

The Empty Seats Next to Me

At the age of 19, I said goodbyes to the familiar faces in my life as I traveled 9395 miles away from home to embark on my undergraduate journey in the US. I had never expected nor imagined being an undergraduate at UDel, but it was a fate I welcomed with open arms. When I first landed in this country, I was greeted by the hot and dry summer air which was different from home's but that was not the thing that made me realize I was in a new country, it was the fact that I was the only hijabi in the vicinity. This would be a rare occasion in Malaysia, the country I am from, and I knew at that moment I would be a minority and different, but regardless I was excited to start my first day as a Hengineer.

Freshman year, probably the toughest one as reality hit, dreams faded, and plans shambled. Making new friends was hard, no matter how much effort I put in and attempts I made. No one ever asked my name back, so I assumed no one was interested in being my friend. Group work I did that year scarred me until today. As an introvert, I only talked when necessary but would always listen. The first time I spoke, everyone ignored me, but I kept on trying for a few more times but to no avail. I made up for the lack of social interactions by putting extra efforts into the background work like writing reports and doing research. That group work taught me loud voices were always worth more than the work you put in. That was what their principles were. People could treat you unfairly just because you were different from them. Loneliness, homesickness, and sadness started to slowly creep over me. As I fell into despair and scared of losing myself, I took a Mandarin class to connect with people who shared my interest in languages. My situation got better until I hopped on the bus where everyone seemed to be avoiding the seats next to me. The same thing happened in the classrooms which only amplified

those feelings I was having. I learnt a lot that year; from how to pronounce baa-tl from bo-tl to using Fahrenheit instead of Celsius to accepting the fact that there would always be empty seats next to me.

Sophomore year. The year both Covid-19 and my Thermodynamics class happened but also the year I went back home. I thought after seeing my family I would be stronger and happier, but I was wrong. I got homesick and lonelier as I realized the holes in my heart were filled temporarily and once I stepped back into the US, the wound just got deeper. I met Thermodynamics on the screen alone with no one to help me or at least that was what I felt at that time. In that class I learned about the equation of state while ignoring my own state. I was suffering. Feared of failing and ending my own life, I sought help from counselors and tutors for I fell into depression. After a few sessions of counseling and tutoring, I saw no changes; I felt empty and was still failing my class. I exploded with tears as I was on the verge of losing the battle and that was when someone sat next to me and asked for my name and well-being. For once, the seat next to me was not empty and that made me happy for a short period of time. However, it didn't last.

Junior year. The lockdown ended, less classes on zoom and more in-person. We were slowly back to normal. Being in a classroom used to make me feel lonely and remind me of how sad I was but at that time those feelings had disintegrated into small particles. My mental health was also better coming out of the pandemic. I visited a few places in other states during school breaks and found the serenity I needed. That was me creating my own happiness instead of finding or just waiting for it to happen to me. I was much more content and done blaming myself, my introversion, and anxiety for not having any friends. Unfortunately, that year was also when

Covid-19 wanted me when it seemed like it did not anyone else. Managing myself while being sick was a challenge but also a proof that I could survive on my own. However, I would be lying if I said that the virus did not make me miss my family, and wish I had a friend I could rely on. So again, even though at that time the reason was because of a virus, I was still left with empty seats beside me.

Fall semester senior year. The seats beside me are still empty wherever I go even when I am writing this. But now, instead of cursing those seats, I have learnt to deal with and accept them with an open heart. They had helped me grow stronger. I also decided to become a tutor because of them to help other students who might feel lost and lonely in their undergraduate careers. I can relate to them as I have experienced those feelings firsthand. I am certain freshman me would be proud to see the person I am today. Having no friends is no longer a problem to me as I will always have my family, professors, advisors, and other help provided by the school who will offer their hands whenever I fall. Even though there are still empty seats to my left and right, someone who really cares will always try to fill them.

This part of my life is probably not about connecting with others but rather about me finding home within myself, being satisfied with my life, and appreciating those people who decided to stay with me in this journey. Those empty seats are just part of the experiences, and I should forever cherish them.