

Past

Depression

Future



Acknowledgement

If it is not because of this opportunity in English 182, I would possibly let go of my thoughts about this project just like any other unaccomplished dreams of mine. I am grateful of professor Ghasedi's class which gave me the freedom and support to pursue my passionate research topic. I cannot express how much I am thankful that I choose English 182 among all the other English courses that are offered here in University of Washington. This class has taught me the skills necessary for a broad field of study and work. Moreover, it made me realize that my passions and imaginations can be brought into reality.

I also want to appreciate my interviewees for their time and willingness to share the experiences. Some of them are my long-term friends and some others are people whose names I barely knew, but each one of them were interesting people to talk with. I am thankful even for the fact that they fought with depression and kept their sweetest smile to us.

Those who responded to my survey also gave me crucial opinions from the other viewpoints and better structured my showcase project to answer the questions. And those who informed me about their relative experience with depression are also an indispensable part of this project. I must give my appreciation to these many anonymous help my project received.

Lastly, I would like to give my thanks to Rose Ju, Feng yuan Liu, and Philip Liu for their encouragement and accompany which made the research process much more enjoyable. Also thank to all the people in my English class Spring 2018, I had a fun time with all of you and wish you all the best.

Memo

“Depression is not far from us” sounded like a cliché to me until the day I heard about my middle school friend's struggle with depression. I felt regretful that I did not noticed her pain and I was not there when she struggled alone. Since then I have always imagined how it would be different if general public like me would know more about depression and were capable of offering their friends with help when needed. While in reality, there is not only very limited support from the general public to depression, but also bias and misconceptions that hinder the recovery process. One of my Indian friends even told me that in their culture some people view people with depression as the weaker group, and think according to survival of the fittest they are just not strong enough for this world. There are much more heart-breaking perceptions among the public that pushing groups with depression further down the hill. Therefore, I think there is great need of adjusting the relation between depression group and general public.

However, there are various causes for depression and different social issues involved when dealing with different situations. It could be an extensive and complex process adjusting the relationship between general public and groups with depression. Considering my unique situation, I decided to start my project focusing on Chinese international students. Base on my library research, Chinese international students are in great need of attention regarding the topic of depression not only for the rapid growing population size, but also for the unique cultural background and social customs that make this group vulnerable to mental health problems.

Though this project, I am hoping to shield light to the environment where Chinese international students grew up and how that might construct the path to depression. I also want to bring up the less fascinating side of International students' life, telling the public that studying abroad is never a smooth and enjoyable journey. I am hoping my message can engage with the majority of the students in high

school and college and professionals in fields related to education, arousing understanding and awareness of the struggles of international students.

Besides communicating with the more general population, I also hope that my project can reach out to those who might currently undergo the influence of depression and tell them that they are not the only one who encounters the harsh situations and those misfortunes are never indications of flaws within their personality. Through narrating the true story of others who successfully combated depression, I want those who are depressed at the moment to regain the faith and courage to fight the seemingly hopeless battle.

* The characters in this book all use pseudonym.

Chapter 1

P a s t

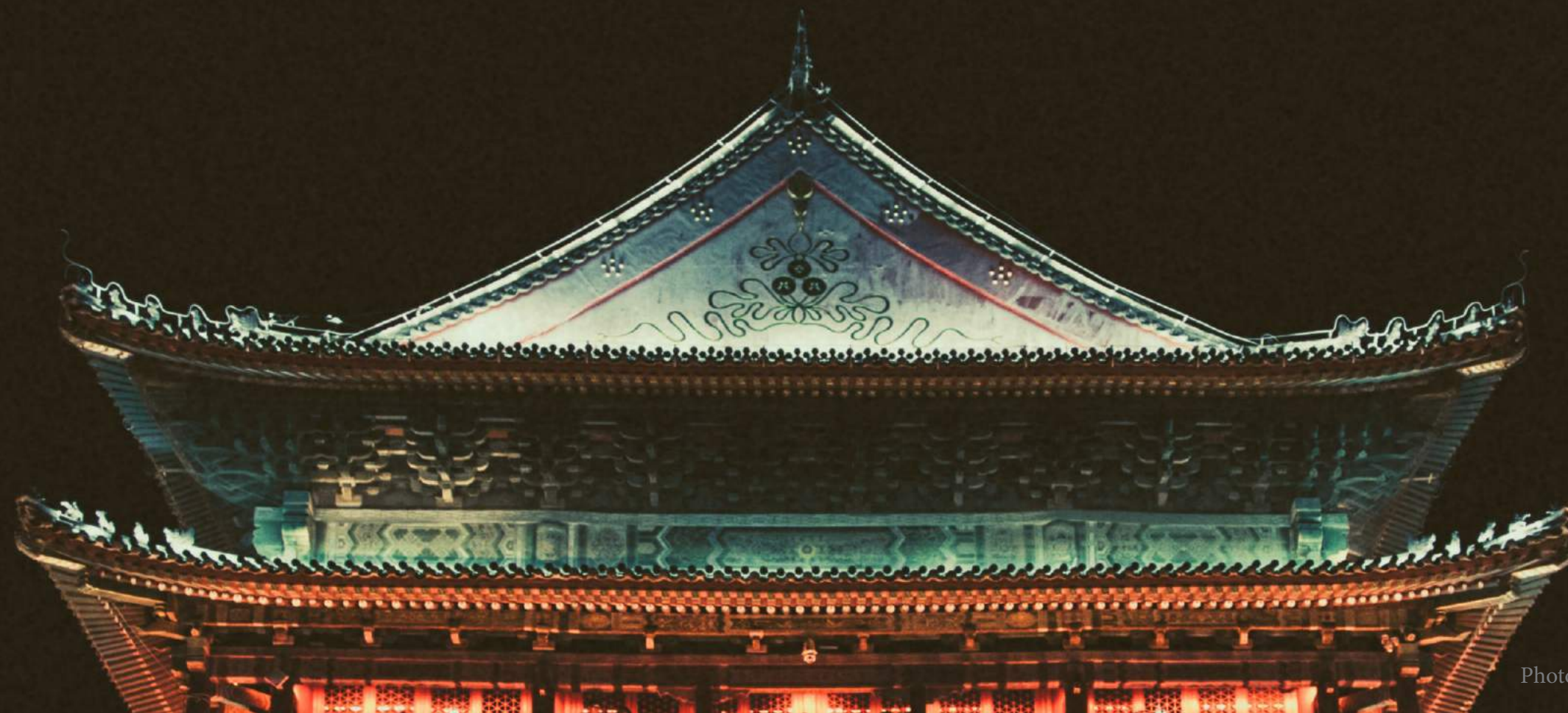




Photo by Andrew Haimerl on Unsplash

My name is Aapeli. I was born in Shanghai – the city of opportunities, the dream state of thousands of young souls.

The great potential comes with great pressure on everyone in my city. Adults here have to work extremely hard in order to maintain a living space and necessities, and our younger populations have to work even harder in order to uptake all the advantages granted to us.

Born in this fascinating city, I have to say that I do enjoy many advantages over those in other Chinese cities. I started playing piano ever since I was in kindergarten, and my piano teacher was a professor from Art school; both of my parents are well educated and knew how to construct a successful future for me; my elementary was one of the top elementary in Shanghai and offered over thirty art programs and some of which are top ranked in the country. Admission for my elementary was rather competitive, and thus there were countless intelligent brains among my peers.

It was fun to be friends with such a group and laugh while playing computer games with them. However, it was not so fun when it comes to announcing ranks after each test. Those who are on top of the list were the ideal students according to teachers and parents, and those at the bottom were labeled as “lazy” or “dull”. Though my Chinese grade was always on top of the list, everyone seemed to only notice my less satisfactory grades on math.



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My math teacher would always call me into her office and talk with me in a truly regretful way: “If you can only work as hard on math as you do for Chinese classes, your grade will be so much better!”

It is not that I did not try to work harder on my math grade. I wished that peers would all come to me asking questions with admiration and parents and that teachers would all praise me telling me that I am the kind of the student they like, so I went to math tutor every week and did as many practice problems as I could. Still I could not tangibly grasp any of the concepts introduced in math classes, the intuitive steps in others’ perception are disconnected segments that just won’t process. My hard work on math never paid off as what my parent described: “you will be able to accomplish anything if you work hard enough.”

At the same time, I was continuing to play piano with my classmates. In my elementary, everyone had to develop a specialty in art, which they called interest development. I was in the piano sector and we have piano classes each week to perform in front of the class and the instructor gives you feedback. It was fun and complementary at first to be able to perform a piece. It did not stay the same as we moved toward the higher level and playing longer pieces. The simple joy of playing the music was gone, instead, came the fear of not being able to finish the song and the embarrassment of being criticized in front of everyone you know. In comparison to those who always get praised during the evaluations, I had realized that piano is probably not my future; but the stamina in me forbade me from quitting halfway. During the hardest time when academy and piano squeezed me at the same time, I felt like I could barely breath and my mind refused to contact any new materials.

Photo by Clark Young on Unsplash



A person in silhouette, wearing a cap and a dark jacket, stands on a paved walkway looking out over a city at night. The city lights are visible in the distance, and the sky is filled with stars and the Milky Way galaxy. The scene is framed by dark tree branches in the foreground.

I think I should be pretty easy to recognize among a group of students back then. The skinny little boy who kept his mouth shut facing any stranger was me. I refused to communicate, or change my facial expression, when meeting new people for no reason, nor could I explain the reason why I act like such a tough kid. However, I would say that I was popular among my class, everyone wants to be friends with me and I looked just normal when I was with my classmates. Yet, deep inside I thought that I was different from everyone else: I worked hard on math but I could not solve the problems that they can solve within a glance; I enjoyed languages and speeches but it was apparently the less important thing for them; I played and laughed with them but was never able to show my frustration and anxiety with anyone because they seemed not worry about the same thing that bothered me...

"Why am I different?" was too hard to question an elementary boy that did not even build a solid worldview. The comparison game had driven me to achieve teachers' expectations and secretly compete with the friends who fight enemies with me in video games. I spent much more time on something that was clearly not for me than pursuing my talents and those efforts that never paid off. The world was too complicated and maybe it is better to lock up my thoughts.

Chapter 2

P R E S E N T

My name is Barbara, this is my first year in college and I think I am surviving through the intensive school works, though I did want to drop out of school maybe once in an exam weeks. I have a few friends and we hang out in a small group in between the heavy school works; I probably won't be labeled as social since I seldom attend events to meet new people but you can hear the laughs of my friend and I all the way across the Red Square. However, anyone that knew me before I came study here in the U.S. will be astonished by the changes in my personality.

Back in my middle school, I was always within the most popular group and I would think that everyone did enjoy being friends with me since I am good at talking with others and make them laugh. I also enjoyed being in a big group and meeting new people no matter how intimate our relationship will grow. I lived in a boarding school at that time and only went back home if I had to, because the complaints from my parents were unbearable compared to having fun with friends. I was enjoying my life very much, until my mom told me that I had to pack up all my stuff and get on the plane to the U.S...

Though I hated to leave all my dearest friends and delicious foods behind, I still held anticipation toward my new journey in the foreign country. The first year was relatively calm and times went by fast as I learn to adjust to the language and culture. However, my life went on a completely different route when I transferred to another high school in the second year.

I imagined myself making friends and socializing as I used to be, so I went up to my new classmates and tried to blend in their conversations as usual. But this time, I felt slap in the face when they seemed to intentionally ignore my attempt to talk with them. The group discussions were my worst nightmare during those days – everyone form groups with the people they know, talks and laughs were annoying noises for a 16-year-old girl who could not find a place that accept her. I felt them mocking me every time I made eye contact with someone and the smile on their face would freeze in a moment; I feared to walk in hallways, among the streams of obvious happiness while I could not sense any of that emotion.

Not only the local students refused to accept a strange face, the Chinese international students in this school also excluded in their small groups. I never understood why they preferred the other new Chinese students that entered the school at the same time as me and always left me out of any events, nor did I understand why I could not come up with the jokes as I would speak to my old friends when I was with them. Even on the very occasions when they remembered to inform me of their gatherings, I was not able to go because my host family lived far from the city and they would not drive if the trip took more than fifteen minutes.



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I had no other ways to get around places so the first half of the school year my life was basically school, homestay, and a visit to church every Sunday morning. I was already rejected in school, however, I felt even more isolated in my homestay. My host family always said they don't have time when I asked to do anything, yet they forced me to attend everything that they wanted me to. Though I did never hear about Christianity in the past, I was fine to attend church as part of the family. It was when I had a fever and could barely get out of my bed and my host family still forced me to go to Church that I started to dislike the idea of going to Church and listen to the preacher talk about the things I did not understand, especially with the look in their eyes as if I was guilty of unforgettable crimes. I had to admit that I did not like my host family. I locked myself in my room as soon as we got home, and my host family did not mind me for not communicating with them. The only times we talked were when they ordered me to do the house works as "part of the family", or blamed me for things that I was totally innocent of. I always remember the one Christmas I spent with them. I was fine with the house full of overwhelming holiday spirit that excluded me as usual, browsing videos and pages in my corner. My host family knocked on my door and called my out of my dark space; however, instead of a warm holiday greeting as I secretly awaited, they told me to go into the shallow snow to discard the trash that filled with gift boxes and wrapping papers. I do not remember the temperature of that day, all I know is that I could not feel my hands in the blowing wind. Nobody came out to help me and they probably never thought of me as opening other gift boxes and watching the Christmas shows.



I tried not to care about those who stared at me with apparent disdain, and I tried to entertain myself with the internet, but still I was not tough enough to process all the negative emotions alone and live like an isolated island. My host family's dog often comes to my room and leave a mess for me to clean, and they said it is my fault for leaving my door open. Well, maybe I did forget to lock the door for a few times, but I will never accept the blame for the injury of their dog. One day I stayed in my room as always, the others were downstairs for whatever reason. All of a sudden their dog started to bark loudly on the stairs, they found it broke its leg when trying to jump over the fence they set to keep the dog out from second floor. I was immediately blamed for not looking after the dog since I was the only one upstairs. I was used to the unreasonable accusations, but what made the situation worse this time was that my host family contact my school and the agency that helped me study abroad and accused me. I was only at the age of 16, no one believed my words and neither did I know how to argue for myself. The entire school, including teachers and students, trusted my host's words, which created yet a proper reason for them to stare at me and whisper behind my back.

I tried to turn to my parents and begged to go back home or transfer again, but they always told me to wait for a bit and see if things get better. I do not blame my parents, since I did never tell them what I went through in this school; not because I thought they will not care, but because I was afraid that my situation will bother them too much while they have no way to help back in China.

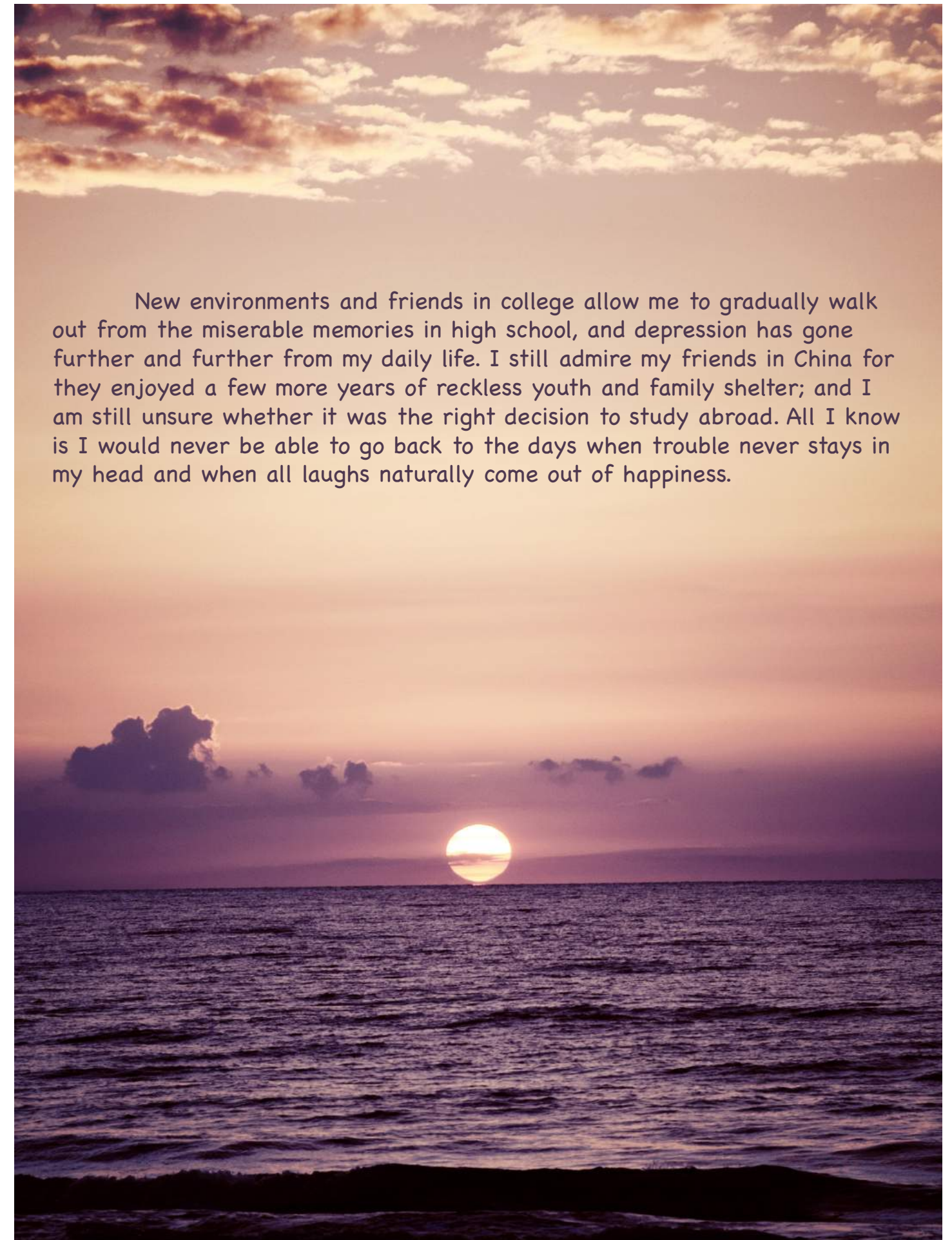
During those time, all I wanted to do was to hide in a corner where no one can see my brokenness and tears. I never wanted to disappear from the world so bad and I thought even if I died no one would probably know or care about it. I realized that I had changed so much over the half years and I was slowly sinking in emotions which I could not process. After visiting the doctor and finding out that I had depression, I kept the result to myself and did not tell anyone at the moment, not even my parents. The news about those who committed suicide under the influence of depression jumped into my mind and I was afraid that I would end up in the same path. I constantly had the battle in my head about whether the world possesses more flaws or merit, and fortunately I always decided that there must be more beauty to the world. I also thought about my parents a lot, reminding myself that I must not waste all the money they paid for my education.

Though I was always on my phone at that time, all I did was no more than skimming through the posts and videos which I did not think were interesting at all. Everyone think I was busy studying or indulging in my phone, only I knew how I desperately mourned for attention and companion. The loneliness left me a lot of time to contemplate and reflect my past. I always thought my parents were strict and only cared about my study, but I start to miss their guardianship. I even admire those who still facetime with their parents every day and had common language. I tried to speak about my illness once with my parents and they immediately told me to come back home and almost booked their ticket to my city. Since then I decided to only talk positively and deal with obstacles on my own.

One Christmas I went back to China and my dad took me to the park for a walk. He looked over the lake and said with a nostalgic look that he still remembered the time he took me to skate on the frozen lake when I was still so tiny and he could easily carry me on his shoulder. Maybe depression made me vulnerable to emotions, I broke to tears that night and realized my parents are getting older over these years and I had to learn to face the journey myself.



Photo by Ben Blennerhassett on Unsplash



New environments and friends in college allow me to gradually walk out from the miserable memories in high school, and depression has gone further and further from my daily life. I still admire my friends in China for they enjoyed a few more years of reckless youth and family shelter; and I am still unsure whether it was the right decision to study abroad. All I know is I would never be able to go back to the days when trouble never stays in my head and when all laughs naturally come out of happiness.

Photo by Animesh Mamdal on Unsplash

Chapter 3



F U T U R E



My name is Renata, I just came back from my weekend trip to Florence. Over the past half year of study abroad in Italy, I have tried to visit a different city every weekend and by far I am keeping up with my goal. I went on the majority of these weekend trips by myself, since I only came to Europe not long ago and it's just hard to find a second person whose schedule works out nicely with you. Moreover, I am enjoying the alone journeys that allow me to walk out of my comfort zone and meet strangers in unfamiliar places. Traveling alone grants me so many freedoms to explore the parts that are fascinating to me and don't have to reframe myself for other people. I might sound very independent now, however, anyone that only knew me from the past would be totally shocked if they heard what I am up to now, for I was the typical "social butterfly" when I still studied in China.

I liked to socialize and I think I was good at hanging out with people and making friends many years ago. My family might not be the wealthiest among peers but were enough to provide me with any kind of opportunities I needed. I used to think that I could accomplish anything in the world and I would be intimate friends with anyone if I wanted. However, coming to the States in my Sophomore year and meeting people that weren't as nice as in my past beat my childish ambitions.

Photo by Carlos Domínguez on Unsplash

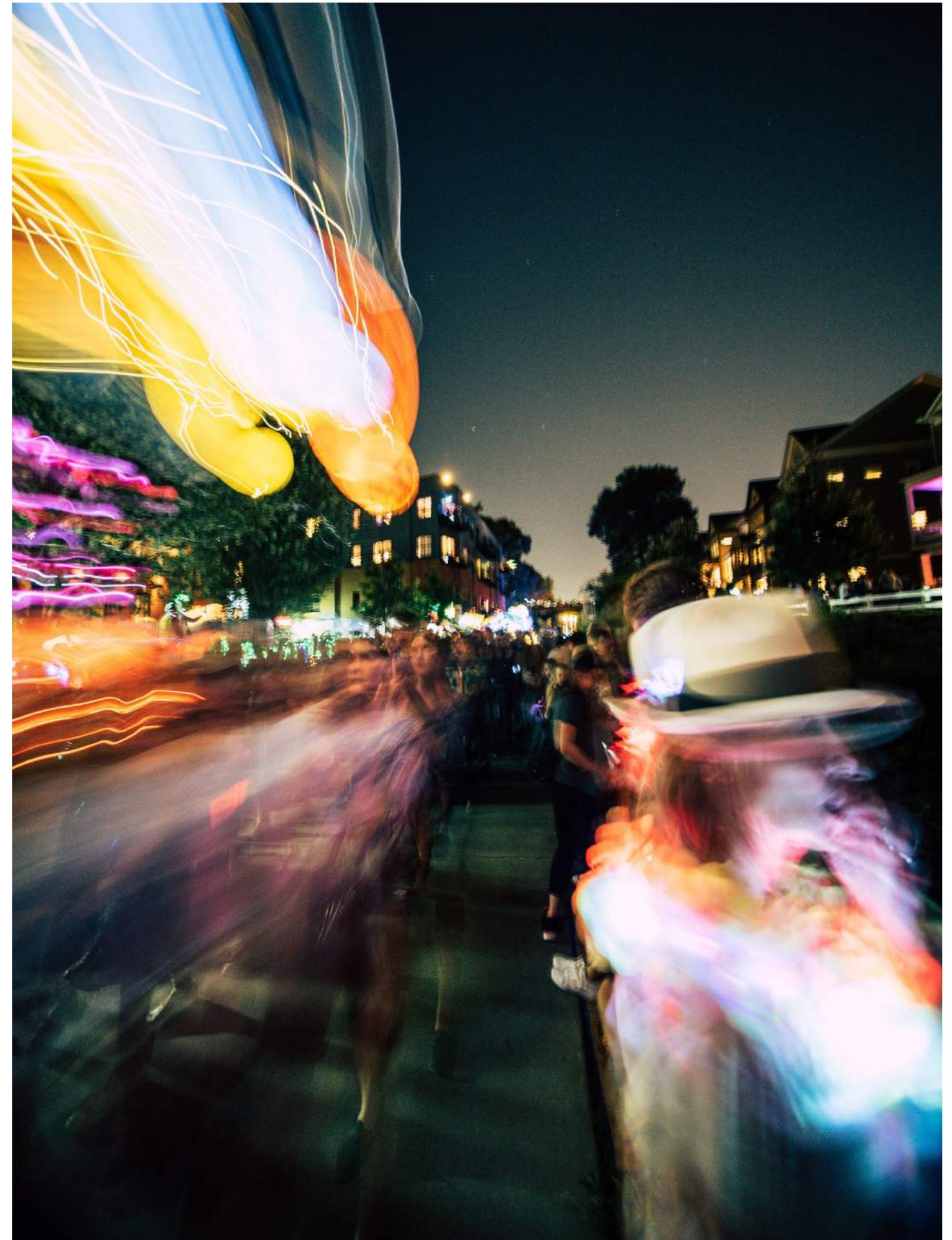


Photo by Cory Gazaille on Unsplash

Going through arguments and conflicts with a host family, being isolated in school and having no one listen to you, I think my experiences pretty much include all the possible obstacles an international student might encounter. At first, I turned to my parents if anything happened; but I soon realized that there were very limited things they can help beside telling me that I can always come back home. Then I learned to only tell partial stories to my parents so they won't have to worry about me too much.

Intentionally shutting down my communication with parents, I pushed myself into a world of isolation. I found the social events and relationships which used to be the center of my life gradually lost their attraction. Meanwhile, the things that happened in school – rumors, small groups, arguments – made me think that I am becoming the mean girl in soap drama which I despised for my entire childhood. I think that both the Chinese and the Americans in that school disliked me, which was fine because neither did I think I was a likable teenager. Everything that supported me with my wildest dream faded away, and I felt my life was too void and aimless to sense any sign of life. I still kept up with my school works and performed my daily routines as normally as possible in case others found out about my problem and informed my parents or even forced me back home. But away from people, after I accomplished all the urgent obligations, I fell back to the magnificent hole and let it take away all my energies and emotions. Unlike the major depression symptom in which patients lose their interests in food, I saw food as the only companion I had left. I could sit on my bed for the entire day facing the blank wall and doing nothing but eating my chips on a less busy Sunday. Sometimes I did not even realize how much food I had until I emptied a giant Amazon box of junk food over a weekend and suddenly felt so bad but still couldn't help to repeat the process the very next weekend. I did not like myself at all, but I felt something forbid me from making any effort to change.



Photo by Ben Blennerhassett on Unsplash

I went back to China over the summer break. My parents did not notice anything because I told them I was out with my friends while they were at work, though in reality I spent most of those days alone in my room with my chips. I think I would probably be on one of those six-hundred-pound weight loss TV shows if my best friend did not drag me out of my bed and took me to a psychologist. Through tracing back from today, I clearly see my path to depression and the symptoms, I was shocked at the moment when the psychologist told me about my mental illness. For a short period, the diagnosis made my situation worse, I started to wonder if depression means I am insane and therefore I refused to take the medicine. Thanks to my dearest friend again for checking my pills almost every day to make sure I was following the treatments, for forcing me out of my room even when I ignored her texts over and over, and for treating me as usual except making sure I know she is always around when I need her.

The medicine had immediate effect for me, at least I was able to stay focus and maintain energy during the day time. I also moved into a new home stay after summer break. The new family had no other child in the house so they treated me as their real daughter. They would ask how was my day on the way home and on dinner table; they were never discouraged by my indifferent attitude; they planned my birthday and remembered the tiny aspects of my dream; they shared their secrets with me and took me into consideration when making a family decision; they gave me suggestions for what they think is best for me but at the same time respect my culture and opinions... I finally found a place to let out of everything that I was afraid of sharing with my natural parents back home. Friendships also began to stabilize in the second year and I found people that I enjoyed, despising those I could never find a way to get along with. Though I never told my full story to any others besides the one friend in China, all the other groups of people in my life possessed positive influence on my recovery. It is the impression of being cared for and liked which helped me slowly walk out of my guilt of being undesirable and regain my confidence.

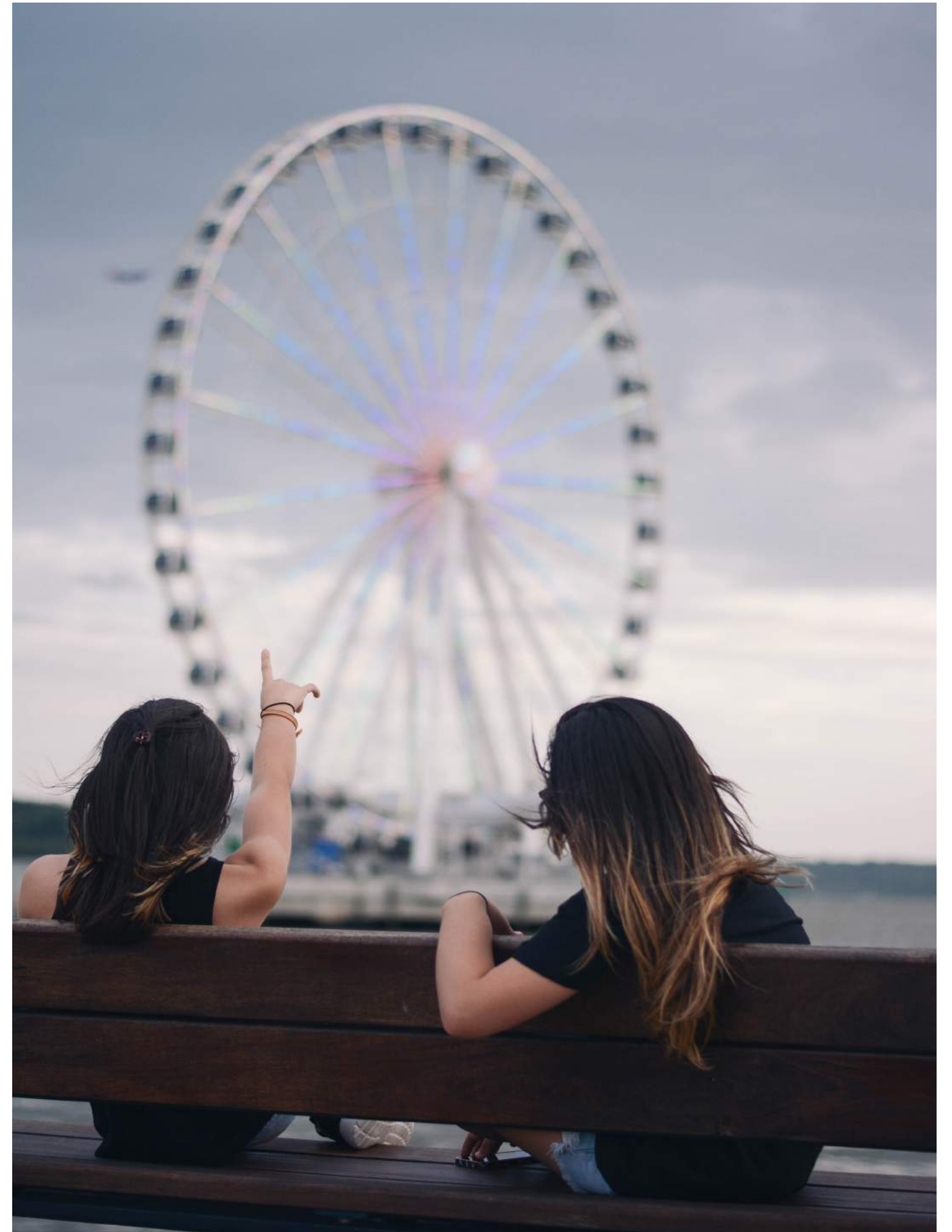
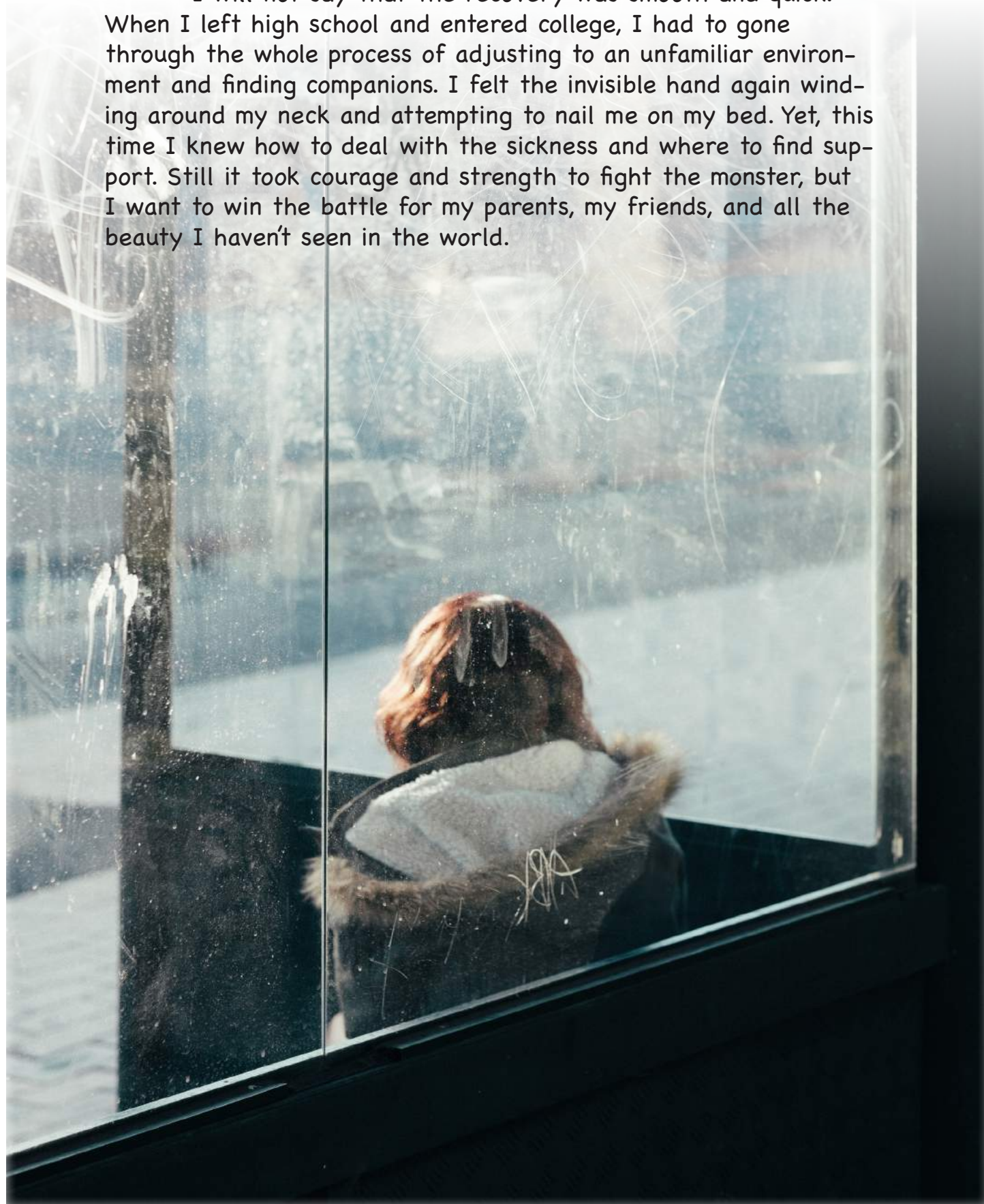



Photo by Karina Carvalho on Unsplash

I will not say that the recovery was smooth and quick. When I left high school and entered college, I had to go through the whole process of adjusting to an unfamiliar environment and finding companions. I felt the invisible hand again winding around my neck and attempting to nail me on my bed. Yet, this time I knew how to deal with the sickness and where to find support. Still it took courage and strength to fight the monster, but I want to win the battle for my parents, my friends, and all the beauty I haven't seen in the world.



Although I still would rather I never went through the hard time with depression, I had to admit that this unique experience also left me with irreplaceable lessons. I relinquished the less important relationships that I only held onto to prove my popularity; I became more aware of what I want instead of what others expected me to. Indeed, the time with depression taught me what is truly important in my life and not to be afraid of being alone for true relationships never fade away no matter how far I go.



I am only able to sit peacefully in a café on the ancient street in Italy because I did not give up during the struggles and eventually beat the depression monster. Therefore, I plead everyone who sees my story and feels similar to my past to go visit a counselor or doctor and follow their instructions. More importantly, find someone that you can trust and tell your struggle. I still believe that there is more merit in humanity which makes this world not too cold to live. Though I know "everything will be alright" sound like the most irresponsible words for anyone who struggles with depression, and trust me I got irritated whenever people used this cliché to soften the hard time I underwent, I must tell you that the storm will pass and I have found my clear sky. I hope you all find your place and be free from the monster.

To be

Continued

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“Each one of us is alone in the world. He is shut in a tower of brass, and can communicate with his fellows only by signs, and the signs have no common value, so that their sense is vague and uncertain. We seek pitifully to convey to others the treasures of our heart, but they have not the power to accept them, and so we go lonely, side by side but not together, unable to know our fellows and unknown by them. We are like people living in a country whose language they know so little that, with all manner of beautiful and profound things to say, they are condemned to the banalities of the conversation manual. Their brain is seething with ideas, and they can only tell you that the umbrella of the gardener’s aunt is in the house.”

- W. Somerset Maugham, The Moon and Sixpence

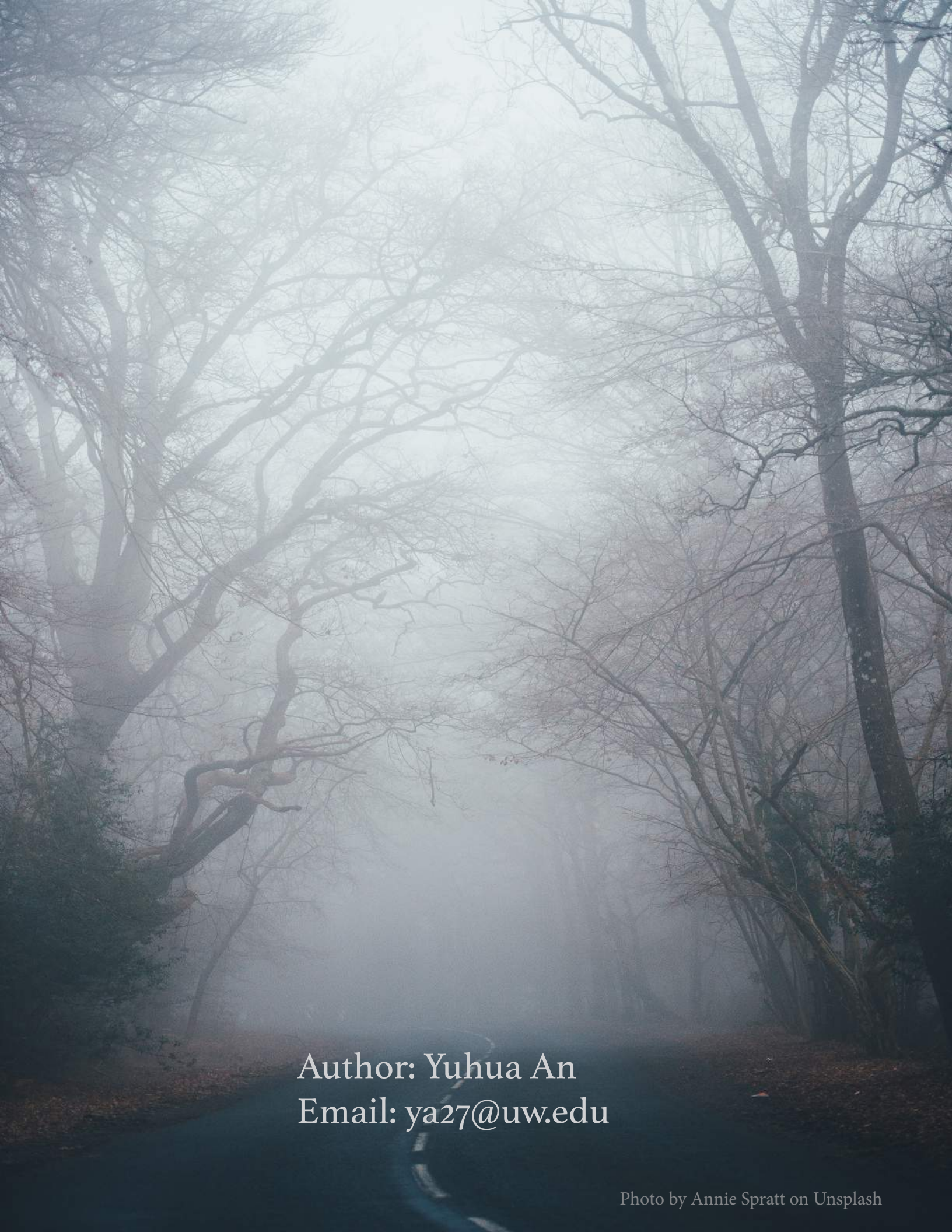
All three protagonists in this book are recovered from depression, though the latter two interviewees still sometimes show signs of unstable emotions. Though I have read many academic articles and experiences of others online, I was still surprised at some of my interviewees' personalities. During the interview sections, all of them were easygoing and talkative. It is hard to imagine any of them going through the isolation states they described. I wish all readers of this book do realize that even the most extroverted friend around us could be subject to depression. Due to many of the stereotypes of depression, most people with depression are not willing to expose their situations for others to judge. On the contrary, people with depression often pretend to be as normal as possible so they can still be accepted by their friends and society.

As examined in all three stories, a friend or family that knows the situation and being supportive at all times is imperative for recovery. However, improper actions and advice could also worsen the situation. It is important for anybody feeling depressed to go to professional counselling. The diagnosis process of depression is much more complicated than a few simple survey questions. Cooperation with a doctor is the common step all three of my interviewees underwent.

The next important thing after suggesting or helping your friends to go to a professional counselor, is to support them, let them know that there will always be someone right there to listen to them, to care for them. Many of the depressed people do show levels of insecurity, company is often more important than trying to give them advice that you think might be helpful.

One important thing to keep in mind when talking with friends with depression, is the difference between sympathy and empathy. The majority of us would be sympathy to others' situation and think that we care and understand their emotion. While in reality, empathy is more in need when communicating with depression groups. As mentioned in my last blog, it is hard for someone who has never had related experiences to relate to the problem. In such cases, it is worse if we try to pretend we do understand and thus build connection. The superficial appearance of understanding only worsens the barrier between understanding, making people feel even more isolated.

No one deserves such experiences when going through the mental breakdowns. As humans we do never understand why most misfortunes exist. Yet, please hold fast to the belief that there is always hope among desperation. Though our thoughts and feelings are hard to communicate, they are valuable to this world, and they are what makes you complete.



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