

Daniela Chen

Daniela's essay

My gaze lift up. I have never been to this place before. All I can see is a lot of people in the same room. I see new faces but I recognise none. I swallow hard. I feel their eyes on me now. They are cameras, gathering data. They are radars, detecting fear. They are inquisitors and I am the object of their unwanted attention. Why are they staring? I ask myself.

Yet their looks are stopping for only a few seconds. They quickly shift to the rest of the crowd. Relax Daniela and breath, I tell myself. My imagination was running wild already but this is not a nightmare. This is reality and so I attempt a meek smile. People smile back. I can do it, I will do it.

There is a room full of people I do not know. I see blonde, black and red hairs. Hijabs and kippahs steal my attention. Lipsticks and ties are flashing in front of me. It is such a diverse mix that it seems like a box full of odd socks. We are conscious of that, however, there is no running away at this point. To be open is the first thing London teaches you. And so, I do.

The conversations start to flow. The volume rises. I can hear English spoken differently compared to the way I am used back home. I am hesitant, but I will try my best to get to know you. *"Could you repeat that again? I did not quite catch it."* *"Where are you from? I never heard about it. Can you tell me more?"*

Diverse backgrounds, contrasting experiences, separate stories. Similar aspirations, commensurate passions, same laughs. We are different, but also the same. Tell me more about yourself and I will feel the warm of your laugh, I will understand the struggles of your life and I will respect you for your ideas and beliefs.

Unique accents is merely one of the things which this room contains. This is a room full of dreams and untapped potential. I cannot read your mind nor heart, but I believe deep down we have the same hopes. We hope to make long-lasting friendships and maybe leave the world a better place than we found it. And now, after three years I can say I was not entirely wrong.

I could not have known at that time that this place was going to be much more than libraries and lectures. People hardly mention one of the many truths of undertaking a university degree. For me, the greatest obstacle was not about the modules to study or the formulas to remember, it was about growing up as an individual and starting the never-ending process of finding my path in life. Perhaps, some of the people in the room knew it already and I greatly admire them for that. But for many others and myself included, we are the group who decided to take life as it comes and make every day an adventure.

I can genuinely say that there were days were the problems felt unsurmountable and impossible, when you feel like giving up. But I am happy I did not, which leads me to say with confidence that those has been the most amazing and challenging years of my life so far.

I might have not said it before, but some of the people in the room were bound to become my second family away from where home is. I honestly do not think I would have been such a meaningful experience without you and because of this I will be always thankful. I will cherish the time spent together discovering new cuisines, be it Korean Kimchi or Indian dhal. I will share memories of our trips across the Europe, visiting new places and broadening our horizons. I will be your teacher and you mine, both in class and life.

I am in the same room once again. I see familiar faces and say "Hi" in many more languages that I thought I ever would. I enriched my knowledge and became wiser (probably debatable), but above all I am not alone or lost anymore. The initial excitement and anticipation in the air has faded. But I can still feel the curiosity and energy of the first day. Everyone is settling in their own seats. The class goes silent. The lecture is about to start. The class is ready and so am I.

This is me, thanking Cass for this incredible journey.