

Takeoff

The sun set hours before the plane began to wake, first with a small twitch—barely moving—and then stretching out, yawning, ready to begin its journey. Inside the cabin, I opened the tiny square window, peeking out at the dark familiarities of the land. Here I was comfortable, completely in control, and the master of my fate. But as the plane groggily began to move and gradually transitioned from a leisurely trot to a faster sprint, I bid farewell to home and security. In short time, the plane tilted its nose upwards, like a dog looking toward its master, begging for the sweet reward of a treat. I was in the air now, off the ground from my world of familiarity, making my ascent into the unknown.

Just a year earlier, I set foot into a new school, but unlike my peers from middle school, I was not walking into the public high school. I instead chose to take all my classes at my community college, an unknown and dark place full of things and people I did not know. My only knowledge of community college was that of negative connotation—people who attended community college weren't smart enough or prepared for the four-year university. I was wrong and I knew nothing else.

Unlike the rows in front and behind me, my row's window was open. I watched the familiar landscape get smaller and smaller until it was just another speck of nothingness and all I could see was the faint light of the land below. The plane continued to rise higher and higher, yearning to touch the stars, and as it tore through the clouds, the faint light of the horizon greeted me, a mixture of lapis blues and blood reds. The clouds looked like a blanket of snow underneath me; the sky was a blank canvas of land to explore.

It was the first day of the term and I approached the classroom, scared and apprehensive. What would the people look like? What would my professor be like? Would people know that I

was only 14 years old, and what would people think of me? I drowned in my narcissistic worries and questions and doubts, thoughts sprinting through my cerebrum and jumping down to my tingling toes. I hesitantly stepped into the room and as quickly as the barrage of questions dashed through my head, they were gone. I was greeted by a kind looking woman with a burning passion in her eyes; young men and women, all with a story to tell and a desire to learn. The two hours of class seemed to be only minutes and as I packed my supplies and exited the classroom, I wondered if all college classes were as wondrous as my first.

The plane rose yet even higher; the stars were so close I wanted to reach my arm out and feel if stardust was truly made of magic. The clouds dispersed and gave way to the void below, to a sea of darkness. Suddenly, I spotted an island in the distance—the city of Los Angeles, now a mass of brilliant light—surrounded by the absence of color and warmth. It wasn't a city anymore but instead a million fireflies all buzzing around, making their way through the black. The plane continued sailing through the dark sky and I bid farewell to the island, to the light.

I had an hour in between two of my classes, and to occupy my time I would sit in a vacant booth at the sitting area. It was a place of bleak faces: the serious guy who reeked of coffee, the blonde with hands glued to her phone, the sunglasses who looked stone cold. No one greeted another, instead opting to look busy with whatever they were pretending to be doing. No one had time for socializing when the midterm was in twenty minutes. There wasn't time for that. Yet, one day, I was pleasantly surprised by a joyous face as I was writing a short essay. "May I sit here, please?" he asked politely with a warm smile, and I happily obliged. I put away my belongings and asked what brought him to the college. His name was Ernest, and he had immigrated from Nigeria just three months prior to our conversation. His joy and smile were

rapturous, and he enthralled me with his stories. I saw him every Thursday at the booth for the rest of the year.

After many hours of sailing, the port was in sight. The night sky and sea of darkness faded and the sun's awakening gave way to the beautiful land below. The void disappeared and in its place was a vast landscape of yellows and greens and blues. The plane began to dive toward the land, drawn by its beauty and I bade farewell to the magical sea and sky as I descended more and more until the clouds were no longer the floor but the ceiling—a gateway to paradise.

It was finals week of school, and after I turned in my test, with a pang of regret, I nodded goodbye to my friends—my acquaintances—and vacated the room. I didn't know if I would ever see some of them again and the time felt like it passed so quickly. I hadn't seen Ernest since we last said goodbye at the end of the semester and I dreaded a similar fate for all my new friends. Just a year before, I had never set foot in this community college before and now, it seemed so hard to leave. But it wasn't time for that anymore. It was summer break. Time to discover something new.

What was only a speck became bigger and bigger, coming straight toward me, toward the plane, until I was greeted by the familiarity of the land and reality. The plane touched down, a magnificent landing with only the slightest of jolts. I gathered my belongings and was ushered out. And once I shuffled from the narrow corridors of the plane, I looked up at the sky.

I knew someday I would return to the stars.

But not yet.