

THE WORLD IN A GRAIN OF SAND

Looking back on the experience of these past months, I cannot help but be seized with wonder. Sometimes everything is still a blur, and the multiplicity of my memories in this place washes over me like a colorful tidal wave. Other times, I see every single one of them take individual shape and unravel before my eyes, akin to grains of sand in an hourglass. There are many of these little grains, fragments of memory... and yet all parts of a whole.

It is now amusing to remember my very first moment in I-House, on a warm August evening last year. The disoriented and jetlagged foreigner that I was eagerly kept looking for the familiar building that I had seen on the pictures back home, silently hoping to find a new home. Yet who could have expected that the city map outside the BART station would be posted upside-down, so that I would confuse Bancroft Way with University Ave and find myself in the middle of nowhere with my many pounds of luggage? And when I finally got onto the right path, with the beige dome towering silently above the end of the road, I was seriously starting to wonder: why the hell didn't Google Maps warn me about the hill?

An hour later, muscles sore, one of my suitcases missing a wheel and the other practically in pieces, I finally made it to the I-House front desk, where I was greeted by the friendliest Resident Assistant. Needless to say, the simple fact of having made it to I-House after my 28-hour journey felt like a triumph at that time. And notwithstanding the small and barren room, the empty hallways and the construction work seemingly everywhere, the place already started to feel like a shelter... in a sense, like a new home.

Little did I know that all this would pale in comparison to what I would experience in the following days. It all started with my Brazilian neighbor and me trying to figure out how to get the internet to work... after which I met the charming but indecently tall Dutch guy who would become my roommate for the rest of the semester. As the days went by, the rooms and hallways became noisier and livelier, and I was already starting to lose count of how many people from how many countries I had introduced myself to. I had met many

coming from Europe – countries I had been to and some others I hadn't –, several from Latin America and many from Asia... and I had met the first Americans: yes, flesh-and-blood, genuine Californians, something I hadn't seen in the previous fifteen years.

As the semester was starting, I recall myself constantly shifting from one amazement to another. I remember exactly how during our orientation retreat, I was marveling at the fact that collectively, the thirty of us could speak forty-five languages, and that every single person had some fascinating story to tell about their culture. At that retreat, I met many of the people who since then have become my closest friends in I-House, and to whom I am forever grateful for making my stay here such a memorable experience.

I very soon started to understand the uniqueness of this place. I marveled at the fact that one could have any kind of conversation in the dining hall, from Singaporean foreign policy to African journalism to the phenomenology of collective action to why Stanford students have dedicated their lives to the wrong cause. I loved the fact that there were always more fliers in the elevators than what one could read in a single ride... and the fact that every hallway encounter with someone had the potential to reveal something new about a part of the world I knew so little about.

Often I found myself being amused or annoyed by I-House's little quirks, which I recall endearingly now. There are of course the unforgettable elevators – one can't have a proper I-House experience without getting stuck in them at least once –, and the experience of getting kicked out of the dining hall every night at exactly 8:30 while having intense conversations with my philosopher friend. Or the wonderful chaos of the laundry room: in such a magical place, one could often barely find his own clothes, and socks, these ordinary and usually compliant items, acquired an uncanny propensity to disappear – until one day I found myself with no socks left to wear at all.

But more often, I marveled at the beauty of the place, and reminded myself of how lucky I am to be here. I would watch the sunset over the Golden Gate Bridge every single

night from my sixth floor window, and I would study in the library until indecently late hours, occasionally shaking up some of my friends who had fallen asleep by 3 AM.

More than the “things” I experienced though, of course I recall the people whom I’ve gotten to know... and whom I’ve learned from immensely. I was consistently taken aback by the diversity of cultures, something I was witnessing on a scale I never would have thought possible. The various events, resident gatherings and informal get-togethers have all shaped and reshaped my fragmented but evolving view of the world, teaching me, opening me up, changing me for the better. From moon-watching with my Korean friends to listening to Mongolian folk music, never before had I been exposed to so much difference, and never before had I marveled so much at the beauty and complexity of it. I am thankful for the insightful, challenging and sometimes just hilarious conversations I’ve had with people... and for all the occasions on which I’ve discovered and experienced something new. Without me fully realizing it, the memories and people of I-House have become the grains of sand in my hourglass: the unique fragments that make up my body of experiences and values – and the vivid little things that like polychrome memories, accompany the passing of time.

This is what I’m taking with me upon leaving this place, and this is what an I-House experience is about in my eyes: it’s the story of many nations under one roof, of six hundred individuals within one community. I-House is truly the world in a grain of sand; it is a condensed picture of multiplicity painted in the colors of borderless cultures.

Lastly, I-House is also the place where I met – by the most random and fateful turn of events – the person whom I ended up falling in love with... and for this reason alone, my stay here has been life-changing. I am grateful to the community, grateful to all my friends, and grateful to her for enabling me to write this essay. As I have learned, all the little things, all these grains of sand can truly add up and build up one’s world. But sometimes, something extraordinary and unexpected happens... and one discovers, amazed and wide-eyed, a whole new world in just one grain of sand.