

Face – Hetty Lau

It is easier the earlier it is. Less people, less triggers, less chaotic. More time, more space, more manageable. We have attended the same schools ever since he started primary school, so he has always gone to school together with me ever since I can remember. Mom used to come along, but now it is just me and him. It has always been, and it will always be me and him.

I set off from home in the early morning. I walk. He walks. I walk quicker and quicker. He keeps walking. The train is always empty at this hour, so there is basically no one on the train. I prop my schoolbag on the next seat. Then I flip open a novel. From the corner of my eye, I can tell he is shuffling and circling, before settling on the seat directly facing me. I zoom in on the words on the page. They only said to keep an eye out. I practically follow what they said.

I was three when he arrived. But Grandma and Grandpa had been telling me stories about storks and angels, so I had some idea of what was in store. Barely tall enough to reach my parents' elbows, I could not see the baby initially, only a soft bundle of wool. 'Eva, say hello to David.' They lowered it, and I looked.

It was reddish but almost translucent—faint blue lines visible near the temples; it was wrinkly but bloated, like a clay figurehead that accidentally dropped before it could be fired in the kiln. A pair of tiny gaps settled in the middle of two puffy lumps revealed bulbous black orbs drifting different directions—unsettling, disturbing.

‘It’s ugly.’ I did not know it then, but I meant the baby looked off.

‘Eva, he’s your brother!’

The baby started wailing, so I went to my room, the door barely muffling out the sounds of everyone else clamoring to figure out the problem on hand. I waited for it to stop. Little did I know that the crying would only become a constant in the household, the out-of-tune accompaniment creating dissonance within the otherwise peaceful trio of domestic bliss. I lay on my back while the crying stretched endlessly into the night, as did some part of me, waiting for the break.

The train ride today seems to be even longer than usual. The small LED lights on the train map seems to blink at me when others are not watching, only for me to realize that I am the one blinking as my eyes strain under the stress, but still they leave floating but unfaltering bugs on my retina. A long-overdue announcement informed me that the train is about to arrive at another stop. I silently breathe a sigh of relief.

The baby eventually looked better. The face was no longer swollen red like monkey bottoms. He was lovable. He still cried at random hours throughout the day, but I got used to them, as Mom and Dad explained to me that is what babies do. He was my baby brother. I sang to him, read to him, played with him, and gave him slobbery kisses on his soft plump cheeks.

We played together. I would share my dolls with him, even though he did not play with them a lot. Nevertheless, he would sit there wide-eyed, listening to all the stories I made up about my dolls that never seemed to go anywhere. Similarly, I would watch him build his bricks. I was not particularly fond of building bricks, but seeing him create different worlds out of mere wooden color blocks was the most fascinating thing to me at that time.

Before David was born, I was always alone. In my mind, everybody else was paired off—Mom and Dad, Grandma and Grandpa, cat and dog, even chopsticks and shoes go in pairs. I always had an intense fear that someday everyone would pair up together, and I would be left behind.

He changed everything. I was sure that I would never be left alone anymore. Unlike my dolls, he could respond to me. He chose to stay by my side and keep me company. When everyone could not care less, I would go to him, and he would come to me. He meant the world to me.

I told everyone at my kindergarten that I have a baby brother. This identity gave me so much pride. I was proud of my baby brother, and I was not afraid to show it.

Everything changed because of him.

I can still remember that fateful day. Mom and Dad took David to the hospital for a check-up. It was just like any other day; hospitals visits weren't new because David would be sick every now and then. But every time he would return home with a sticker or a small lollipop, and a smile on his face. Mom and Dad would be tired but relieved nonetheless.

When I looked up from the picture book I was reading, I saw the dark wooden door opening ever so slowly and heavily—I could not be sure whether it was my parents returning or if it was some thief trying to sneak into our home and steal everything away. Maybe the screws of the door were rusty after years of usage, or perhaps Mom and Dad were holding something heavy on their shoulders, they couldn't open the door with their usual ease?

Relieved to see that it was, in fact, my family returning, I was about to get up from the sofa to greet them, before I was stopped in my tracks by their heavy looks which echoed the painfully slow opening of the door like it was made of lead.

As if sensing their heavy feelings, David also looked uncomfortable, like a goldfish that is stuck in a small tank, swimming repetitive laps under the scrutiny of other people.

That night, they told me about his autism diagnosis. I only knew that to Mom and Dad, it's a bad thing, but I'm not sure what to make of it. Why can't it go away like a fever? I didn't get the answer I wanted, but I stopped asking *why* when I sensed their impatience. I just asked them to spell the word, then said goodnight. Later, I looked it up in the dictionary, but I still could not understand what that meant.

I guess they were tired of understanding as well.

There are usually not that many people until about an hour later when it is peak hours, but strangely enough, there are noticeably much more passengers today. A lot of parents have just got on the train with their children in hand, and it is getting crowded. I have to put my schoolbag on my lap and hug it close to my chest as all the seats are taken up. Perhaps there is an event taking place today—some parents seem to recognize one another and chat away

with great spirits. The children also seem especially energized, swinging on the handrails and grabbing on the handles as if they are in a park.

I am too tired to pay attention to the crowd sharing the train, but I hear a familiar noise. Underneath the talking and yelling and laughing, I hear light muffled whimpers through the jam-packed throng.

Directing my focus back onto the words, I try to follow the plot of the novel and block out the disturbance.

He was crying.

He came to me at the door of my classroom, right as I opened a packet of seaweed. I immediately stuffed all of it into my mouth, but it proved to be the wrong decision. A piece of seaweed stuck to the roof of my mouth unbudging, no matter how hard I swallowed and scrapped with my tongue. So I gave up and turned to the crying boy outside, irritated by the tiny annoyance.

‘Okay. Let’s get you some water. And then we’ll go to the staff room because the corridor is no place to cry.’

I rested my arm over his opposite shoulder in a half-embrace as we walked to the staff room. I got him a paper cup filled with warm water, then reported to his class teacher. I sat opposite him as the teacher went to gather the students involved. Some teachers walked past and asked what was going on.

‘Eva, what are you doing here?’

‘Nothing, it’s just David.’

‘I see. You take care.’ They shot a few smiles at me and him, the way little kids are given small prizes when they come in last at competitions.

A few of my friends dropped by the staff room, poked their heads in at the door to see how I was doing, and directed a few dramatic pouts at me. I pouted back playfully but remembered my responsibility and that I should not pout, so I stopped myself once they were gone.

I looked down at my shoes. The faux leather on the round toe Mary Janes had peeled off to show chalky, unprotected skin. Like the picture of eczema in the encyclopedia Dad used to read me. Thin eroded straps bounded my ankles tightly, restraining my feet from ever escaping from the shoes. I imagined the flaky faux leather would feel like seaweed, glued to my throat, unyielding to begs of mercy as the mouth grew parched and it dries to take mold of the bumps and curves, becoming attached like an ugly scab. I imagined reaching and peeling off the seaweed scab. That way at least one of my senses would suffer less.

The boys were soon brought in by the teacher. They were easy enough to identify as they were still snickering, making faces, and mocking movements. The teacher made them apologize to David, but they said their apologies half-heartedly as one would expect, however still doing the task just enough that nobody could nitpick about it. So they left. But he just would not stop crying.

‘Stop it’, I said, ‘stop crying now.’

The teacher tried to help, ‘Come on now, they can’t act mean to you or say bad things about you now. We got the situation under control.’

She did not get it under control; he simply refused to stop.

He cried, screamed, and kicked. The bells rang, and I needed to go back to my classroom. The teacher assured me that she could take care of him, but he gripped my arm tightly with one hand. I tried to pull away but he would not budge, now holding on with both hands. He made such a loud ruckus and the other teachers were throwing glances over at us. The teacher gave up on calming him down, so she decided that he would leave school early. I would be accompanying him home.

He was still crying all the way when we left the school, and he clung onto me like a piece of scab sticking to pink new skin that once torn, promises bleeding and an additional scar berating your impatience for not tolerating just a little bit more and so you end up having to trap the itchy, sensitive skin behind another layer of synthetic manufactured nude.

The train starts again.

It is entering another section of underground tunnel, the minute fluttering of the book page might have been the cool air ventilating through the system, or it might simply be the tiny, tight tubular compartment we are inside, reminding me of canned fish shivering in a darkened container, pushing or passing waves of kinetic energy, only to be gobbled up by some malevolent mouth, entering a pitch-black void that grinds it down into mush and dissolves it until no trace of the original form is left. Contrary to the exterior surroundings, inside the train, the excitement towards a certain event is practically buzzing in the atmosphere; the train car is packed tight with people's voices overlapping one another in an unending crescendo.

I thought I heard clapping noises, but it is not a daydream at all. The sound is real—he is clapping. He is clapping so uncontrollably, that his hands can't quite catch up with his

wrists, slapping together briefly before quickly moving away before they can fully meet, but then pushed together again, bending his fingers in a crooked, unnatural angle. Like the fish that are scooped out of the tank at the fish stall, beating their tails aggressively yet uselessly on the chopping board before accepting their fate.

Stimming. I hate it.

I hate the behavior and I hate the fact that I know the word because of the connection.

It is so ironic. People usually clap when some extraordinary things have been done, or when you want to congratulate people on special events. Nothing worth congratulating has happened ever since that fateful day. Sometimes, I just want to pry his hands away and question what he is congratulating, is it our misfortune or our pain, or is it his success at making us all suffer.

But I never did that. I just clasp my hands over my ears, hiding under the blankets, inside my room—when another unidentifiable fit happens at unpredictable hours. I usually wait for someone else to come and silent him, or take him away to another place where he can cry all he want until all the energy has been exhausted and tired to a rest.

He claps, and I clasp. I guess the misplaced ‘s’ stands for the solitude which I miss, or the silence that I desperately crave.

I push my head further into the book to shield myself from the scene.

I led him onto a bus that had a stop near home. He was sobbing so hard it seemed like he was going to hyperventilate.

I could not bear leaving him like this.

So I hugged him tight, close to my heart, like his favorite weighted blanket that he had when he was a baby, but was thrown away by our parents because it shrank down in the wash. He quieted down after a while, but I started to wonder if a piece of their love shrank in the wash as well.

Under the purplish fluorescent light, I saw how the translucent white fabric of his shirt fluttered under the chill of the air con. Then, I finally saw the bruise on his arm. I rubbed at his bruise futilely, accidentally rubbing some residue of the seaweed onto his arm in the process, which reflected the fuzzy light like fish scales. But he simply flashed me a gummy smile. I thought, *why are you so happy, you can't even stand up for yourself*. But he was so calm. Maybe the same question never bothered him.

When even the noisy crowd cannot drown out the cries I am hearing, I know it is getting serious, way more than what I imagined. Whimpers turn into whines, and whines turn into wails. I look up, registering the rapidly stomping feet, violent shakes of inward-folded arms, and a rocking head.

He holds his watery stare on me as he manages to find my face in the midst of the strange crowd, which is not difficult as the parents are already ushering their children away from him, speaking in hushed but unmistakably disgusted voices. The people sitting near him have already hurriedly gotten up, slinging their backpacks or handbags over their shoulder and pushing through others to get to some other train car. They don't even bother to look back and glance, just rushing to get away.

The space around me is sparse, but the air seems to be ever hotter and heavier, as his eyes lock on my face.

Sitting directly opposite him, I cannot look away. I cannot stop looking.

Stop it. Please just stop.

The crowd has dispersed from him so quickly that we are the only ones left sitting, with no one standing between us, no obstruction, just a completely head-on, clear view of each other.

Another girl told the class she also got a baby brother the following week. It was enjoyable and exciting knowing someone who share the same joys and experiences.

One day, David was brought along as Mom came to pick me up. I immediately brought the girl over. I raised the canopy just a little so that she could see better but the bright afternoon sun would not disturb him and wake him from his nap. I tickled his little cheeks, and held his tiny, delicate hands gently. He gurgled a familiar sound, wriggled a little as if to wake up. Apparently, another wave of sleepiness took over, as he snuggled further into the fuzzy blanket. Smiling and looking expectantly at her while she peered into the stroller, I waited for her to compliment on my baby brother.

‘Isn’t he—’

‘Your brother looks weird.’

I watched her turn and walk away as I lowered the canopy entirely, covering the stroller, only this time it was not to block the sunlight out. I never spoke to her, or of him, ever again until the last day of kindergarten.

A new year always promises a new start.

I have waited for this for a long time. Going to a new school means that I would meet new people, people who did not know that I have a younger brother with special needs. To them, I would just be Eva.

I tugged on the straps of my schoolbag nervously but excitedly. Walking into the classroom, I see that my classmates wearing the same crisp white shirt and matching grey skirts or shorts, and they are already gathered in a large group, chatting in high spirits.

‘Hey, do you want to have lunch together?’

‘Do you want to be friends?’

‘Nice to meet you!’

Getting used to a new school and making new friends is not hard at all.

The difficult part is maintaining them. Despite the attempts at distancing myself from him, people always seem to catch on.

Before his first day at my school, I sat him down at the dining table. ‘Do not talk to me outside of home. Do not talk to me at school, or in any public spaces. I am not going to respond to you, so do not try to talk to me. Nod if you understand what I mean.’

He looked at me with a blank expression, but he nodded nonetheless. He probably thought that this was a rule that this new school had. I didn’t bother explaining, because he could not understand a single thing I was doing anyways.

It was a success. I simply ignored him as I quickly walked pass him on the corridor when I happened to come across him and he didn’t say anything to me although we made eye contact.

But the truth could not be hidden for long.

‘You have to go to the office to get your brother—’

‘Are you David’s sister? He is in the sick room again—’

And every time without fail, I would get dragged out of a conversation, out of my recess, away from my lunch, away from my friends, to attend to the various needs of my brother. Most of the time, he calmed down when I was gently stroking his back as his cries hiccupped to a stop. But looking at the blank wall in the sick room during recess for extended periods of time dries up one’s patience.

‘Uh, why is her brother always getting in trouble?’

‘Did you hear? Her brother is so weird like...’

I don’t blame them, really. Emotionally and physically, I am a bad friend. I am always away from them, I cannot join their afterschool visits to the shopping center or the fast-food chain, nor the weekend picnics or sleepovers. Adding me into the group chats is simply a waste of time and effort, understanding cannot be reached on both sides—I don’t know about the bubble tea shop opening near the school, nor do they have the capacity to absorb my daily frustrations. Even for my few friends, my identity seems to blur.

‘Hey, do you think you can join us for brunch on Saturday?’

‘Maybe—’

‘But I guess you have to take care of your brother still? Next time then.’ But I can join, sometimes. Only that now I have already turned down so many of their offers, they even assume that I am busy with him. *But I want to make time for myself and for you all as well...* I used to protest, but my mind is already making excuses, *what if they don’t want you there? Afterall, you are absent all the time, it would be so awkward for everyone because they*

practically don't know you at all. And they are probably scared that you would spread the stupid to them. So I shut up.

Even I don't know myself at all. Who am I besides his sister? What can I tell people when they ask me what I do during my free time? That I don't have free time? That I can't do what I want to because I have to take care of my brother?

The situation at school is not ideal, but it is even worse at home. At home, I am stuck with him forever. The television is never on the channel that I want, but always playing some obscure documentary about old historical events or excavation projects. Everybody has to accommodate to his needs, keeping the sounds to a minimum, having meals at set regular times and only having the same boring food that he eats. Sometimes I question myself whether I like certain foods because I have never tried anything else, or whether my personality is the way it is because it is who I really am or was I just influenced by my brother.

It is easy to think of him as just the only one constant in my life. But nobody seems to realize that the rest of my life is made constant, even unchangeable, because of this one constant.

It should not be my responsibility to take care of him. For goodness' sake, I'm only three years older than him, I deserve to live my own life without having to place someone else in priority before myself. Even when he has my help, he will never get better; there will never be improvement, just disappointment and failure, plus the negative impact on my own life. but nobody seems to realize that.

So I am still stuck as his babysitter. Which I would happily oblige, if he were a real baby and would eventually grow up and require my help no more, and if my patience towards

him had not been so thoroughly worn out throughout the years. Right now, I just want to live not as ‘David’s sister’, but just Eva.

He is forever stuck in that stage in life, and it feels like I am stuck as well.

Stuck in *his* routines.

Stuck with being *his* keeper.

Stuck with *him*.

In the past, when people say ‘he cries too much’ or ‘he talks strange’ and ‘he does not act normal’, I did not care and just ignored all of those comments. Yes, I can see all of that, but so what if he’s different? He’s my brother.

Yet now I mind. I realize admitting that I see all of these things about him means I have to care for him in response. Unlike Mom or Dad who have the excuse that they have to work and therefore do not see the ways in which he needs help with, I am always with him, and other people view me as his keeper.

At some point, I realized ‘not seeing’ equals ‘not responsible’— *I was too busy doing homework, I was sleeping at that time...* They are good enough excuses for most scenarios. That’s how I finally got my break.

His eyes meet mine, but all I can focus on is the collar of the white uniform shirt utterly covered by his tear stains, the wet fabric sticking to his skin, just translucent enough to show the grey undershirt right beneath. His schoolbag is hanging loosely on one of his

shoulders and is barely off the floor because of his wild fits and erratic behavior just now. His name tag, where his photo and full name is printed on the front in a size so large you can hardly miss it from across the road, is scratching the floor every time he takes a choked breath, like a fish out of water, gills fruitlessly pumping air to the body that could not adapt to the environment thrust upon it. He is still making the incomprehensible groans that continue to scatter the freaked-out parents who are dragging away their children while covering their eyes in desperate attempts that they will not bear witness to the scene, but I am paralyzed in my seat, forced to take it all in.

Then, a man cannot stand it anymore. He pushes his way through the crowd and says to David, ‘Kid, you better stop that behavior right now! You’re disturbing everyone!’

When he receives no clear response from David, he starts shouting threats.

‘I’m warning you, I’ll tell the train driver!’

‘Shut up! If you continue doing this, I’ll kick you off the train!’

The sign next to the man seems to be mocking the situation. *Care for those in need.* Ha ha. There’s someone clearly in need, but nobody wants to care. Why does no one show their care?

But—

Why don’t I?

I realize, (or rather, I finally admit to myself) that I am ashamed.

For the first time, his reddened face mirrors mine.

‘He keeps doing it, and I can’t stop him.’ When Mom and Dad went out to visit our relatives during Chinese New Year, they decided to leave me at home alone with him. People mentioned something about saving face. How do people save face? It is not like red packet money that can be slipped into the piggy bank for safekeeping. Your face is attached to your body for the rest of your life, until your very last moments. But I learned to keep my comments and questions to myself, so I kept quiet and nodded along.

They pinky-swore that it was only going to take a few hours, but they had been stuck in the traffic, so they were hours later than the promised return time. And he started slapping himself as soon as we received their phone call.

‘They promised!’ Slap.

‘You promised!’ Smash.

‘Promised, promised, promised!’ Bang.

His cheek quickly swelled up like a bulging goldfish eye and turned a tuna-sashimi kind of pink. I could not wait for them to come back and handle the situation. He had to calm down right this instant.

I switched the festive television game show off to play his favorite—Star Wars, but he paid no attention, turning away and complaining that it was too loud, hitting his head harder as he yelled for it to stop. I could not give him a snack as Mom and Dad had locked away the *chuen hup*, plus he already had candy today, and another one would probably cause a sugar high that only exaggerates his emotions.

So I held onto him. I wrapped my arms around his torso, holding down his flailing limbs and keeping it down.

He was shaking forcefully, but a few years' advantage over him allowed me to just barely hold his limbs in place.

David. David, David, David.

I kept repeating his name to tether him back to reality. I held onto his hands. Unlike when I held Mom's smooth hands or Dad's firm hands, or even when I held the sticky hands of my classmates in games, his hands refused to nestle neatly in between the curves of mine. They were unusually warm, so warm that you would jump and flinch at the temperature, making you wonder if you left the stove on in your sleep and this was the aftermath of him burning his hands in the fire. They were pliable yet they did not bend like the soft palms I was used to, instead firmly angled inward as if they are forever holding a phantom of a treasure that you never really understood so you threw it away carelessly. But I held on to them.

Like the anchor that helps ships to stay in place even in the middle of an ocean. Like the roots of a tree that grab tightly onto the soil so that it does not fall over. Like the knot you tie around your wrist so that even when your hand slip, the balloon would not give way and float away into the sky and burst into a thousand plastic pieces when they hit the high altitude, so that you can save the balloon for as long as it lasted, until the helium slowly but surely escaped the plastic exterior completely. God knows how tightly I held on that it would not float away to the ends of the world never to be seen again.

'What the hell? Are you crazy or something! Do you even understand what I'm saying?' The man continued to yell at him. Some other parents heard the foul language, and

visibly moves their children further away, tightly shielding their ears and eyes. From who or from what, I'm not sure if I can tell.

His cries are quieted a little bit before picking up with even more ferocious intensity.

Stop. Just stop. Stop this right now.

Of course he understands.

He has never had a problem understanding things. There is no doubt about that. He could always understand things well when he puts his mind to it, remembering even the tiniest detail. It's just that he doesn't know how to express it.

And he still remembers what I said to him before, 'Do not talk to me outside of home.'

So even though his face is completely flooded by his tears and snot is running down his nose and dripping so low it dangles and sticks to his lips and chin, his unusually stiff back is stuck firmly to the back of the seat, and not even budging a little.

We are the ones who are not understanding all along.

He is still looking at me with his eyes so wide and innocent it feels damning to be on the receiving end. His eyes are glistening from the tears, but they also lit up with a glimmer of hope as I stand up in the nearly deserted train car. The man is shocked, probably taken aback because he did not realize I was sitting there all along, thus surprised by my presence. But I did not look at the man. I focused on David, looking him right in the eyes and admit that yes. He is my brother.

To anyone who might care, I am sorry that I am ashamed of David. And I am more ashamed of myself. Ashamed of how I would dream of having no connection to him when he has never wronged me and has only stayed loving and forgiving towards me. Ashamed of how I value him less than I value my so-called 'face'.

Although I have yelled at him for so many times, I can never ever say he is 'crazy'. He is my little brother, and I would not change it for the world.

I still don't know what to think of him.

Nor how I am going to balance my own life and caring for him.

But his tear-stained face reminds me of the day he first came to our family. He never really changed; I was the one who had a change of heart.

This time, I am going to him.