



May 2021

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Special Focus

Mental Health Awareness

Educators of the Year

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YES! I Am Mexican

Owning Your Identity



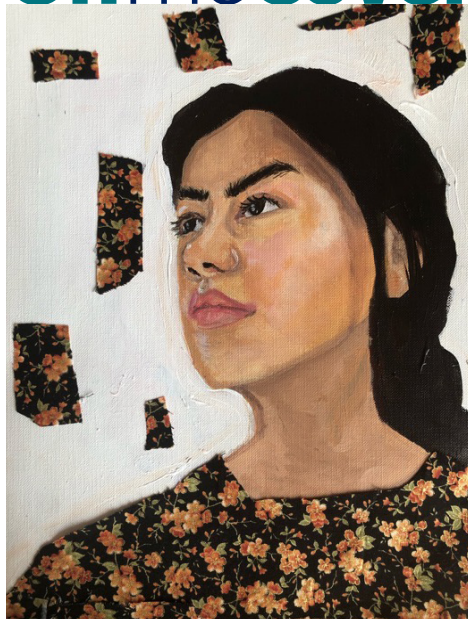
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Naperville, IL

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The Bet

by Georgia Pulierm, Los Angeles, CA

Artwork by Kaylee Bodiford, Bryant, AR

April 2014. My sister proposed yet another bet. The winner of our past bets had bragging rights for weeks. They were serious. She bet me the one thing I was sure to lose – to see who could not eat meat the longest. Whoever won would get a dollar for every day she lasted longer than the other. Until then, my favorite food was steak. Better put, the only food I was willing to eat was strips of cow flesh, burnt to the consistency of tough leather. That was my diet, chosen with great pride, and I had no intention of changing it. Given my dedication to steak as my main life-sustaining nutrient, Chloe's challenge was quite jarring. It was like asking me to avoid all things Justin Bieber, an unthinkable hurdle to my 12-year-old self. We twisted pinkies, and I set out to win.

I struggled to stay strong. To inhibit my cravings, I searched for cute videos of cows. Instead, I was met with horrific images of cattle being slaughtered. I read about the horrors of industrial animal farms, the conditions of livestock jammed so close they could not move, inhumane feeding, and slaughter practices. The next morning, I watched Chloe eat a ham and cheese omelet. I won the bet, but rather than joining her, I was flooded with mental images of the story behind her meal and the process that brought it into our home. When I tried to eat a bite of steak, I hesitated and stopped. The meat oozed blood. It was filled with tendons I had never noticed. My delight turned to disgust, and the meat between the bread reeked of inhumanity, sadness, and cruelty. I knew I was never going to eat meat again.

Vegetarianism became a way of life. I studied what vitamins I needed to maintain health and what foods could help me achieve optimal levels. However, not only did my food change, I changed. I credit this shift in mind and body to what I learned by taking that fateful bet. The experience strengthened my ability to take on challenges in other areas in my life. In high school, I was hit with crippling migraines several days a week. With little warning, I would get a sharp pain behind my eyes, a mind-bending headache, and extreme nausea. At first, it felt impossible to overcome. I had to figure out ways to tackle my assignments with quality even when I couldn't get out of bed. I recognized that no matter the challenge, I was strong-willed and capable of pushing through to a solution.

I stopped complaining and started doing it. The techniques I developed to address the migraines worked.

In another way as well, the small bet I took so many years ago planted a seed that bloomed years later. This seed was my social conscience, a notion that grew from talk to action, from vague

“*Being vegetarian has taught me how to be confident in my positions without swaying to the winds of outside pressures*”

ethical standards to principles that became core parts of my identity. Decisions I may not have made when I was younger became natural, such as insisting on minimal plastic in the packaging of my products on my website, doing the work to ensure they are cruelty-free, and donating a portion of profits to a cause that aligns with my beliefs. While creating these ethical standards and strong values, I have learned to find passion for things without condemning others who do not agree with me. Doing research allows me to teach people and make even small differences in the face of established “normal” practices. For example, while I am adamantly opposed to industrial farming and can argue why until the end of time, I am not judging those who choose to eat meat. In my family, my two older brothers are big meat eaters. I try to urge them to buy meat that has been responsibly raised with humane and environmentally responsible practices. Being vegetarian has taught me how to be confident in my positions without swaying to the winds of outside pressures. I can be aware and respectful of differing opinions without adopting them. Even on a dare.

October 2020. Chloe approached with that mischievous gleam in her eye. This time, I stepped in. “Chloe,” I said, “before you suggest another bet, by my calculations, you have a pending balance of \$2,370. So far.” I haven't heard a bet from Chloe since. 🍷

Artwork by Serena Pei,
San Jose, CA



Artwork by Aileen Xie, San Jose, CA

Special

by Anonymous, Sunnyside, NY



When I was young, my parents always told me to strive to be the best.

“Why be number two,” they asked me, “or three, or four, when you can be number one?” With wide eyes, I nodded and agreed; who didn’t want to be number one? I went to school on weekdays, went to prep school on Saturdays, and went to piano lessons on Sunday, every week without fail. My parents worked all day, every day, in their own Chinese fast food restaurant, and so I rarely spoke with them. My older brother took me to school, took me home, and helped me if I had homework questions.

My parents urged me to master everything. “Piano will look good on your college record,” they said. “Drawing will be a useful skill. Just look at your brother’s drawings.” I began drawing lessons on Saturdays, arranged right after prep school.

For many years, it was easy. I felt smart, like I was special. Nobody in school seemed to know how to do anything I did. They didn’t know what algebra was in fifth grade and struggled with long division when I was studying geometry. They didn’t know how to draw beyond stick figures or how to play any instruments outside of blowing a few notes on a cheap plastic recorder.

Things began changing in middle school. The day of the citywide high school admission test drew closer, and suddenly, nothing except the test mattered.

“This test is very important,” my parents told me, over and over, almost every day without fail. “This test determines your future. Your brother goes to the best school in this state, so you should be able to as well.”

A few months later, they told me, “Don’t waste your time in high school. Your brother plays games all the time, and that’s why his grades are low.”

“What if I don’t get in?” I asked, and my mother laughed.

“Of course you will get in.”

That didn’t reassure me.

But to my relief and joy, when I opened

the white envelope that I knew concealed my high school future, the small, bolded text of the school name greeted my eyes. I immediately took a picture and sent it to my parents.

I didn’t receive anything other than a thumbs-up emoji.

“Remember,” they told me as I began high school, “don’t waste your time. Don’t be like your brother.” Their attention was no longer split between my brother and me as he entered university. Their pressuring expectations were now solely directed toward me.

High school was different from elementary or middle school. Almost everyone knew how to do math as quickly and efficiently

“*I was quickly falling behind, and I was hit with the cold, hard truth: I wasn’t special. I wasn’t a one-in-a-thousand genius.*”

as me. Almost everyone knew how to play an instrument, or excel at a sport, or was an artist, or excelled in some other aspect outside of academics.

I wasn’t number one, or even number two, or three, or four. I was quickly falling behind, and I was hit with the cold, hard truth:

I wasn’t special.

I wasn’t a one-in-a-thousand genius.

Bitterness sprung in my heart. My parents had always told me to be number one. I couldn’t be number one. How were they going to accept that? How was I supposed to explain to them that I wasn’t special? That I wasn’t the daughter they wanted me to be?

I stopped drawing. I had no time for it. Playing piano every day slowly dwindled

to about once a week. My parents were displeased, but I had no energy to play nice with them. I was struggling with my classes, and I continued struggling despite my efforts.

When report cards came out, it turned the household into a war zone. My parents noticed none of my efforts, or the time I spent on schoolwork; to them, my worth was defined solely by the small numbers, arranged in a neat little column, one after another.

“If you don’t care about me,” I shouted, “why would you care about my grades?”

My mother froze, and my father raised his hand threateningly.

“Watch your attitude,” my mother warned.

I didn’t get the message. “All you two care about is grades, grades, grades! Why can’t you see that I’m trying?”

A searing pain exploded at the side of my face, and I staggered. Identical pain blossomed as another blow landed on me, and I stepped backwards, slipping and falling. Black dots swam in my blurry vision as my father screamed at me. My mother grasped his hand, whispering softly to him.

They left me to retreat into their bedroom, closing and locking the door.

It was a while before I could stand up and not have the world spin upside down. Hot, unwilling tears streamed down my throbbing cheeks and dripped off my chin as I walked slowly into the bathroom, quietly closing and locking the door. I slid to the floor and buried my head in my arms on my knees.

It wasn’t the physical pain that really hurt.

It was their lack of concern.

I wasn’t able to really look at them eye to eye again for months.

My grades fell even lower, and I made little effort to pull them up again. When just months ago I was dissatisfied with anything less than an A, I was numb to the Bs and Cs that followed. My parents didn’t mention anything about my grades, and I never brought it up. We almost never looked at each other, let alone talked.



They acted as though I didn't exist, excluding me from meals and ignoring me when I pulled all-nighters.

A part of me wanted them to yell at me, if only to stop them from ignoring me.

My freshman year came and went. The summer was almost unbearable; not talking to my parents when I had to spend more time with them was difficult. I busied myself with a job, and my brother – far away in university and safe from the tense home environment – expressed what appeared like obscure concern for me when I informed him dully that I still wasn't on speaking terms with our parents.

I could no longer sleep at night. Instead, I often spent nights staring at the ceiling, replaying the arguments that I had had with my parents and weaving scenarios in which I hadn't spoken back, or shouted, or cried. When I returned to school, insomnia took a toll on me. I couldn't maintain my attention during school, and I began the school year with lower grades than I had ended my freshman year with.

I wanted my parents to talk to me again. I wanted to tell them I was sorry, that I would try harder, that we shouldn't be strangers in the same home.

Yet a part of me was bitter. They were my parents. Why, how, could they cast me aside so easily? Did it not bother them if I didn't exist? Was I really so insignificant that they

“*My troubles seeped out of me with the blood, and I was flooded with a sense of relief*,”

could go about their daily lives without a hitch when, because of them, I couldn't sleep nor focus on anything I wanted?

My conclusion was that I was, indeed, that insignificant.

After all, I wasn't special.

I wasn't a one-in-a-thousand genius.

I wasn't the daughter they wanted me to be.

A horrible, panicky feeling crawled through my stomach and up my throat. I was constantly anxious, and one day when I was alone at home, I was hit with a sudden compulsion. I took two wine glasses from the kitchen and raised them above my head.

I dropped them, one by one, watching the once pristine stemware shatter upon meeting the mahogany wood. The noise stirred something in me, and I was, for the first time in a year, completely relaxed.

For a few days, my anxiety went away. When it began growing once again, I searched desperately for something else

to calm me. Music only reminded me of my neglected piano and the piano lessons I had abandoned. Drawing reminded me of the numerous presents I had drawn for my parents on their birthdays and holidays. Writing always turned into homework.

I got my answer when I was cutting meat to prepare myself a meal.

I nicked my finger, and for a split second, pain flashed through my hand before it was gone. I lifted my hand closer to my face, watching the blood slowly drip down my finger and palm. I caught it with a towel before it could drip down my wrist and off my elbow.

At that moment, I realized that the pain was like a tranquilizer. My troubles seeped out of me with the blood, and I was flooded with a sense of relief. It lifted the tension that was plaguing my mind. It was something I could control.

It became an almost daily routine.

Old wounds never had a chance to heal properly as I went over them again. I couldn't get my parents to talk to me, and I couldn't do anything right academically or socially, but at the very least, I could control my own pain. Did it matter to others that I was doing this? They didn't have to know. They would never know. My parents would have the blinds continuously drawn over their eyes.

After all, I wasn't special.



Artwork by Alice Jang, Scarsdale, NY

I wasn't number one.

I wasn't the daughter they wanted me to be.

And I didn't have to be.

Or so I thought.

My clinic doctor noticed the thin lines of slightly elevated scar tissue when withdrawing blood for a blood test. Within a week, I was arranged to attend therapy. My parents were made aware of my situation, and when they gave me uneasy looks, as though I was mentally insane, I realized something.

I no longer just wanted them to notice me.

I wanted them to love me.

I rejected help. I refused to talk to my therapist, and my parents remained convinced that I was a psychopath in the making. I still couldn't sleep at night, and more nights than not, my gaze returned to the blades in the kitchen.

One early morning, around three, I exited my bedroom to go to the bathroom. On the way, I paused by my parents' bedroom; hushed whispers tickled my ears through the partially open door.

"It hurts, down here," I heard my mother whisper, "that our child doesn't understand we're trying to help. The things we ask for aren't for us... Why doesn't our child understand that?" Her voice was broken, and her words ended with a small, watery hiccup.

My eyes widened.

"We ... We should have spent more time with our children when they were younger, instead of working all day for money. We could have prevented this. We should have done more.

"I love my children. I really, really do. But ... "

"Should I just ... give up?"

"Would that make me happier?"

I resisted the urge to walk in and shout that I wouldn't trade them for the world, that I loved them.

I wasn't insignificant. I plagued their minds at night the way they plagued mine, and they clearly couldn't sleep either. It bothered them that I wouldn't talk to them, that I wouldn't greet them when they came home after a day's hard work.

I existed. I definitely existed.

The next day, a Saturday, I woke up early.

Breakfast was on the table with freshly boiled water by the time they were awake. My mother looked surprised, but my father's face was stony.

"I'm sorry."

The words slipped out of me so quietly they could have been mistaken for the hissing of the stove fire.

"I'm sorry. For everything."

They never gave me any form of recognition of my apology. Instead, they sat down and began eating. After a second of hesitance, I joined them.

When I collected the dishes for washing, my father gave me a long, scrutinizing gaze before leaving for his room. My mother sat at the table, eyes never leaving me, and I swallowed hard.

"I'm sorry," I repeated once again.

“I no longer just wanted them to notice me. I wanted them to love me.”

Her voice was quiet, but it held none of the iciness I was bracing myself for. "Wear an extra sweater if you're going out today. It's cold." With that, she stood up and left to join my father, and I was left staring after her.

The uncertain expression of my face slowly morphed into a small smile.

I wasn't special.

I wasn't a one-in-a-thousand genius.

But I was a child that my parents loved and cared for, despite every wrong choice I've made.

And in the end, I was okay with that. 🌞

The Teller

by Diya Sabharwal, New Delhi, India

Artwork by Samiya Nagrath,
New Delhi, India

My fortune teller, Nashia, isn't very good at telling fortunes. She's a good teller of a lot of things, but fortune isn't one of them.

I visit her bi-weekly for a whole different purpose altogether. You see, she's a teller of great truths. She has strong opinions on many different topics and will not hesitate to share them with you. She is a *saheli*, a friend, a home away from home (if people could be homes). She tells me the truth about Mrs. Majumder's fat tabby cat, and about how my backside looks rather fat in my new trousers. She tells me about her life as a bank teller at a big bank, for that is her day job – it provides her sustenance – something that fortune telling, despite its high necessity in today's society, can rarely ever do.

“The lights from her crystal ball dance upon her face”

Oh, but she's a flatterer, that one. Every time I go over to her little hideout, she tells me her talisman warned her of my arrival. The talisman twinkles when it is happy, she says, and it always twinkles when I am about to come. The talisman is made of a bright topaz stone, contrasting brilliantly when held up against the azure walls, and I tell her my eyes twinkle, too, when I see it.

“Guut, then de feeling ees mutual!” she exclaims in a singsong fashion, the Arabic inflection in her words reverberating off the walls, her thick voice forming a sonorous canopy around us and providing comfort.

My fortune teller is also a great teller of stories. She will sit across from you in that tiny azure room, her jet black hair a perfect tangle of curls under her hijab, and she will tell you many great stories of her life living on the edge of the Sunderbans delta, from many long years ago.

And her face lights up with joy when she reminisces, a twinkling in her eyes as well now. As she speaks, her face hypnotizes me. Every part of it expresses the kind of deep emotions you can only hope to receive from your very own *aashiq* – a lover.

Even her nose shows expression. It crinkles, flares, and seems to bob up and down, enlivened by the memories of years past, a sweet button-nose with a freckle atop it. And the lights from her crystal ball dance upon her face, and her eyes tell more about her than I could ever hope to understand.

She will tell you about great adventures in the Sunderbans forests, the marshy mangroves. She will tell you stories of the time her big brother brought home a little tiger cub. She will tell you how she and her family raised it and fed it milk; ivory milk to match those ivory teeth.

She will tell you stories of how she cared for him, how she brushed

his fur with a makeshift comb she fashioned herself out of pine leaves and a bamboo plant, and how he would greet her every day with a special snort sound he'd reserved just for her. She will tell you how she cried when he grew up and left home, never to return. Had she not taught him better than to abandon his family?

She will tell you to take a sip of your martini, and it is now well past midnight, and you can see smears of her dark purple lipstick on her martini glass, and that thick Arabian voice still has you enraptured with all its telling.

And, if she gets drunk enough, and if your fortune is good, she might tell you about Rashid – the hairdresser who loved her. She might tell you how he bought her tulips every day for a month, and as she speaks you will see glimpses of her youth peeking out from where it's been hiding all these years.

And she will tell you that his azure eyes shined brighter than the sun, and you will wonder to yourself if they were even nearly as bright as hers are right then. She will tell you of the warmth of his hand in hers, and she will shiver, quite oxymoronically, at the memory of his embrace. And if you ask her if she misses him, she will adamantly refuse.

And so, at the end, she is a teller of lies as well. ☀️



Artwork by Claire Luo,
San Jose, CA



Artwork by Neha Vinod, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates



Photo by Serenity Barton, Wyndmere, ND



Artwork by Aina Marzia, El Paso, TX



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Photo by Jiayin Zou, Mclean, VA