

## **My Story So Far: An Autobiography**

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**English 11, Period 3**

**Mrs. Rodriguez**

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### **Chapter 1: The Beginning (Birth – Age 5)**

I entered the world on a humid August morning in 2007, arriving three weeks early and, according to my mother, "already impatient." I was born at Memorial Hospital in Austin, Texas, weighing six pounds and four ounces. My parents, Jennifer and David Chen, had been married for four years and had nearly given up hope of having children before my mother discovered she was pregnant with me.

My earliest memory is from when I was about three years old. I remember sitting on our back porch during a thunderstorm, pressed against the screen door, completely mesmerized by the lightning. My father sat beside me, and instead of pulling me away from the door, he counted the seconds between the flash and the rumble with me. "One Mississippi, two Mississippi..." That memory captures something essential about my childhood—my parents never discouraged my curiosity, even when it led me toward things that seemed scary.

We lived in a small brick house in a suburb called Cedar Park, about twenty minutes north of Austin. The house had a big backyard with a wooden swing set that my father built the summer before I was born. I spent countless hours on that swing, pumping my legs and pretending I could fly.

My mother worked part-time as a dental hygienist, and my father was a software engineer. When my mom was at work, my grandmother—my father's mother, who we called Nai Nai—would take care of me. She spoke to me primarily in Mandarin, which is why, even now, I associate that language with

comfort and warmth. She would make me congee with preserved eggs and tell me stories about growing up in Taiwan. I didn't realize until much later what a gift that time with her was.

At four, I became a big sister. My brother, Ethan, was born in December 2011. I remember feeling a complicated mix of excitement and jealousy when my parents brought him home. The jealousy faded quickly, though. I appointed myself his protector and guardian, a role I still take seriously today.

## **Chapter 2: Elementary School Years (Ages 5-10)**

I started kindergarten at Live Oak Elementary in the fall of 2012. I was terrified. I remember clinging to my mother's leg in the doorway of Mrs. Patterson's classroom, convinced that if she left, she would never come back. A girl with red pigtails walked up to me and said, "Do you want to see my eraser collection?" Her name was Sophie Martinez, and she became my first real friend.

Sophie and I were inseparable throughout elementary school. We had sleepovers almost every weekend, invented elaborate imaginary worlds, and swore we would be best friends forever. The friendship taught me early on that connection with another person can make everything less frightening.

Academically, I was an eager student. I learned to read quickly and became that kid who always had a book hidden under her desk. My second-grade teacher, Mr. Kim, noticed my love of reading and recommended me for the gifted and talented program. Being identified as "gifted" was a double-edged sword. On one hand, it gave me access to interesting projects and challenged me. On the other hand, it planted a seed of perfectionism that would cause me problems later.

Third grade brought my first real struggle. We started learning multiplication tables, and for the first time, something academic didn't come easily to me. I remember crying at the kitchen table, convinced I was stupid because I couldn't memorize  $7 \times 8$ . My father sat with me for hours, patient and calm, creating games and tricks to help the numbers stick. That experience taught me that difficulty doesn't mean inability—it just means more effort is required.

During these years, I also discovered my love of soccer. I joined a recreational league at age seven and immediately fell in love with the feeling of running across the field, the ball at my feet. I wasn't naturally the best player, but I was determined. I practiced in the backyard until it got dark, driving my parents crazy by accidentally kicking balls into my mother's flower garden.

Fourth grade was marked by loss. My grandmother, Nai Nai, was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and passed away within four months. I was nine years old, and it was my first experience with death. I didn't fully understand what was happening until she was gone. For weeks afterward, I would forget she had died and ask my father when we were going to visit her. Grief, I learned, doesn't follow a logical timeline. Even now, certain smells—jasmine tea, the particular soap she used—bring her back to me instantly.

### **Chapter 3: Middle School (Ages 11-13)**

Middle school is a universally awkward experience, and I was no exception to this rule. I started sixth grade at Canyon Vista Middle School in the fall of 2018, and almost immediately, everything felt different. The social dynamics became more complicated. Suddenly, there were invisible rules about what to wear, how to talk, and who to sit with at lunch.

Sophie and I remained friends, but we started drifting apart. She became interested in makeup and boys, while I was still happiest with a book or a soccer ball. By seventh grade, we barely spoke. Losing that friendship was painful, and I spent a lot of that year feeling isolated and lonely. I ate lunch in the library most days, pretending I preferred books to people.

Academically, I continued to do well, but the perfectionism that had started in elementary school began to intensify. I would spend hours on assignments that should have taken thirty minutes, convinced that anything less than perfect wasn't acceptable. I started having trouble sleeping, lying awake worrying about tests and projects. Looking back, I can see these were early signs of anxiety, but at the time, I just thought I was being responsible.

The summer before eighth grade brought a turning point. My parents enrolled me in a soccer camp at the University of Texas, and for two weeks, I was surrounded by girls who loved the sport as much as I did. I made friends—real friends—for the first time since Sophie. We stayed in touch, and some of those girls would become my teammates in high school.

Eighth grade was better. I felt more confident, partly because of the soccer friendships and partly because I finally started to figure out who I was. I joined the school newspaper and discovered I enjoyed writing. My English teacher, Ms. Torres, encouraged me to submit a personal essay to a district writing contest. I wrote about my grandmother and won second place. Standing on that stage, holding a certificate and a small trophy, I thought: maybe this is something I can do.

#### **Chapter 4: High School – Freshman and Sophomore Year (Ages 14-15)**

Starting high school at Westwood High in the fall of 2021 was strange because of the pandemic's lingering effects. We wore masks. Some classes were still hybrid. The normal rituals of freshman year—pep rallies, dances, crowded hallways—were muted or modified.

Despite the unusual circumstances, I found my footing. I made the junior varsity soccer team, which gave me an automatic community. My teammates became my social world. We practiced together, ate lunch together, and spent weekends at each other's houses. For the first time since early elementary school, I felt like I truly belonged somewhere.

Academically, high school was an adjustment. The work was harder, and the stakes felt higher. I took all honors classes my freshman year, determined to build a transcript that would impress colleges. I maintained a 4.0 GPA, but the cost was high. I rarely slept more than five hours a night. I stopped reading for pleasure because I was too exhausted.

The summer after freshman year, something broke in me. I had a panic attack for the first time—heart racing, couldn't breathe, convinced I was dying. My parents found me on the bathroom floor at 2 AM, hyperventilating. They took me to the doctor, who referred me to a therapist.

Starting therapy was the hardest and best decision of my life. At first, I was resistant. I didn't think I had "real" problems. But my therapist, Dr. Ramirez, helped me see that my perfectionism wasn't a personality trait—it was a coping mechanism that had stopped working. She taught me strategies for managing anxiety and, more importantly, helped me question the beliefs that were driving me to exhaustion. I learned that my worth wasn't determined by my GPA. This sounds obvious written down, but truly believing it took months of work.

Sophomore year looked different. I dropped one honors class and took regular chemistry instead. My GPA dropped slightly, and the world didn't end. I started sleeping more. I read a novel for fun—the first in over a year. I joined the school literary magazine and submitted poetry. I wasn't cured of anxiety—I'm not sure it works that way—but I had tools to manage it.

On the soccer field, I continued to improve. By the end of sophomore year, the varsity coach told me I would likely move up the following season. That news meant more to me than any test score ever had.

#### **Chapter 5: Junior Year and Beyond (Ages 16-17)**

Junior year is where I am now, and it's hard to write about the present with the same clarity as the past. I'm still in the middle of this chapter, figuring things out as I go.

I did make varsity soccer, and it's been everything I hoped for. We made it to the regional semifinals this past fall, and even though we lost, playing in that game—under the lights, with the stands full—was one of the best experiences of my life. I'm not good enough to play in college at a competitive level, and I've made peace with that. Soccer gave me confidence, friendships, and the understanding that joy can come from working hard at something you love, even if you're not the best.

I'm taking my first AP classes this year—AP English Language and AP US History. The work is demanding, but I've learned to approach it differently than I would have as a freshman. I ask for help when I need it. I take breaks. I remind myself that a B on a test isn't a catastrophe.

I got my driver's license last summer, and the freedom of being able to drive myself places has changed my life. I have a part-time job at a local bookstore, working Saturday afternoons. Standing behind the register, recommending books to customers, I sometimes think about my nine-year-old self reading under her desk and smile at the continuity.

My relationship with my brother, Ethan, has evolved. He's twelve now, in sixth grade, and navigating his own awkward middle school experience. I try to be the supportive older sibling he needs—giving advice when he asks, staying out of his business when he doesn't. Sometimes I'll drive him to get ice cream, just the two of us, and he'll open up about things he won't tell our parents. Those moments feel important. As for the future, I'm starting to think seriously about college. I want to study English or journalism—something that involves writing. I've visited a few campuses and am beginning to narrow down my list. The process is stressful, but I'm trying to approach it with the perspective I've gained: whatever happens, I'll figure it out.

## **Chapter 6: Who I Am**

Looking back over seventeen years of life, I can see certain threads running through my story. Curiosity—from that thunderstorm on the porch to my love of books and writing. Determination—in soccer, in academics, in pushing through hard times. Anxiety—a constant companion that I've learned to manage rather than defeat. Connection—to family, to friends, to the communities that have shaped me. I am the granddaughter of a woman who crossed an ocean and taught me another language. I am the daughter of parents who counted lightning with me instead of telling me to be afraid. I am a sister, a friend, a teammate, a writer, a work in progress.

If I've learned anything in my seventeen years, it's that life rarely goes according to plan, and that's okay.

My grandmother's death, my struggles with anxiety, the pandemic that reshaped my high school experience—none of these were things I would have chosen. But they all taught me something about resilience and adaptability.

I used to think the goal was to become a finished, perfected version of myself. Now I understand that there is no finished version. There's just the ongoing process of growing, learning, making mistakes, and trying again. My story so far is only the beginning.

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### **Reflection**

Writing this autobiography has been a strange experience. It's forced me to look at my life as a narrative, to find the moments that mattered and explain why they mattered. Some things were hard to write about—my grandmother's death, my struggles with anxiety and perfectionism. But putting them into words made them feel more manageable somehow, like they're chapters I've completed rather than weights I'm still carrying.

I'm grateful for the assignment, even though I complained about it at first. Understanding where I've been helps me think about where I'm going. And maybe that's the point.

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