

I've had a bunch of "first days"— first days of school, first day on the swim team, first day on the volleyball team, first days "back". But none felt quite as it did on this past August 24. I stayed up late carefully studying the map. I planned out as many routes as humanly possible. I set five different alarms for the morning, laid out my outfit and fell asleep muttering "Room 243, room 302, room 196..."

As I shoved and fought my way down the hallway flooded with the sea of middle schoolers, I saw quite a few familiar faces. I smiled as they hesitated and peered in my direction. Word spread that the "girl who moved to China" has returned. I walked down the halls with great glory and my head held high and a neon arrow blinking above it. People ran up to me and asked how I was doing, snap-chatted selfies of me and them to their friends, and ran around proudly introducing me to faces I'd never met. I was the it girl.

"BEEP, BEEP, BEEP". Oh, why should such sweet fantasies be so short-lived?

At NIS, each grade only had 50 to 60 or so students. Each class had around 15 pupils and we went to nearly all our classes together. We knew loads of kids from other grades through socializing in after school clubs and out of school events. We were patches of fabric from forty or so different countries, of numerous different ethnicities and backgrounds with multiple different mother tongues and hundreds of diverse stories sewn together by the thread of the school. We understood each other in a sense that not many else could. So naturally, we aided each other through tough times. That sure would've been what any new student (which most of us once were) would hope for. When lunch came along, we were inclined to rearrange tables to make one long enough for everyone to sit at. All of the seats on the bus were either empty or was fully occupied. I knew the names of people from almost all grades. Even so called 'outcasts' had somewhere to fit in to. In fact, there was no such thing as not fitting in. School felt like learning with your family. School felt like home; or a second home at the very least.

Now, don't get me wrong there's nothing bad about this school and there certainly isn't any purposeful exclusion, but that doesn't mean there aren't people eating their lunches in solitude. There are twice the amount of students at NIS crammed into this one middle school with only three grade levels. You can imagine that if just the eighth grade were to be put into groups or partners most would be strangers. I am in quite a lucky position knowing a few people in most of my classes because we shared five years of elementary school together. I always have someone to consult when I have questions and someone I know to sit with on the bus. But there are hundreds of students in one single grade and you can bet that for some new students, answering the teachers' questions was the only talking they had going on for the first few days. There's a big difference between being alone and being lonely. There was plenty of "alone-ness" at NIS but rarely loneliness. But I found that once you crack open your shell and stop caring what other people think of you, people will find you more approachable. If you never raise your hand in class, never stop to start a conversation, no one will know you're waiting for them to feed you friendliness.

The day will come when I feel like this is home. That day will always come. Maybe it's because of the thousands of students at this school. Maybe it's because of my three year absence. But maybe it's because I can't stop comparing it to NIS; my home, heaven and happiness for three short years. But no one said it would be easy. After all, you can't spell challenge without change.