of my most cherished. My mum has listened to my every thought, and has seen me grow and flourish in life. I have tried my hardest in school, and the joy of doing well has become a common part of my life. Although I still face hardships, I am now strong enough to move on and get through them. If I had not experienced hardships in my past, I would not be a girl whom I am proud of today. When I look back at my past, I feel a warmth within me, and I am filled with gratitude for the position I am in now. I have grown from a small Year Seven girl, into a girl whom I am proud of and grateful for. But most of all, I am grateful for my support system; my family and my friends,

who have helped me more than they know. Without them, I would not have become a girl whom I am proud of.

My mum has held my hand every day of my life, shielding me from storms, and dancing with me through sunshine. She tells me the hard truth when I need to hear it. She has given me advice that has entirely changed my perspective. The grace that she has shown me, and the sacrifices she has made for me have allowed me to flourish. She has inspired me to show grace to others, and has made me a more resilient person. My identity has been molded by her in every stage of my life, and for that, I am forever grateful.

My friends have been with me in this newfound sunshine, for they are what parted the clouds. The immense joy and peace I experience with them is too great for words. They have inspired me to be my best, and I never feel my stomach drop when I am with them. Their presence has been the sunlight that makes flowers grow, and I can see myself growing every day.

To grow up can be scary and alienating, and storms will come through. But there is always calm after storms. Flowers could not bloom without rain, but they also need sunshine. Those who I am surrounded by have been the sunshine that has caused me to grow. They have made growing up beautiful and exciting, because we experience it together. I know as I continue to grow, I will rely on new things to help me through. But as I look to the future, I feel excited, and have a light feeling in my stomach. I am no longer weighed down by anxiety, because I have grown up.

# Year 8

By ZE

My hair was frizzy and dull, the intense smell of burning lingered off of my long bleached and damaged ends. It was straightened the night before, but the bleach wouldn't let my hair stay straight. As I pushed all of my plushies off my bed, I glimpsed into the mirror.

"My hair looks disgusting, and my skin... Why am I so pale?" I thought to myself. Annoyed.

It was 8:30 am at that point, meaning Mum had already left, and I had just woken up. I had no sense of urgency so spending thirty minutes or more on my appearance meant nothing, even though I was already late.

"Hey google, play lil Tjay" I shouted eagerly, ready to re-straighten my hair.

The smell of burnt hair had crept around my room, mixing in with my strong perfume.

Time check: It's 9:00 am

The thought of school hadn't even crossed my mind until I looked around for my other body mist and saw my uniform on my dresser, tossed aside like a scrap of crumpled paper. This signalled me to open up my schedule, just to find out there was a science test that I was supposed to take. With that in mind, there was still no urgency to get to school.

I walked against the cold piercing wind which came along with a few raindrops, finally entering the school campus. In fear of my hair and makeup being ruined I swiftly pulled out a book from my bag as a shade against the weather. Recess had just started.

When I crept through the front door, Mum greeted me, so I wondered:

"How many more times can I get away with this?"

That routine of not going to school early repeated a couple days a week for the next month. Even if I didn't attend late, I would wag periods throughout to get out of a full day of school. The wagging mostly started from peer pressure, that came with most situations.

"C'mon Zaz, It's just a single period. No one will notice!"

"Pleasee I really don't want to wag alone."

I bit my lip as I fidgeted with my necklace. Not wanting to look like a baby, I caved.

I would wag every period if I could, even by myself. Showing up to school with a full face of makeup sat in a bathroom stall. Constant absences alerted my coordinators meaning calls going home and detentions. Who I feared the most was my Mum. She would warn me not to misbehave, otherwise there would be consequences. I thought of the worst. Would she take my phone? Would she ground me? Would I never be able to see my friends again? These consequences were lit in the back of my mind like a flickering candle, casting shadows of worry. But I never listened to these thoughts, always wanting to rebel. I wanted desperately to fit in, I had missed so many classes that I didn't even know what was going on. In my head there was no point.

I can't remember the date, but I can remember the exact moment my rebelling would come to an end. The walk home felt different. The birds weren't singing, and it felt awkwardly quiet, as if a storm brewing in the background, A notification rung in my AirPods,

"Text message from mum: I got another call about your attendance. You disobeyed me again, just wait until I get home."

I stopped in my tracks and my eyes widened to digest the message I had just received. With my heart rate rising, I continued walking. For some reason I knew my mum was serious this time, I was actually afraid of what could happen.

I got home before my Mum, and the wait was dreadful, unsure of what to expect. As her car pulled up, I could feel her anger in the way she slammed the door.

"Zahra!" She screamed from outside, her voice piercing the air.

Silence. My trembling hands did not know to respond

"Zahra, where are you?" She repeated as she walked in, the front door clashing open against the wall like a crack of thunder.

My eyes turned away from the television towards her face, her clenched jaw in view.

"I did not move halfway across the world for you to just sit in a bathroom stall all day."

"What are you talking—," I began, but I couldn't get far.

"Who do you think you are? Skipping class at the school I enrolled you in for your sake!"

"It's really not that deep—"

"Deep? It's time to grow up and realise that your actions have consequences. From now, your iPhone, iPad and laptop in my room. NOW." She exploded.

“But Mum—“

“I don’t want to hear it, I’ve warned you about this.”

In that moment, I felt my blood boil with rage. Stomping towards my bedroom I swung my door purposely with as much force as possible, the picture frames vibrating as a result. As soon as I crashed onto my bed, silence wrapped around me, as thoughts came flooding into my head like heavy rain, non-stop. Is she serious? What a joke, right? It wasn’t my fault, was it?

It felt like the world was coming down around me. It had never been this serious before, was this all worth it? I thought, Laying by myself amongst complete silence with nothing to entertain me. Why did I continue doing the wrong thing? It was all so pointless.

For some reason I didn’t understand that I had brought this upon myself, no one forced me to wag almost everyday of school but myself.

Now that I’m older and have kids of my own, I realised that when you’re young, you often try to deflect upon others. Blaming them for your actions and never seeing that you were actually responsible. I thought that growing up was wearing makeup, and being able to control my own day. But in that moment I learnt that growing up was actually being able to take accountability for my mistakes. Lying in the silence of my bedroom, this message had never been more true.

# Rosa's Epistles

by Rosa Galanti

Dear Nonna,

Do you remember when you wrote down your Crostata recipe for me and Mum? When we eventually ended up making it, the Crostata tasted nothing like yours...It was probably because of the measurements being "one little packet of whatever" and things like that. I don't blame that on you though. If I knew Italian, you could have just written it in Italian and it would taste much like yours. And that story of when your dad came back from war seven whole years later. When you tried to explain he got captured in war, you gestured cell bars, like you sometimes do. I understand you a lot and you don't usually forget words but it still makes me feel a bit guilty that all I need to do is explain myself in simple sentences and you have to search for the words in a language you aren't even fluent in. Do you remember how happy I got when I got to eat your spaghetti after not seeing you for a while? The smell of your pasta sauce was so easy to spot and remember...I ate so much in so little time. And the rare chance there were leftovers, I'd bring them in the car home with me and mum. You should've heard her rant about your amazing cooking. She'd call you sauce "liquid gold" and I agree with her completely. I was originally going to save the pathetically small amount of leftovers for dinner but it seemed Mum was desperate to eat your pasta. But all that trouble you went through just to have a conversation with me wasn't fair. I'm sorry I don't understand Italian but next time I see you I will learn new phrases to impress you with, I promise.

Lots of love,

Rosa V. Galanti

P.S.

please make some of your iconic crostata for me...i miss it so much, but no pressure.

Dear Mum,

I'm sure you're sick of me begging you to teach me Macedonian, but I feel bad for Baba and Dedo. On top of that, I wanna teach my kids Macedonian one day. I don't know anyone except for the elderly who speak it and I don't want it to become a forgotten language. Even so many people at the Macedonian wedding we went to didn't actually know how to speak Macedonian—me included. Actually, that wedding was very fun...with the tassel, the spiral of

people dancing and holding hands as the band stood in the middle of the spiral, speeding up the music and peoples footwork all over the place...it was such a nice vibe. And even though I don't understand what they are saying in the Macedonian songs, I've always been a big fan of the vocals and instrumentals in the music. Even if I'm not connected to my culture as much as I want to be, it's still refreshing to actually be around people who understand the culture or see cultural references of us in the media, which is something I've only seen twice...one of the times being married at first sight. I remember I was sitting at the end of the couch, reading a comic until I heard "Macedonians?" I immediately looked up to see what you and Grace were talking about. I feel like I'd be more connected to my culture if I could speak the language. So please, just teach me a little Macedonian bit-by-bit...I already know the Cyrillic alphabet so it makes it a little easier. Or you can help me work out where or how to learn it. Sorry for asking so much, I'm just super desperate to learn it.

Love you so much,

Rose

Dear Baba,

Whenever you come over or we go to your place, you always give us something. As usual, you give me pickles, avjar and feta because you know how much I love them. Thank you for always filling up our fridge with food from the garden and food from the grocery you know we like. And thank you for making us food a lot. I love when you make us piperki and dometi, even if it's such a basic meal. And in return, I will perfect Zelnik and Kifi for you, just the way you make it. I remember when you would make Zelnik for new years and sneak a coin in one of the slices for good luck. I would always get upset when someone else would get it and not me, but that was when I was very young. Even so, it's pretty embarrassing...Also, I'm sure you noticed but I can understand what you are saying much more than I could when I was younger. I can even respond in simple phrases in Macedonian. You always smile a lot whenever I respond back in Macedonian. Eventually, I'll get fluent in Macedonian and we will have conversations much easier. I used to not understand anything about Macedonian so I've gotten pretty far. Thanks for being so patient with me. You're still one of the most kind and giving people I know and thank you for everything you have done for ke and the family. We all love and appreciate you.

With love,

Rose, or "Roise" according to you.

Random guy from school,

No, I am not Greek, and yes North Macedonia is a country. Just because you believe that the Greeks own North Macedonia, doesn't mean my culture is diminished or the same as yours. If my culture is closest to anything, it's Turkish. Our cultures are not alike and North Macedonians are not a part of Greece, so seriously stop screaming to me about "Macedonia isn't a country!" And just accept my ethnicity and culture.

From

The "stupid" Macedonian girl—not Greek.