

THE KIDS ARE NOT ALRIGHT

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When I envisioned my first year of college, I saw myself on Southern California beaches, meeting new people, and finally getting out of my hometown to discover the world. On my first day of college, I realised that my freshman year would instead be characterised by constant lower back pain from sitting all the time and I would be slowly losing myself while trying to keep up with classes in a time zone 14 hours ahead. It was the complete opposite of the year I had planned for myself.

Realising I was not alone in this narrative somewhat helped. My friend Afia started college at a Japanese institution when the pandemic started getting out of hand in March 2020; she helped me ease into the whole online-learning-from-a-different-time-zone thing. Most of my late night conversations are with Abrar*, who is studying at the University of Texas at Dallas. He is the most intelligent person I know, and watching him slip into depression during this devastating year saddens me immensely. Then there's Sagorika, a third-year student at the University of British Columbia. Sometimes we video call each other and work without saying a word. There is something so comforting about human presence at a time like this, even if our time together is dominated by silence.

Most of the time, I feel disconnected from the people closest to me. My best friend started college at New York University only towards the end of January, which meant that my first quarter of college was defined by short texts between us because of our different sleep schedules. "What are you up to?" I text her when I wake up at night. "Just woke up," she writes back the next morning.

I see my mother for a few minutes every morning when she wakes up for her Fajr prayers and exchange brief conversations with my father when he watches the news before he heads to bed. We were never a family big on having thoughtful conversations but seeing them merely once every day somehow makes me feel that I am farther away from home than I have ever been. As each day passes, I find myself questioning whether losing my sanity is worth it.

Sleep deprivation has become the norm. I sleep when I can, sometimes in the small breaks between classes, and oth-



PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

er times, all day. I know college is more than stress, depression, and sleep deprivation. But right now, that reality seems so far out of my reach that I constantly find myself questioning the decision to start college during a pandemic.

At the back of my head, I am constantly reminding myself, *it is not like this*, but at this very moment, *it is like this*. Soon, these words will mean nothing to me, threaded together only for the sake of my mental health. Students are expected to churn out material with almost no support system, and those attending classes from abroad have it twice as hard, battling not only the rigorous quarter system but also a monstrous time difference. I know, the first year of college is never what people expect. Hollywood movies have unexpectedly raised our standards. But the Class of 2024 was met with a different kind of disappointment. We never thought the year would go by behind a screen. Coming to terms with this was tough, most of us still haven't. *We're not alright*.

The other day, I met with Maegan Douglas, another freshman from my English class, virtually. Broken shards of sunlight streamed in through her window as she called me from her Lancaster home, where she lives with her family and three dogs. She tells me she finds herself lucky

having ended up with professors who give her accommodations when she needs them, but they can only do so much for a freshman class that stumbles at every step. She is not wrong. It helps me immensely that the faculty members have been kinder than ever. When I cannot wake up from my two-hour naps for my 8 AM class because I have been in lecture all night, they understand and give me work to make up for missing discussion.

I have not made any friends on campus. I know people, but would I call them friends? How do you know who your friend is in a virtual setting? I know college is more than this constant pang of loneliness, but what if it is the same when I am eventually on campus?

Others going to UCLA from Dhaka tell me that they have not made friends either. "Try connecting with people when they meet at 5 AM over Zoom while you try to squeeze in a power nap between classes," one of them tells me, "Besides, making friends virtually is difficult. No one wants to talk in breakout rooms mandated by your TA."

Knowing this gives me some serenity, but it is difficult being somewhat of an extrovert and realising that you have spent a whole quarter in an institution and not interacted with anyone meaningfully.

However, as taxing as the first quarter of college was, it has taught me so much. I may have spent nearly every minute of it knee-deep in stress because of the intense course load but somehow loved every second of it. I was awed by my faculty members and how much insight they had to offer on just about everything, whether it was lectures on Aristotle's *Poetics* or conversations with my TA on how sexual violence is used as a weapon of war. Passion seeped into every aspect of their work and that made me a little bit more hopeful about my education. This was the first time in a long while that I was genuinely enjoying the material that I was being taught and could not contain my excitement to learn more.

During our call, Maegan tells me she is hopeful for when we are eventually back on campus. She looks forward to a better, less stressful time and firmly believes that she can expand her social circle beyond the one friend she made in science class. "We'll be alright," she tells me.

I think I am starting to believe her.

**Names have been changed for privacy.*

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