**Why I’m writing this chapter**

The PhD finish line is full of triumphs: a published paper that will be used to inform the world of your research, a final defense for you to showcase and explain that research, and the recognition as an expert in your field. These accomplishments are the fruits of intense labor and rigorous mental fortitude, but often research is presented without mentioning this mental toll and the strain on life that it took to succeed. I’ve been pretty fortunate on my graduate school journey. My family is relatively healthy, I have friends willing to catch up with me when I am able to make the time, and my professors and lab mates have been exactly the type of support I’ve needed. But even being fortunate, I’ve still had to miss out on holidays with family and friends, weddings and other important moments in the lives of those around me. I’ve willingly put myself through this experience because of how big this opportunity feels to me: I’ll be the first person in my family to receive a PhD, in a field as prestigious as science, an opportunity to become another minority in a field that is still growing in diversity.

I write this chapter to identify with anyone who has ever felt inadequate, who has suffered from imposter syndrome, and who throughout failure nearly gave up. This chapter highlights my journey into a world of knowledge that I never thought I would have the opportunity to take, and I hope it gives you some perspective on the process that it takes to become an expert in something.

The rest of the thesis is research and work, but when I saw the opportunity to write a chapter about “the parts of the story of science that don’t get told in scientific publication”, I felt compelled. My PhD journey wasn’t straight forward. Like many other students before me, I’ve struggled mightily with my mental and physical health, and it felt like a necessary addition to my PhD thesis to share a transparent view of my graduate school experience.

10 years from now, I’m not sure how I’ll feel about graduate school. 7 years. 1/4th of my life. A project that brought me deeper into the niches of science than I ever thought I could go. What is van der Waals packing anyways? This miniscule attractive force that relies on the periphery of atoms in space. Investigating these subatomic interactions within both theoretical and physical experimentation, and making sense of the results. And here, finally at the end, realizing that my thesis is a translation of my findings that this superficially nanoscopic (it’s actually smaller) force has on membrane protein folding and association. Discovery and novelty are extremely difficult to quantify. So what does it mean to become an arbiter of this seemingly immeasurable and imponderable academic knowledge?

I don’t have the answer right now, but I do have the lessons I’ve learned along the way. And by preserving my experiences in writing, I’ll have the opportunity to reflect on these thoughts while considering the answer to that question in the future.

Thanks again for reading, and best of luck on whatever journey you are currently facing. Sending love and good vibes your way :D.