

## **Breaking free**

I don't know if superpowers would have taken away the awkwardness of my coming of age. Maybe if I could fly or become invisible, I could've skipped those years of hiding behind lockers, pretending I wasn't looking when I absolutely was, or praying no one would ask me to read aloud — because somehow, even my breathing got weird when people were watching. Maybe X-ray vision could've helped me see through the thick fog of self-doubt that hovered around me like a storm cloud in Year 9, or at least helped me find an escape route out of every painfully silent group activity.

But I didn't have superpowers. I had a lopsided haircut that was supposed to be "textured layers" but looked more like I'd lost a fight with a weed whacker, acne that popped up with precision timing before every school photo or social event, and a voice that cracked like cheap glass during even basic greetings. I was awkward, all elbows and knees, a walking tangle of limbs and nervous laughter, wings too big, legs too thin, all flail and no flight.

I didn't know how to stand without looking weird. I didn't know what to do with my hands. I once laughed so hard at a joke that wasn't funny, I snorted in front of my entire homeroom. I said "you too" when the cashier told me to enjoy my meal. I practiced how I'd say "hi" to my crush and then bailed when we made eye contact. My thoughts were like scrambled signals, always racing, never arriving.

It was the end of summer when I turned fifteen that everything started to change. Not dramatically. Not like a superhero origin story, there was no radioactive spider, no dramatic transformation montage. Just small, quiet shifts, like the sound of shoelaces tightening before a race you're not sure you can run.

My older cousin, Theo, had come to stay with us for the school holidays. He was nineteen, in uni, and from the way my parents talked about him, you'd think he was some kind of golden boy. "Top of his class." "Captain of this." "President of that." Like he'd been born with a LinkedIn profile.

He arrived wearing a leather jacket and confidence like it was sewn into the lining. Meanwhile, I was still trying to figure out how to wear a hoodie without the sleeves swallowing my hands. When he said "hey," I accidentally waived, with both hands.

At first I hated him. He was everything I wasn't: loud, smooth, magnetic, but then something strange happened. He started talking to me - not in a forced way adults do when they feel obligated but like he genuinely wanted to know what music I liked, or what I thought about school. One night, we sat on the roof of our garage, looking at the stars, and he said, "you don't need to wait to be someone else, you know"

I blinked at him "what does that mean?"

“It means”, he said, taking a swig from his coke, “you think once your voice settles, or your skin clears, or you figure out how to talk to girls without panicking, then you’ll be the real you. But that’s crap you’re already you. The rest is just practice”.

That sentence stuck with me. Like a lyric I couldn’t forget, even though I didn’t understand why it mattered so much at first.

In the weeks that followed, I started trying little things. I wore the stupid band shirt I actually liked, even though no one else at school had even heard of the band. I answered a question in class, stumbled through it, voice wobbly, and felt my cheeks burn like someone had lit a match under my skin. But I didn’t shrink into my seat. I stayed there. Upright. Breathing.

I started writing stories again. The kind I used to scribble in the backs of my notebooks before I got too embarrassed to let anyone see them. I printed one out, handed it to my English teacher with trembling hands and a shrug, and walked away before she could even say anything. The next day, she told me it was good. Good enough to enter in a competition.

It wasn’t easy. I still tripped over my words when I got nervous. I still laughed too loudly at the wrong times. I still turned red when someone made eye contact too long. But slowly, the fear of those moments stopped deciding what I did.

I didn’t wake up one morning fearlessly. I just stopped flinching so hard at who I already was. I stopped rehearsing my reactions in the mirror. I stopped editing myself mid-sentence. I started choosing honesty over perfection, and the more I did, the lighter I felt. Like I was finally stepping out of a costume I hadn’t even realised I’d been wearing a version of myself stitched together from everyone else’s expectations.

And underneath it?

I wasn’t perfect.

But I was real.

And that was enough.

One afternoon near the end of summer, Theo and I were walking back to the skate park. He was the only one who could actually skate. I just carried the board and tried not to fall too hard afterward. That’s when he said, “You’re different now.”

I shrugged. “Maybe.”

“No, seriously,” he said. “You’re standing straighter. You’re not mumbling all the time. You’re not trying so hard to disappear.”

I didn't know what to say. But it felt good. Like maybe I wasn't just pretending anymore, maybe I was actually growing into myself.

He left two days later. The silence in the house was like a vacuum. But I kept going. I kept writing. I kept being just a little braver each day.

I don't know if a superpower would've helped me. Maybe it would've made things easier, faster, cleaner, less painful. But I think it also would've taken away the parts that mattered most. The slow, awkward parts. The small victories no one sees. The nights where just showing up feels like enough.

Because the truth is, change doesn't come with a lightning bolt or a big moment. It sneaks in, quiet and clumsy. In the way you speak up, even when your voice shakes. In the way you look in the mirror and don't flinch. In the way you finally stop apologising for taking up space.

And maybe that's the real superpower not flying, or invisibility, or strength but the courage to stay, to try again, to grow into someone you're finally proud to be.

***By Justin Gao***