

Sometimes, I think you are a robot.

Your face shows an almost never changing expression of intelligence and seriousness, as if you are analyzing everyone's actions with certain preciseness. I suspect you have a heart just like a robot's too, which is, they don't have one. Every day, you come home late from club activities which drag on late into the night. The garage door would squeak open, and I'll see you from the kitchen as you enter. A worn backpack bursting with textbooks and binders weighs down on your shoulders. No matter how many times our mother warns you of how ruined your posture will get, you don't listen. You never did, even when we were young. A plastic bag that dangles from your arm rustles when it sways and hits your leg. You don't seem to notice. Instead, you kick off your shoes, and trudge up the stairs. Each day, there is not a single "Hello" or "How was school?" uttered. Just our old, battered door opening, and your tired face appearing from the dark gloom of the garage.

It wasn't always like this. There were days when you and I used run around the backyard, shrieking with laughter, sunshine warming our faces that smiled with delight. Drawing pictures in the shade, singing songs when taking out the laundry. Now it has been several years since we have done anything together. School for you has gotten more stressful, and that means for you there is no time to play. The days of the sunshine are gone, bringing my sister's love with them.

I ride on the bus, alone in my seat. The new bus is larger than the one we used to ride on. My seat feels too spacious. Is it the bus, or is it the lack of your voice? How we would joke and talk all the way to school? Perhaps I can't tell, or maybe I don't care anymore.

The bus screeches to a halt, exhaust hanging in the air like a stormy cloud. Spring is just beginning to peek around the corner, and it lightens my mood. I begin to walk to the school gates, a spring in my step. The atmosphere is quiet, sunlight just beginning to stream into the classroom when I enter. There is no one else in the room other than me and the surrounding silence. I wait in the serene setting, until kids start to flood in and class officially begins.

The teacher begins with introducing a contest to us. Just by hearing the name of it, my stomach flutters. Small snippets of memories appear in my mind. The rain and its soft touch as it drizzled onto my face. Us walking into the massive building, our footsteps echoing at each step

we took. The chilled drinks and sharp cheese refreshments I ate the whole time. How they called your name, and you walked to the front to receive your certificate. You always were going above and beyond, and I guess that's why all the teachers love you. Just like a good book, everyone wanted more. They craved a sequel, or a book by the same author. But they never find anything like the first book they read. Instead, all they get is a battered paperback with no plot, no adventure, no suspense, nothing. In other words, they get me.

It's not that I'm bad; I'm just not good enough. When I was young, oblivious, and attention hungry, I never noticed how your drawings were better than mine and the twinge of jealousy when looking at your grades was non-existent. Now, a small worry lies deep in my stomach, slowly growing like a tapeworm. With it in my body, a thought will always race in my mind whenever you beckon me to try a club or competition with you: *if you do it so well without trying, there is no way I even have a chance*. And as your achievements increase, it continues to chew away at my confidence.

Now, my teacher reminds me of yet another success you made in your sixth and seventh grade. I don't want to enter, but the room quivers with whispers, and explodes into conversation as soon as the teacher leaves to get printouts. When she returns, in her arms are the rules for the contest. The teacher taps the papers gingerly on the counter to straighten them out, and then sets them down with equal carefulness. "Anyone who wants one is welcome to take it," she calls out. Instantly, a small mob forms around the papers, and the pile becomes an unkempt mess. I walk to it and begin to straighten it out, wanting the papers to be nice and orderly. Looking up, I see my teacher looking at me, and smiling. Not knowing what to do, I give her a tight smile in return and then quickly snatch a sheet before going back to my desk. No sooner had I sat down a classmate of mine began to whine.

"It's not fair how we are the bottom, youngest grade," he gripes. Although he had just stated his opinion, the boy waits for an answer, or maybe for his teacher to support his thoughts. She instead stares at him, and I wonder if she ever wanted to kick someone out of the class for complaining too much. To my surprise, she instead grins at the student.

"*Actually*, there is no disadvantage for your grade," the teacher tells him. She then mentions you, and again, turns and smiles at me while she continues to mention how you won,

two times in a row even though you were the youngest in your category. I get it now. My teacher has found the book, but has not opened yet. She wants me to enter, and thinks I can win.

* * *

I hop onto the muddy road as my bus pulls away behind me. The damp soil sticks to my sneakers like leaches on bare skin. When I open the garage door with a small shove, I notice that you are sitting at the kitchen table. You're reading, with a bowl of grapes in front of you. "No clubs today?" I ask, after dropping my backpack onto the ground. I slide into the chair across from you and pop a grape into my mouth. It bursts sweet juice over my tongue when I bite into it.

At first, you don't react to my inquiring. Your eyes are focused on the book in your hands. Slowly, you look up, and notice me for the first time. "Huh? What?" Your shoulders tense, and your head jerks up to look at me. You look confused, as if you had just walked into a room and had no idea what was going on. I repeat my question, and you relax, leaning back on your chair. "Yeah, stuff was cancelled due to tests," you reply, and then stand up. You push your chair back, which makes a grating noise, even on the wood floor of the kitchen. Under your breath I can hear you mutter "I still have homework, though." You grab your bag and trudge up the stairs, and at the last minute I decide to trail behind you into your room. At your door, you glance at me for a second, as if asking "*why are you here?*"

The gaze only lasted for two or three seconds, but it still hurts. There are memories I remember of when I would burst into your room, with food, homework, a humorous story, or anything I could ever think of. How you laugh your airy laugh, or eat the ends of my bananas which I hate. When I used your room like my second room, sleeping for nights then getting evicted. How I'd come back after one week or so. I remember your smile, the one that showed your crooked teeth.

Now, the smile is gone, after your braces had straightened your teeth. All that's left is this girl that stands in front of me, her stare cold as ice. Is she really you? I manage a weak smile, asking if I can accompany you for your homework. No grins or laughs are returned to me. You just give me a small shrug, and say, "Whatever, just don't mess up anything."

I haven't been in your room for a while, and the green shaggy carpet sticks through the spaces in my toes. You set your backpack down next to your desk and then sit down in your chair. Small headphones slip over your ears, and you hum as you work. I sit on the floor, my legs straight in front of me. We both work in silence, besides your humming.

One or two hours later, I stretch, turning my back when sitting down. A series of small cricks goes up my back. "Homework, done!" I announce, and begin to check my planner to make sure I had not forgotten anything. When I open the notebook, something flutters out onto my lap. It was the printout for the contest.

The feeling that something began to chew on my stomach as soon as I took out the sheet practically screamed at me to put it away, and forget about it for the rest of my life. I balled the paper up, and aimed at your recycle bin. *Whoosh*. The ball flies into the air, and then misses entirely, hitting the leg of your table. You bend down to pick it up, and I want to yell at you, tell you "no!" or "Don't pick it up!" but nothing comes out of my mouth. Your slender hands begin to unfold the paper and your face lights up at the sight of the contest.

"Oh, I remember this contest!" you exclaim, waving the crumpled printout in your left hand. "You should try it."

I stare down, studying my hands. This is not what I want. I know I can't do this contest, and now you are pushing me to do so? "Why don't you do it? It should be easy for you," I murmur quietly, under my breath. With your hearing as good as a falcon, you still knew what I said. Your smile started to fade like a sunset, slowly disappearing under the horizon.

"You know I don't have enough time," you say, your hands still clutching the paper. I look up and study your face, something I have not done since we were kids. I'm startled to see you have bags under your eyes. Not like the small ridges on my bottom eyelids, your eyes have actual, small dark crescents below.

I curse at myself for not noticing. While I was being selfish with all of my "I'll never be as good as my sister," thoughts and negativity, you were working on projects. I think of how I had asked almost every day if you wanted to play, and how your response was always no. I wonder if you sat at your computer and looked at the sunlight that steamed through the window,

desire growing in your mind. If you ever had wanted to go outside, but your homework tied you up, chained you to your seat.

Of course you aren't perfect. Nobody is. Not you, not me, or anyone in the world. No one expects anything from me either, only I do. Although teachers wish they had another student like you, they probably don't think another person just like their sister will really show up. Then, there was you. You always accepted what I wanted, always rooted for me. Why did I ever think otherwise?

I have made my decision. "I'll try my best on the contest," I tell you, confidence building up in my chest. I take a shower before starting, the hot water washing away all of the worries I had left. When I sit down at my desk, I think about my teacher, who smiled at me. There was no pressure in that smile. Just encouragement, a small "you can do it!"

I lay my fingers on the keyboard, and begin to type.