

Property of Ronnie Li

Ronnie Li

“Home”

I am a breakdancer. I can perform on command at any time and in any place, although I usually commence my shows when no one asks me to. I attract mounds of attention after freezing my audience members in their tracks, and I generously ensure everyone multiple encores, persisting until the last person has departed. But this is merely the vision I construct for myself, a reality that provides ample explanation for the otherwise ineffable intricacies of my Tourette’s. In this world, I serve as the pimple on society’s pristine complexion; at least, that was the assumption with which I began my classes at Brown.

Before I left my home on Long Island, I brusquely explained to my mother, “They didn’t understand before. They wouldn’t understand now.” My teachers, doctors, and family members all knew that sitting in a lecture hall would be quite different from sitting in a high-school classroom. More of the sound waves from my vocal tics would echo in a bigger room, which means that more students would be interrupted and likely to object to my presence.

Having dreaded the beginning of class for three days, I finally managed to hoist my body up from my bed an hour prior to my first class at Brown. I took care of my hygiene robotically and proceeded to trudge to Chemistry 0330. The idea of simply passing, not even excelling, had already begun to seem dubious, and the downhill nature of George Street didn’t exactly mitigate my worries. Nevertheless, seeing no other viable alternatives, I entered the crowded lecture hall. Soon I would have to see heads turning toward me. Soon I would somehow have to explain myself to nearly 250 students and two professors.

Luckily, I squeezed through the line and found an open seat in the front row. Sitting in the front had always been optimal; I disturb fewer classmates with my vocal outbursts and I don’t see anyone staring at me if I maintained my focus forward.

Not long after Professor Sweigart began, however, an irrepressible urge broke through the dam of my prefrontal cortex, and I unleashed a resounding howl throughout the room. It was not the way I wanted to make my first impression. In fact, the outburst was so loud that I instinctively closed my eyes to avoid seeing the reaction of my professors.

When I opened them, the room seemed as though nothing had happened.

But evidently my mischievous brain was not satiated with this lack of shock among the students, and it compelled me to follow up with a subsequent series of “Hao”s and “Ha”s. This time, the professor glanced at me, but out of every word he could have spoken, every action he could have taken, he simply smiled and continued his talk.

That my professor tolerated and even seemed to understand my situation completely baffled me. Such instant compassion and disregard for my tics – which could have easily been interpreted as gestures of disrespect – had never existed in my high school career. Throughout the last four years, I was nicknamed “Pterodactyl,” labeled “Twitchy,” and asked which recreational drugs I used. At Brown, I received welcoming smiles instead of distrustful glares, met with the most helpful faculty in dealing with my accommodations, and was told by a stranger not to apologize after I had elbowed him in

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the waist during Convocation. Setting all sycophantic intentions aside, the feeling was novel, but tranquil and inspiring nonetheless.

After my classes concluded for the day and I bought the required materials at the bookstore, I met one of my floor mates along the way back. She informed me she was about to go to Starbucks and asked where I planned to go.

“Well,” I replied, “These books are terribly heavy so I think I’ll drop them back home.”

She seemed confused. “Wait – do you mean your dorm? Or are you actually heading back to New York?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I meant my dorm.”

With that we exchanged our goodbyes and promised to meet again later on. As I walked, I realized that some students placed an overt emphasis on the difference between the concepts of “dorm” and “home.” On the other hand, my greatest fear of intolerance had just been removed, and I felt honored to be able to call – even automatically – my dorm room at Brown University a home.