

-So, you said you want to go to Duke next year. Are you ready? Are you fearless?

-Yes. I can proudly say that I am fearless. Not only for the kind of fear toward ghosts. It's true that darkness or ghosts don't scare me; however, this is not what I want to tell you.

It was a mid November night and I burst into tears again. I could not remember how many times I had done so in the previous two months. I was so stressed. "You are putting too much pressure on yourself, girl", my host father, Mr. Aboud, said. True. But I couldn't help it.

I used to be a girl at the center of the world. All of my family's attention was on me, so were their expectations. I always excelled in school, receiving the highest or at least second highest grade on every test. A class monitor, an organizer, a leader, I did everything the way I wanted, and somehow my instinct never failed me. I had good friends and a modest but admired family. My parents not only cared for me but also gave me a loose rein in running my own life. Everything was so perfect that it hatched a problem. Having a wild nature, I wanted something imperfect. I sought a challenge.

It took nine months for me to finally get what I wanted. I became an exchange student in America. When I got off the plane, my host mom greeted me with a gorgeous smile. I was off to a good start. The school I would be attending, Collegiate School, was one of the best private schools in Virginia. Could I have been luckier? Having heard that the courses in America are much easier than those back home, I took as many AP classes as possible. My English was better than most of the other exchange students; I was more than confident. Here came the American sky where I would freely soar! I was so excited about my new life

full of challenges in making friends, studying in English, taking standardized tests and applying to colleges.

It was that November night when I fully understood what my mother meant by nagging: “Be careful what you ask for, or you might get it!” That night I cried from pressure. I had had to move to a new family, but they didn’t seem as nice as they were when I first visited either. The tension between my former and current host families made me the one who suffered. I could feel the coldness from my new host mom, and my little host sister called me evil for no reason, despite all my efforts to be nice to her. Being sensitive made the situation even worse for me. However, home wasn’t the biggest problem. School was. I was too used to spending no more than an hour or two on homework a day, but was still the best at my Vietnamese schools. Now it could take forever. I had to handle schoolwork, start the college application process, and study for the standardized tests all at the same time. I had to succeed this year. What a shame if I had to go back to Vietnam and repeat my senior year! I had to be as exceptional as I used to be. The last straw came with my SAT score. The friend who knew me best said that I could do much better, provided I had time to study. TIME. That’s the problem. That November night, I couldn’t hold it anymore. For the first time in my life, I had to admit that stress was killing me. Something had to change, and I made that change.

-Anyway, that November night is over. Now I am fearless.

-You mean you are back to exceptional and therefore you are not scared of anything?

-No sir. I’m not trying to tell you I’m fearless because I’m exceptional. In fact, it’s simply

that now I know I'm just an ordinary girl. For an ordinary girl, I know I can succeed as well as fail. I expect joy from life, but I know sadness is unavoidable. Sir, if you are aware that anything can happen, what can frighten you?

-You said the school you place your heart in is Duke University, but your parents cannot fund your education at Duke, although they wish to. Out of hundreds of international students applying to Duke each year, about only twenty five will get in with financial aid. Do you fear that our admission office will reject you this year?

-No. Duke has graduate schools, right?