

Pre-med Brunch

A familiar mesh of students and locals and health professionals stood between me and the entrance to the café down the street from the university hospital. I brushed past them and their tendrils of conversation: observations on the latest high-profile donation to the hospital, plans for the upcoming weekend, fleeting attempts to avoid discussing the weather. Today's sundry assortment of pedestrians lined up along the café's brick walls would spend all morning waiting for a table. They would spend their time waiting for people like my friends and I as we lingered and shared our summer experiences and Fall semester schedules. Regular pre-med talk.

Inside the café, utensils clattered against plates as chairs rocked and scraped along tile floor. Competing footsteps from patrons and waitstaff synced almost rhythmically with sounds of outside traffic. Above the clamor floated a cloud of disparate voices competing to be heard in this mid-sized, open space.

Troy--my boyfriend--spotted me first; his enthusiastic waving drew me to a booth near the back of the café where Annie, one of my freshman year dorm friends, sat next to him. Across from her sat Devyani, one of Annie's friends.

"Sorry I'm late," I said when I reached the head of the table.

"It's ok," said Annie. "Troy was telling us you'd probably be another five minutes, anyways."

I rolled my eyes at Troy. "I'm not *that* late to things," I breathed. Troy flashed one of his boyish grins and before I could tease him about his salmon-colored shorts, a server appeared at our table, as if summoned by my late entrance.

"Are you all ready to order now?" he asked.

My friends glanced at me. I knew if we sent the server away without ordering, in the middle of a busy café, we might never see him again. I smiled and nodded.

The server turned to Annie, who ordered fruit and oatmeal. Devyani ordered a Mexican omelette, which at this café meant sliced jalapeños folded into a vegetarian omelette. I didn't know Devyani well, only that she was a local and that she was bored because there was so little to do on campus before classes started. She was the secretary for Red Cross Club this year; as the vice president of the club, I felt I had at

least some responsibility to screen her. Troy ordered eggs and sausage with whole wheat bread. His arms weren't as firm as they had been before he left for break. Not that I had any right or desire to judge, especially after I ordered a vanilla parfait topped with sweetened granola.

After the server explained the obvious—the café was busy and our food might take a little longer to arrive than usual—he disappeared into a throng of patrons, and I chose that moment to slide into the booth next to Troy. My boyfriend flashed me the same inviting grin he projected at professors and fraternity brothers. I wanted to reach forward and fix the few blades of hair that had fallen across his forehead, but my public timidity retained my hand in my lap. Strange that a couple who dated for almost two years could become so convincingly formal over a single summer.

“How was Cayman?” I asked him.

“Oh my god,” sputtered Devyani. “You went to the CAYMAN ISLANDS this summer?”

Troy shrugged. “It wasn't that amazing. I was stuck doing office work for most of the day because my dad wanted to be ethical about my credits, or whatever.”

“He got an exemption from the business school to study abroad at his dad's company and get class credit for it,” I explained to Devyani.

“What do you mean it wasn't that amazing?” said Annie, who glared jealously at Troy. “I saw posts of you scuba diving and biking along the ocean.” She looked at me. “Why didn't you go with him?”

“I couldn't, remember?” I said. “I had to wrap up a few things with my summer research mentor, so I could submit an abstract for the symposium. Trust me, I wish I could have visited, even for just a couple days.”

“It's in the same time zone, right?” Annie asked.

“Only for part of the year,” I said. “During the summer they're an hour behind.”

“That's so convenient. You don't even have to worry about coordinating your schedules across time zones!” Annie leaned back into her seat, weary with the memory of a past relationship still weighing heavily upon her. “I was dating this guy in the UK that I met while doing a summer abroad in London. He was such an amazing guy, and

his teeth weren't even as bad. The time zone difference completely destroyed the relationship, though."

"How many hours was it?"

"They're four hours ahead, which doesn't sound bad at first, but when you have two people with busy lives and extremely different sleeping schedules, there's like no time to chat. Plus, I'm pretty sure he was cheating on me by the end of the relationship."

We all murmured our condolences for her loss. Troy's eyes flickered to mine, a half smirk streaked across his face. I allowed myself a moment to feel glad we were back in the same city.

The door to the restaurant opened every few seconds, allowing a welcome gust of air to circulate through the humid restaurant, whirling around tables and bodies and warding off the encroaching summer heat. Next week, we would all dread this relatively tranquil moment for the relentless schedule that accompanied the onset of classes.

Annie, still straddling a double major in neuroscience and linguistics, had maxed out her credit allowance for the semester. She was considering asking for an exemption to take more credits so she could add a mini course on community action and social change taught in Detroit. Devyani, prioritizing her new positions as Red Cross Club secretary and treasurer of the Asian Student Organization (ASO), was taking fourteen credits, partly to attend to her leadership roles, but also so she had more time to study for the MCAT in January. A competitive score on the MCAT, the medical college admissions test, was more important than GPA, extracurricular activities--anything one could ever write in a personal statement. The results of my own MCAT were pending and I was afraid that, upon seeing my results, I would have to clear my schedule and join Devyani in studying once again for that seven-hour gateway exam to medical school.

"I swear," Devyani said. "Every day of being a pre-med is like having a mini anxiety attack."

"What about you, Troy?" Annie said, leaning forward in her chair. "What's your schedule like?"

Troy grinned and shifted in his chair. “I mean, it’s nothing like what all of you are taking. I’ve got a class called business model innovation, another one on professional relationships, and—” he smirked. “One on how to use Excel.”

“Like, the spreadsheet program?”

He nodded. “Yeah, I guess so.”

Annie leaned back in her chair, exasperated. “I should’ve applied to business school,” she breathed.

Our food arrived quickly. As the server slid our food onto the table, Devyani leaned forward and inhaled the overpowering scent of fresh omelette and toast heaped on the plate in front of her. She waited for each of us take a bite of our food first before she finally dug her fork into the nearest pile of eggs; after each bite, she was careful to wipe her mouth with the napkin she kept draped across her lap.

I spooned a glob of parfait into my mouth. The locally sourced yogurt was already lukewarm, and I wished I had ordered Troy’s eggs and sausage, even if the heaping slab of grease in front of him was even worse for me than my parfait.

Annie was the first one to spot the familiar face as it approached our table. Troy and Devyani followed Annie’s gaze, and although they weren’t familiar with the individual ebbing and flowing through the crowd, I was sure they had overheard his name at least once in pre-med conversation.

“Ravi!” Annie yelled out to him. “How are you? What are you doing here?”

Ravi Hussain was supposed to be starting classes at a mid-tier medical school on the East Coast at this point in the year. The former president of the Red Cross Club, he had doubled the number of campus blood drives and expanded our winter formal into a campus-wide event. As a student council representative, he had passed measures to reduce university carbon emissions and he had successfully petitioned the university to divest from companies that conduct business with Israel. Ravi’s name graced two scientific publications from two separate labs and, last I heard, another publication was on its way.

Ravi shrugged. “I’m doing okay.” He grinned. “I was hoping to get one last brunch here before the rush of undergrads, but I guess I’m already too late.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be starting classes right now?” I asked. “What happened to med school?”

He shrugged again; his face sank ever so slightly. Ravi had graduated last spring with hopes of attending medical school this Fall. He had applied to 26 schools, armed with three letters of recommendation from science professors, third author on both scientific publications, and a 3.8 GPA. Regardless, he had only received a couple interview offers, and by the end of the cycle, he had found himself with a single waitlist position at a safety school in southern Illinois.

“Sucks that you didn’t get in man,” said Troy. “Clara told me how hard it was to get published at all as an undergrad.”

Ravi’s story was a fear that plagued most, if not all pre-med students. When we prepared our applications to medical school, spending hours staying up late at night to study so we could improve our GPA’s by a tenth of a point, remaining at the lab beyond our required hours to get a possible authorship, we did so to avoid Ravi’s fate.

“Did you apply again this cycle?” Devyani asked.

Ravi nodded. “I’m taking a gap year doing clinical research at the hospital right now. I applied right when the cycle opened, so hopefully I get better chances this time around.”

“I don’t understand how you didn’t get in,” Annie breathed. “You did literally everything. How could they not accept you?”

I tried to ignore the flash of embarrassment that washed over his face, an embarrassment quickly vanquished by a gleaming white smile. “I heard it was an especially tough cycle,” he said. “I was talking to some friends and they told me Temple over-admitted students, so it had to offer a ton of accepted applicants a financial incentive to take a year off before starting. A lot of competitive people applied last cycle.”

“We should compare our med school spreadsheets sometime,” I said. “I want to make sure I’m not applying to the same schools as you did, because there’s no way I’ll get into schools that turned you down.”

He chuckled at the obvious flattery. “No Clara, you should still apply to where you want to go,” he said. “As long as we’re both competitive, there’s no reason why a school wouldn’t accept both of us.”

Ravi glanced towards the entrance and smiled and waved. “That’s my girlfriend waving me towards a table,” he said to all of us. “See you later, and good luck this year!”

“Good luck to you too!” we called after Ravi.

Our eyes trailed him until he disappeared into the now dwindling fog of bodies. Ravi was a fluke. He was one of the few applicants who, despite being completely capable of contending with the rigors of medical school, managed to fall just short of receiving a genuine opportunity to prove himself as a member of an incoming class.

“If HE can’t get into medical school, I might as well not even apply this cycle,” said Devyani as soon as Ravi was out of earshot.

“Oh please, Devyani,” said Annie. “You don’t have anything to worry about. You basically have a personal statement because of your parents.”

“No, that’s not true at all,” Devyani said. “I mean, I do talk about how going to India every year has inspired me to want to provide free healthcare to rural populations, but there are too many of us applying for me to be competitive just because my parents are immigrants. My dad’s a doctor, so I’m even in the majority of med students who have a physician in the family.”

Medical schools, already flush with Asian applicants, would see my name, Clara Chen, and automatically shift my application closer to the rejection pile. As the number of competitive applicants continued to outpace increasing class sizes, people like Ravi, competitive to the point of superiority a decade ago, now needed multiple attempts to achieve acceptance to medical school.

When I looked back down at my food, I realized I had lost my appetite.

“Are you going to take your parfait home with you?” the server asked.

“No thanks,” I smiled. I looked at Troy’s plate, which was already covered with napkins and silverware.

The line winding around the restaurant's facade had long ago dwindled to an infrequent trickle of pleasant-faced patrons carrying biodegradable takeout boxes. Devyani clutched one of the boxes to her side as we parted ways at the entrance.

"Thanks for letting me come to brunch," she said. "I probably wouldn't even be awake by now if you hadn't invited me."

"Oh I KNOW," said Annie. "I need to sleep in every day this week so I can make up for all the sleep I'm not going to get this semester."

"It was good to see you guys again," said Troy. "Whenever I get bored between classes I guess I can always find one of you at the med library."

We stood there in silence for a moment.

"Are you headed back towards campus, Clara?" Annie asked. "Do you want a ride?"

I shook my head. "No, I'm heading to the library to print some things before classes."

"What do you have to print? Everything's online now."

"I know," I said. "But I like to print the syllabi so I have them with me the first day. It makes me feel like I'm actually carrying something important in my backpack besides my laptop."

Annie smiled. "Sure, Clara." Annie and Devyani waved goodbye and headed to the parking garage across from the café.

I turned to Troy. "See you tonight?" he asked. I nodded and leaned forward and hugged him. "See you later," I said.

I pulled my phone out of my handbag on the way to the library. I knew my score wouldn't be released yet. The web site stated that scores would arrive approximately a month after taking the MCAT, even though there was no reason to have to wait that long; the test was multiple choice and completely electronic. For all the talk of the time and effort required to curve and standardized tests for each MCAT cohort, I couldn't imagine that shifting a bell curve would take more than a few minutes. I clicked the refresh button on the toolbar.

Nothing.

One more time.

I gave up.

I slipped my phone back into my handbag and did my best to enjoy the surrounding landscape. High rises built for student housing dominated the campus skyline. Lower down my view, I could make out the individual buildings that composed the bulk of Southern Michigan's campus. Patches of muted browns and oversaturated greens dotted my view. In a month or two this same view would transform into a striking collage of color. Then, a moment later, the leaves would fall, and they would be carried away in heaping masses by university trucks.

Further up the hill, I spotted two boys roughly my age. One of them pushed the other, who sat in a wheelchair and wore a hospital gown. I shouldn't have been surprised at the sight of them—the hospital bordered campus and it was common to see patients walk past university dorms—except for an uncanny feeling I couldn't place.

The boy pushing the wheelchair wore a Sherman G. Whipple School of Business T-shirt, a pair of boat shoes, and a flat brim hat. As he pushed, he maintained a steady conversation with the patient in the wheelchair, sometimes bending down and whispering to the patient. As the wheelchair drew closer, I focused my attention on the patient in the chair. His hands lay folded in his lap, but they didn't remain in one place. They shook, his hands. Trembling across his lap and up his knees, only to slide back into the crook of his legs. His head twitched as well, lolling from one side to another and then back again--tell-tale signs of Parkinson's. But he seemed too young for Parkinson's. I searched inside my head for a random fact I had learned in neuroscience last semester: the average age of onset for Parkinson's patients was either 50 or 60, and early onset Parkinson's could strike patients as early as 40 years old. None of those numbers even remotely fit the patient in the wheelchair, who was easily half the average age of onset. And if the patient was in a wheelchair, unable to walk on his own, that meant he was struggling with the later stages of the disease.

"Excuse me," I called out to them, although my greeting was directed at the guy pushing the wheelchair. He stopped at the bottom of the hill, so that the wheelchair rested on flat ground just before the busy four lane intersection adjacent to the hospital.

I looked at them, realizing that I didn't know what to say. I had no polite way of ascertaining their intentions. I glanced quickly at the patient sitting in the chair, and then at the boy standing behind the wheelchair.

"Are you working as a caregiver?" I asked the boy wearing the business school shirt. "My name's Clara, by the way."

He looked at me and grinned knowingly, but I wasn't in on the secret. "What's your name?" I added quickly.

"Stewart," said the boy. "And yes, I am his caregiver." He gestured at the patient in front of him. "This is Benjamin. He graduated from Southern Michigan last year, from the business school. I'm a senior at SMU this year."

Benjamin's bloodshot eyes rolled lazily up to greet me. I smiled at him and looked back at Stewart. I didn't have much interest in becoming a caretaker, but I wanted to keep that option available in case I needed to bolster my medical school application, or if I was unable to find a better gap year position.

"How long have you been doing it?" I asked. "How did you get that job? Do you enjoy it? When are you applying to med school?"

Stewart grimaced at the mention of med school. "I'm applying to PA schools this spring," he corrected me. "Nowadays, it's harder to get into PA school than med school." His response explained the grimace. For whatever reason, people applying to PA schools loved to express disdain for those applying to medical school, as if their perceived inferiority to pre-med students necessitated retaliatory rancor.

"It's not even like physicians do any more than PA's on a daily basis." He added. "A lot of the time, when a patient comes into clinic, they're seeing a PA or a nurse, not a physician. PA's can perform most of the same duties as physicians, and in a lot of clinics, you get paid the same amount. And we don't have to spend half our lives in school, either."

"How did you become a caregiver?" I asked to change the subject.

Stewart hesitated. I watched him swallow the beginnings of a statement, and trade what he swallowed for another introduction.

“I applied through HomeStead Health, interviewed, and got the position within a month. They don’t require any kind of license besides CPR training, which they provide if you don’t already have it when you apply.”

“And was Benjamin assigned to you? What happened to him?”

Stewart hesitated again. I realized that he wasn’t swallowing his words as much as searching for them somewhere, buried in his mind.

Benjamin grunted. Both of us glanced down at the quivering figure in the wheelchair.

“Benjamin is suffering from a spontaneous onset of tardive dyskinesia,” Stewart said, looking ahead to the crosswalk behind me now.

The words came out clipped and rehearsed, as if Stewart had been instructed to say that phrase, and coached until it emerged just like that, word for word.

A cold certainty told me that Stewart would get into PA school. From his façade of confidence to his rehearsed responses, he must have had someone, some interest, working in his favor.

“You can play the game even if you don’t believe in it,” Benjamin managed. “Because you can play it in your own way. You owe it to yourself.”

I looked up and met Stewart’s eyes. “What is he talking about?”

“They don’t see you because they don’t expect you to know anything,” Benjamin continued.

I glared at Stewart. I wanted him to know I wasn’t leaving until he divulged some information of value.

Stewart looked down at the sidewalk. “We used a service,” he explained limply.

“What do you mean?” I persisted. “Is it a ghostwriting service? I’m sorry about asking all these questions.”

Stewart was clearly uncomfortable now. He wanted nothing more than to leave, shake me loose and continue free of my prying questions.

“Aspiring pre-health students are a relatively constant quantity,” Benjamin sputtered in the background of our conversation.

I maintained my eye contact with Stewart. I wanted him to give me contact information--a phone number, a name, even an email address.

“For each one who decides to embark on the path to some health profession,” Benjamin continued. Stewart looked up, but when he did, he looked behind me to the other side of the crosswalk. “...another one capitulates and chooses mid-tier employment,” Benjamin finished.

“We have to get going,” Stewart said. He bid me goodbye and quickly wheeled Benjamin towards the crosswalk behind me. Before he walked out of earshot, I heard him lean down to Benjamin and hiss, “You don’t need to tell them anything--they already get enough help with the application process.”

I didn’t allow myself to look back at them; I was too overwhelmed by my own thoughts to follow the pair before campus swallowed them up. A diagnosis of Parkinson’s didn’t make sense at all in an individual that young, but a disease like Huntington’s acted differently. As Huntington’s progressed through generations of a family, the symptoms of the disease manifested earlier and earlier, a phenomenon known as anticipation.

I took out my phone and searched for Stewart and Benjamin and HomeStead Health; the first search result revealed a directory of caregivers in the area where, in the description, I read that Benjamin’s clinical diagnosis was Huntington’s Disease. If tardive dyskinesia could be induced in a patient with Haldol and then diagnosed deliberately as Huntington’s, then the assigned caregiver would care for a patient with a terminal, debilitating disease. If that caregiver was applying to a health professional school--such as PA school--then that experience alone would form a narrative durable enough to serve as the bulk of a personal statement. Any admissions interview question could be parried with a response leading back to the caregiver’s experience with the patient. Other extracurricular activities no longer mattered. Even demonstrations of sympathy and emotional intelligence became optional. Stewart had a *longitudinal clinical experience* as an undergraduate student, and he would get into any PA school he wanted while other, more typical pre-health students like Ravi and I, would be overlooked as schools scrambled to accept more applicants like Stewart.

The implications of the situation crept in, slowly at first, then as an overwhelming tide of guilt. They had fabricated an entire clinical experience to get into graduate school, where they would be seeing and treating actual patients. I had witnessed an

ethically questionable arrangement and I was responsible for taking some kind action to—what, solve this mystery? Both boys had vanished, and the directory for HomeStead Health disappeared when I turned off my phone screen. I thought back to Ravi, standing at the head of our table, mustering the courage to apply again to medical school. I thought of my unwritten personal statement, and how it would take me months to craft five mediocre paragraphs that an admissions committee member would read in five minutes. I realized suddenly that I understood their choice, their resolve to thrust themselves into PA school no matter the cost.

I tried refreshing the test site page again as I walked back to my apartment, hoping irrationally that my MCAT score would eventually appear on the screen. I resolved never to compromise my morals when I became a physician.