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Young Program

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The Slow Superpower

Among you are writers and cartoonists. Stand-up comics. Fast runners. Fast talkers. Quiet listeners. Some of you are athletic. Some aren't. Some of you are popular. Some wish they were. And some don't care about popularity at all. Some of you already know how to love, and some of you will learn that along the way. Some of you can focus for hours. And some of you are daydreamers, like me.

In high school, I spent the boring classes daydreaming. This was in Turkey. To keep us from drifting off, they had painted the classroom windows white. But there was one tiny spot where the paint had chipped away. Through that little hole, I'd secretly look outside and slip into an alternative universe where I'd save a teacher's life. I'd walk up to the blackboard and solve an impossibly complicated geometry problem. Everyone would stare in amazement, and I'd smile shyly and say, "This line, this angle... it's actually very simple." Despite being short, I'd score an unbelievable game-winning basket at the most critical moment. I would give such a sharp reply to the boy who said my Levi's jeans were fake that everyone would burst out laughing.

Those were my realistic daydreams. Then there were the ones that didn't fit into this world. Aliens would arrive, and I'd be the only person who understood their language. I'd be able to see the future. I'd clone myself. All those fantasies had one thing in common. I wanted to be noticed. I was so ordinary, and I wanted people to see me. I wished I had a talent. Or a superpower.

For years, I had a recurring dream at night. Like Medusa, in these dreams, I had gaze-power. I could move objects just by looking at them. At first, those dreams were terrifying because with this power I would send tables and chairs flying across the room. Walls cracked, windows shattered. I could move things with my eyes, but I couldn't control them. Over the years, though, I learned to control that power inside my dreams. Now, with nothing but my gaze, I could flip through the pages of a book or slide a plate across a table and stop it precisely at the edge. The dreams became so much fun that I'd fall asleep hoping I'd get to move things with my eyes again.

For years, in real life, mostly as a joke, I kept trying to move objects with my eyes. I knew it wouldn't work. But... what if? And somewhere deep down, it also felt as if, if I could only concentrate hard enough, maybe I really could.

During my PhD years in the United States, by then I was already in my thirties, I was studying in my room when my eyes landed on a floor lamp across the room. This wasn't a dream. I was completely awake. There was a screw sticking out of this lamp. Suddenly, I felt an extraordinary calm. If I focused hard enough, I was certain I could move that screw. It would slowly push its way upward, cutting through the metal. I stared without moving. And... the screw... began to climb. Tears streamed down my face. I was shaking with fear. It had finally happened. But how was I supposed to live with this power? Was I losing my mind? My whole body had gone ice cold. I walked over to the lamp. The screw... was actually a ladybug, crawling across the lamp. I didn't have a superpower after all. I was just a nearsighted, silly, and ordinary PhD student.

Maybe I have always been a bit silly. I grew up in Izmir, Turkey, with my sister, who is two years older than me. Those were the years before the internet and Instagram, when television was black-and-white, and there was only one channel. Every Friday, a humor magazine called *Girgir* came out. It was full of comics. I was six and I didn't know how to read. My sister would read me the captions, then she would laugh. I would laugh too. Then I would ask her, "Why is this funny?" She would explain. I wanted to be a cartoonist.

I started drawing in high school, around your age, just to survive the boring classes. When I wasn't looking through that little hole in the white-painted window, I was drawing. When I drew our teachers, my peers would gather around me and laugh at the drawings. Now you might say, "Ah, so her superpower was drawing." But it wasn't. I was just so-so at drawing. Nothing special. I was dreaming and drawing, and I didn't know what to do with my life. My family was saying, "Get a proper job, become an engineer, for example, have a stable income; you can keep drawing or acting or doing art as a hobby." On one hand, that kind of life never felt right to me.

On the other hand, they had a point. We were a lower-middle-class family. Politically, things were unstable. The economy was terrible. It was a military-influenced system, and in Turkey's patriarchal society it was especially hard for women to find their way. If I didn't have a good income, what would happen to me? Would I get married and let a man take care of me? No way. On top of that, getting into a good university meant brutal competition. Once a year, there was a nationwide three-hour exam. More than one million students took it. Only 1,000 students out of one million could get into the best engineering programs. And in the middle of this jungle, how was I supposed to "listen to my heart" and become an artist?

My sister got into computer engineering at one of the best universities in Turkey. I thought I would follow her, but with no obvious talent in any subject, I ended up studying mathematics at the same difficult university. I struggled through the demanding program until I crashed into depression. With the help of my friends and sister, I managed to complete my degree in mathematics. It was the hardest thing I have ever done. But even when I finished, I still felt lost. I wasn't going to become a mathematician. I didn't want to end up in a bank or an insurance company, trapped inside a cubicle.

I was 24, and I had no idea what I was going to do with my life. But there was a burning fire inside me, and in my dreams I kept moving objects with my eyes. That summer I didn't leave the house. I just drew. I drew for hours. When you draw five hours every day for three months, magic happens. By the end of the summer, I couldn't believe how swiftly my hand was moving, and how figures were emerging.

By the end of that summer, I had become a cartoonist for *Leman*, the continuation of the humor magazine my sister used to read to me. Math was so hard that, by learning something that difficult, I somehow learned **that** I could teach myself anything I wanted.

A few years later, I moved to the United States to pursue my PhD. To entertain my friends and share fragments of my new life, I started drawing small everyday moments and posting them online as webcomics. For example: something I saw at a farmers market, a child in a Spider-Man costume, absentmindedly eating cucumbers while staring into the distance. I called the site *Ordinary Things*. Through this experiment, I hoped I might develop my own style and find a publisher for my first book. I had to come up with a unique style, something that would make a publisher say, "Wow, this is so unique. I've never seen anything like this."

After posting one drawing almost every day for five years, I had developed a distinctive style combining drawing and collage. My plan had worked. I found an amazing publisher for my first graphic novel, *Dare to Disappoint*. When I finally held it in my hands, I already knew what my superpower was.

Despite studying mathematics, I had become a graphic novelist. I had created the book I carried in my head for fifteen years, without any formal art education. Meanwhile, I was an artist and academic making interactive digital art with emerging technologies. My superpower was not giving up when things got difficult. My superpower was staying with it. My superpower was one dull word. Persistence. A very ordinary superpower. Even if I didn't have a "natural talent," I had decided on a life philosophy and stayed with it. I was not going to live a factory-

made life, but a handcrafted one. My superpower was smiling at those who said, “Oh wow, you’ve got zero talent. You’re a bit of a disaster,” and then going back to work. My superpower was doing what I had set my mind on, even if it took a very long time.

It is not a surprise that in my second graphic novel, *Evil Eyes Sea*, the characters desperately try to move things with their gaze. Superman can fly. The Invisible Man can sneak into places no one else can enter. Spider-Man can climb walls. Professor X can read minds. Real life is much slower. Much slower than the speed of technology and the endless stream of images, stories, and information moving through our lives every day.

Learning to exist inside that slowness of life, and even enjoying it, is a superpower. Being able to create something without obsessing over the final result, the likes, the awards, or the success, and simply enjoying the process, is a superpower. When you were a child playing, you had joy and full focus. Working with that same childlike joy and deep concentration is a superpower. While everyone else is busy learning the newest software or the latest gadget, being able to see the connections between things, to see the whole picture, and to develop artistic vision instead of just a bunch of skills, is a superpower. Being able to hear criticism without being defensive is a superpower. While everyone else is trying to be seen, quietly sitting in a corner and becoming a great observer is a superpower. Choosing the right role models, learning from them, without becoming a poor copy of them, is a superpower. Having a handful of people who believe in you, and believing in them, is a superpower.

And instead of relying only on talent, moving forward little by little, without comparing yourself to others, is a superpower.

You are at the beginning of one of the most exciting journeys of your life.

The question is: **What is your superpower?**

Your superpower is not far away. It is already with you. It may be operating like that ladybug, slowly making its way upward.

For years, I couldn't understand why that dream kept coming back. The power bursting out of my eyes...

And one day, it clicked.

The power was never in my gaze. It was in my way of seeing the world.