

Tuesday

by Fares Bou-Nassif

Week 1: Tuesday

I walk in through the gates, dreading the long walk down to the cafeteria. I watch the cars passing me by, their drivers all uniquely sleepy, tired, nervous, or indifferent. Some come in loud, active groups. Some come alone, with quiet music playing from their radios. Some are ranting loudly over their cellphones. While the university staff attempts to maintain the beautiful gardens that surround the drive down, I hop over and around the wetness that envelops the pavements, watching every step, to keep my mind distracted long enough for me to enter the inner grounds of the campus. I continue to observe the drivers. I recognize the faces, oblivious of the names, curiously attempting to read their minds. You can never really tell what goes on in their minds. I reach the inner entrance. Almost there. Another BMW drives past me, the driver engrossed in a phone conversation. She seems to be passionately discussing something with a friend. Probably the outfit she plans on wearing this weekend at SkyBar. It's Tuesday. A Pathfinder drives past. I recognize the driver. He ignores me. They all do, never willing to offer a fellow student a ride down. I could never understand why.

I reach the steps above the cafeteria, with the sprawling mass of students gathered outside it. I still cannot begin to relate to the purpose of gathering around such a spot. I find the area in front of the library much more suitable for gatherings. Then again, it is typical of humans to gather around a food source. Especially the Lebanese, with their passion for food. Always the same choices, never opting for change, never looking for variety. Leading their lives as they would their diet. I walk down, hoping to find a friend among the crowd who would concede to leaving the melting pot of the cafe for a more suitable spot on campus. I see some people I know, avoiding them due to their need to coexist in the uncomfortable cliques they have created for themselves. I find my cousin who, like me, does not enjoy the crowds. We grab a coffee from the cafe, and walk off to a more relaxing location, a place where the less image-obsessed, more socially introverted mingle. We sit and chat.

Half an hour later, I walk to class. Excitement builds inside me, the thrill of starting a new major enveloping me. I wonder what the class will be like, anticipating a new experience full of enlightenment. I passionately begin to draw, as instructed. Suddenly, doubts begin to fill me. I haven't drawn anything in years, and my incompetence hits me like a rock. I begin to feel the anxiety building in me, the fear of failure rising once again. I remember my past, the frequency of my failures, the times that I almost passed my courses, but then didn't.

The classes begin to scare me, and my old apprehension returns.

Week 2: Tuesday

A week later, I am fighting it again. The terrible possibility of failure still lingers in my mind, but I resist the temptation to give up. I constantly remind myself that I am not incompetent, but simply untrained. I walk down into the campus, ready for another long week of stress, trepidation, and scholarship. I have begun to build a routine, a pattern that I am comfortable with. I have returned to the student state of mind.

I spent the last week working industriously towards improving my drawing skills. I have entertained myself with my literature coursework. I have busied myself with design projects. It was a long and hectic week.

I reach the cafeteria, the passageway to my classes. It is as crowded as usual, if not more so now that most of the students have begun their classes. I enter the studio. It will be a long day, again. I am better prepared this time, if less motivated and more tense. I begin to unpack my equipment, ready for the relentless work expected of me over the next three hours.

Once my first set of classes is done, I return to the cafeteria. Again, everyone is here. I decide to leave immediately, and opt for a quieter location nearer to my next class. I reach for my laptop, relieved to have found time and a place to write some more. I let my mind wander, and it takes me places I do not expect. To a past self who would have coexisted with the cliques quite gladly and naturally. To a long forgotten time when life was less serious, when experiences were still new, when thoughts were still elementary. I allow my mind to remind me of previous events, of past universities, of once novel escapades. I compare my life then with mine today. The difference is immense and it scares me.

I reflect on the groups of students I used to see and relate to years ago in different states of consciousness and an adolescent frame of mind. I let my thoughts linger, reliving the days of years gone. I do not miss them, and yet, I long for their carelessness. The unguarded bravado of the students around me today reminds me of what it used to be like.

I understand them now, and yet wish I did not. They sit and dawdle in their groups, freely entertaining themselves and their friends, unaware of any responsibility. Some know better. Some don't care to consider the consequences. Most just follow the pack.

I write.

Week 3: Tuesday

Classes continue to be difficult, flagging, and exhausting although also alternately interesting, entertaining, boring, or repetitive. This I cannot truly compare with past experiences, since that is the only aspect of university life that I had not been vividly exposed to. I tenaciously and inconsistently become a studious, industrious, dedicated pupil of art, while vehemently complaining about the intensity of the program, the scope of the work, and the dreariness of the material. Nevertheless, I admittedly enjoy almost every facet of the course contents, keeping the end result and purpose of my choice distinctly in sight.

This perseverance gradually withers and weakens as the load increased. My excitement is replaced with dread, my resolve with doubt, and my restful nights with sleepless ones. Eventually, distractions became welcome, making it even harder to work.

Oftentimes, I try to renew my commitment, to fight off the fatigue, and it would work - for short bursts of time. I learnt to juggle my scholastic responsibilities with my recreational activities. I write less often now, go out for shorter periods of time, and carry my sketchbook with me everywhere I go. Time passes, I sleep less, and progressively form a routine that suits my educational, recreational, and societal lives. Things begin to fall into place, outside of campus. I still cannot, however, begin to accept the general behavior and habits of the student community as a collective, regardless of how often I try to blend in.

I watch them constantly, and gradually my distasteful regard of their conventions, inclinations, and oddities begins to bitterly transform to something akin to sour dislike.

Week 3: Friday

I'm sitting at the university, and there was an event going on around 100 meters away from me. It ended a few minutes ago. Unlike other universities I've been to, this is the only place where you can actually feel like you never left high school. I guess that might be a good thing, or maybe it's a horrible thing. Either way, it's definitely strange. Too strange.

Most of the student body was standing around a stage near the entrance. The rest pretended not to be interested, sitting back and stealing glimpses of the action from a distance. It is presumably "cool" to be indifferent. If only they knew how to really be indifferent. At best, I would consider their actions terribly unsuccessful attempts at a feign. Of course, I have a very critical, albeit not judgmental, mind. I can find fault in anything and anyone, with natural ease and skillful delicacy. So what?

The crowd scattered. Everyone returned to their natural state of vegetation. They sat, ostensibly purely self-involved, observing the students around them, while appearing to be fully immersed in whatever it was they would be doing. The conversations of each clique are similar yet different. They all carry the same tones, words, ideas, and principles. They are just different in content, and not greatly so even then. I could never understand how such a large collective can be this excessively simpleminded. And yet, as much as I hate to admit it, they are fun.

A random combination of bitchy, snobby, nouveau-riche, intellectual tweens that were anything but original, and yet craved originality in themselves and others more than anything else. Of course, when confronted with it, they trashed it as too "outlandish", "tacky", or "overdone". They would, naturally, know the extremes of these three words. They live those extremes every day of their lives. It still surprises me as to how well they can fake an open-minded and accepting attitude while being, in fact, very culturally close-minded and intolerantly ignorant. Yet again, they prove the paradox that they represent, unintentionally, to anyone trying to understand them. And it is not a sexy or intriguing paradox, to be sure.

Week 4: Tuesday

The things we write when we feel angry, frustrated, depressed, anxious, or simply pompous. Weeks after my first few days at the university, I have come to realize the errors of my preconceptions.

I met a few people from my classes. They seemed nice, but I didn't really want to get to know them. I guess I was prejudiced against the students here or something. I was not willing to open up. Then one particular student actually got through to me. He seemed nice, interesting, fun, and different. He wasn't like the rest of the crowds, didn't seem to want to get close to anyone either. Equally friendly and private, he stood out.

He became my connection to the university. Him, and a handful of girls I had intermittently began to befriend. They would come and go, as most things in my life always do. I felt more satisfied that way. I would call them, occasionally. They would find me, sometimes. We weren't really close though, which was convenient for my purposes. The only male friend I had acquired within my program, I had also made sure to keep a safe distance from him. For some reason, I was still not comfortable assimilating into the university community.

Some of my other classmates were also entertaining and rather approachable. My professors seemed nicer and generally more helpful. The overall university environment suddenly yet steadily became more pleasant and congenial. I was met with a shockingly different side of the university community - a side that appealed to me on many levels. I, in turn, began to be more open towards most of my colleagues, and more sociable than I had been weeks before, although still noticeably distant.

Week 5: Tuesday

While I still see many of the students at the university as arrogantly ignorant and naively fake, I have come to realize that many of us are not. The image the university portrays to the outside world is not the same as the vibe I encountered during my first week here. The atmosphere I had envisioned when I had chosen this university as my new home had not been prevalent until I had adjusted to the less-than-friendly visages of the populace, and allowed myself to integrate into it.

Nevertheless, I still refuse to be seen at the cafeteria for too long. Instead, I have opted for the slightly more secluded while still socially active space behind the cafeteria. I have also come to terms with the boringness of the library plaza. I have explored the vast campus, I have made my acquaintance with many of the students, and I have silently and consistently observed the less approachable of them.

I have become a student here, comfortable in my environment, finally accepting of and accepted by the majority of the community. My classes, although progressively more difficult than when I had started, have begun to grow on me. I am less weary of the work I am given, more confident in my abilities. I can draw much better now than I could a month ago. I, generally, feel more at home at the university.

And yet, I am not really. I still tend to avoid the crowds, still tend to be seen alone while my friends saunter on campus. I am more content in my solitude.

Week 7: Tuesday

I sit alone in my spot on the steps behind the cafeteria. It is relatively much quieter than the surrounding areas, as usual. I begin to type. I have too many thoughts in my head, too many ideas floating around my biosphere. Once again, words become my medium, lines my poison. I sit, and allow them to flow through me.

I am contemplating my life at the university. I begin to type, but dislike my words. I try again.

Looking into the void, I see a gathering of beings.
Beings that glide on surfaces of brick, trying to belong.
I observe their movements, their habits, their behaviors.
I see myself in them, as they see me in their own selves.

We all stare into oblivion, watching ourselves through the mirror of our eye,
wondering what would happen next, perpetually anxious of tomorrow,
living today as we would any other day, ignoring all our apprehensions,
hoping for the best, while we sit idly by, tempting fate, challenging reality.

I am captivated by the woman sitting across from me.
I have no reason to be, but I am. She sits quietly, peacefully.
Alone.
She looks like she belongs in the cliques in the cafeteria below.
And yet, she is not with them.
Then, she is done sitting silently aside, and walks off to rejoin them.
Only for a short while. She quickly returns.
She is like me, unwilling to be seen. She puts her shades on.

Like me, she sits in obviously public view, hoping to remain invisible.
Like me, she wants to be forgotten, wants to be alone.
Like me, she belongs here.

Students come and go, some looking around them, taking in the faces they see.
Most walking straight ahead, with seeming resolve and shallow confidence.
They sporadically pause to greet a classmate, hug a friend,
or just to comment on something or someone they have noticed.

Gossip dominates the campus.
Image rules the community.
Money controls the spheres of society.

I am content with what I write. It is not perfect, I know, but I find it fitting for the situation. It makes me wonder longer about the small society I study in.
I watch everyone around me. Some notice me and stare back, confused.

Week 8: Tuesday

It has finally dawned upon me how different life is at a place you have spent time in, compared to a place that is foreign to you. I have now been a student here for two months. I have come to realize many things at the university. First and foremost, the irregularity of classwork is relaxing and intentional rather than the presumably mistaken and discomforting outcome of such randomness. The scope of the work, while immense, is much more thoughtful and interesting, leading to a more active and motivated approach to classwork from the students than was initially the case over a month ago.

More importantly though, the friendliness of the students has become evident to me and most of my equally novice students. People I see frequently enough around campus that I do not know now greet me as they would a classmate, students that seemed at first unapproachable are now comfortable enough to converse with most, and even the initially arrogant are becoming more amicable.

I, in turn, have increasingly become more gregarious as I have begun to fit in more readily. I have, just like most others, become a familiar face on campus.

It is curious, comparing this experience with my numerous others, how similar the process is at any academy of higher education, particularly at universities. There is always a period of alienation from the initial moment you enter a society until you finally begin to connect and belong.

I have come to enjoy that process, and find it strangely reassuring.