

Most high school movies open by instilling fear into the viewer, labeling the years as “torture” and filling them with cliques of popular girls and their complementary groups of lesser than “nerds”. I entered my first year with this fear brewing in the pit of my stomach. Turns out, everyone felt the same as I did, brainwashed by *Mean Girls* and tales of horror from alumni about the bathrooms. Our collective fear wasn’t entirely misplaced; there were still cliques and messy bathroom stalls and teachers so strict you can’t help but feel sympathy for their kids– but there were also people who would hopefully become my lifelong friends, hallways filled with laughter, and more amiable teachers who pretended not to notice you dozing off in class.

My high school is slightly different than the typical American high school portrayed in movies. First of all, it is in New York City, the unofficial capital of the world, labeled by those who do not live there. Second of all, it’s the most competitive high school in this big city, with all ten floors filled with kids from all five boroughs who all took a different convoluted route through the subway system to be present every day, ready to dominate in the race of life that I had entered the moment I set foot in the building. Despite the bustling nature of my school, which matched the New Yorker attitude, I found a sanctuary–the library. Don’t misunderstand, the library was not the only place that we studied; in fact, there were often groups of stressed juniors with their notebooks sprawled on the floor, rapidly scratching away before being sent to their demise – another exam. However, the library was for studying, and studying only, while on the floor, well, you never know who’s going to pass you by, complaining about a teacher, attempting to ride a skateboard, or the typical group of friends that walk in a horizontal line and occupy the width of the hallway.

In my sanctuary, I wasted away my school days vigorously scratching notes with my perfectly organized pens and rapidly flipping through textbooks, slowing down only for the occasional novel. While others strolled down hallways and joked about the recent lunch options in the cafeteria, I buried myself in the familiar silence of the library, engulfed by the scent of paper and my overwhelming thoughts. Since everyone my age had just started high school and felt as utterly lost as the next person, there was no curtailment of teenagers eager to make friends– a phenomenon among individuals of this age group. However, I was not one of them. I waited for my peers’ hesitant greetings to tap me on the shoulder before reciprocating a simple wave, assuming the friendship would be able to grow without my presence–the sunlight and water it needed– and that I could continue spending my days in the library rather than one of the many unofficial social spots within the building. More librarians knew my name than my peers for the first month of freshman year, greeting me with a smile they reserved for the students who listened when shushed.

I now realize that my sanctuary was truly an island, far away from the mainland. As the year progressed, my island migrated closer to the general population, but it was never a swimmable distance. I made friends, but I kept my guard up, building walls around myself with stacks of over-annotated course guides. Sometimes, when I found a gap in my wall, I glanced at the mainland, watching girls walk with their arms linked, hair flowing behind them, just like the movies. I watched the cliques rise and fall, the occasional brave warrior who approached a new lunch table, and the rivalries between the two newest mean girls. I observed with the safety of the oceans that separated us, hiding my voice from the ears of my peers. It was fear that kept me isolated on the island, fear of losing myself to the whirlwind of the social system, of change,

of self-doubt that would set me further back, and the immediate regret that may follow a rogue sentence escaping my mouth.

I had seen the power of the high school socialites inflicted on others before, in movies, but also real life. I had watched helpless individuals be exiled from the palace grounds through my peephole, walking past their “ex” friends with their heads down, enduring the piercing gazes that burned into their bodies. Even my long-tested confidence recoiled at such events that reflected the social pyramid a little too well. Over the years, I have become one of the most confident people I know, not afraid to sit at a lunch table alone or claim the seat in the library that remains vacant for no particular reason. However, my confidence lived solely within my comfort zone, which, during these times, manifested physically as the library. Applying my confidence to anywhere except my island seemed like a lofty imagining, a much bigger obstacle than I had anticipated for my freshman year, and one that transcended simply grades or classes.

I began working to expand not only my confidence, but also my comfort zone throughout the year, introducing myself first when our seating charts were scrambled and raising my hand higher even when my answer was anything but correct. As time continued, my introductions became bolder and I became more social, leaning outside my social circle of librarians and learning my peers' names and interests. On my birthday, as I emerged from the library after a free period that I filled with rapid typing and skimming of textbooks, my new friends surprised me, crowding me with birthday wishes I never expected to receive and bearing snacks. My progress shone through their words and gleaming smiles, a feat that once seemed like a fantasy I had conjured moments before falling asleep. They waved to me from the shores of the mainland, which, interestingly enough, seemed much closer—perhaps even close enough to visit. The shores that used to look grey, polluted, and intimidating now sparkled with seashells and hosted calm waters, perfect for an arriving boat.

In every high school movie, the main character goes through war just to survive the wretched four years that await them. But in the crummy sequel that comes soon after, she is almost always surrounded by the friends she had made during those years, all working glamorous jobs and standing arm in arm. I have made monumental progress in exploring outside my comfort zone— and the walls of the library— my freshman year, and I intend to improve further this coming year, hopefully meeting more of my peers on my explorations. I have already begun building my boat to the mainland, where I will utilize the survival skills I have picked up from *Gossip Girl*, and armed with my treasured friends, forge my path in the jungle, which is known to outsiders as a typical New York City high school.