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Back to *School*

**2 Author
Interviews!**

Miel Moreland, *It Goes Like This*
J. Elle, *Wings of Ebony*

Oh, The Places You've Been!

Stories of Travel & Adventure

Little Neck • Experience With
The St. Louis Arch • The (Un)
Restroom • Where I Stand

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Oxnard, CA

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The Pressure of High Expectations

By Cooper Hu, Albany, CA

Just a week ago, I had what I considered bad grades. I had Bs in English and math, and that made me feel like I wasn't meeting my parents' high expectations, as well as those of my siblings. In my family, the only acceptable grades are As – anything lower and my parents will be disappointed. It bothered me, but I still did not feel overwhelmed by it. I knew that they were just quarter grades and if I brought them up by the end of the semester, everything would be fine. However, many students struggle with high expectations, whether it's academic or in sports, because these expectations come with pressure that some students can't handle. The biggest problem with high expectations is that once students feel they can't handle the pressure, their schools are unable to provide resources to help.

High expectations can put students under intense pressure. In a *Washington Post* article about how students in high-achieving schools have been designated as an “at-risk” group, the author wrote, “The unrelenting pressure on students in high-achieving schools comes from every direction, from overly invested parents who want As, coaches who want wins for their own personal reputations and school administrators who feel pressured to get high standardized scores in their school.” It's hard to get things right when you have expectations dragging you down, especially when it's coming from the people you know or love. Sometimes these expectations can push students to their limits. I fear disappointing my parents and grandparents; the moment that I fear most is my parents realizing I didn't meet their

expectations. They expect good grades and good behavior, which for me means straight As and having good classroom behavior. If I can't meet these expectations, not only will I be met with disappointment from my parents, but also consequences – less internet access, taking away my devices, and even more tutoring.

“It's hard to get things right when you have expectations dragging you down, especially when it's coming from the people you know or love”

One of the problems with the pressure of expectations is that many teachers and schools don't have effective mental health strategies. Writing for Edutopia.org, teacher David Tow wrote “In my day-to-day work life, I see two common – and mostly inadequate – mental health strategies deployed to help high schoolers who look like they might be struggling: First, take some time, and second, get caught up. Even if the advice is phrased differently, it's usually a variation on the same theme. Students are advised to take the adolescent equivalent of a personal day, and then complete their work accordingly.” This approach does not address the root of the problems that the students have, only the symptoms. It just tells the

students to take a break, but that won't help them. Even after the “personal day,” the student will still have to meet the same expectations they were trying to take a break from, and they will feel pressured all over again. *The Washington Post* reported that “adolescents in high-achieving schools can suffer significantly higher rates of anxiety, depression, substance abuse and delinquent behaviors, at least two to three times the national average.” The better the school, the higher the expectations for the students, and when schools don't have adequate mental health strategies, these students can suffer serious consequences. Schools should care more about how their students are doing emotionally, rather than how they're doing academically.

When I saw that I had a couple of Bs, I wasn't overwhelmed. I knew I had plenty of time to fix those grades. However, some people can feel overwhelmed from pressure coming from the high expectations created by the people in their lives. These students can't turn to their schools for help if the schools aren't equipped with adequate mental health resources. Without the help from schools, the students facing the pressure can suffer from consequences that can impact them physically and mentally. Schools need to focus more of their resources on their students' mental health, as well as put their students in a position where they can do well academically without the negative effects of stress and pressure. In order to do these things, the district and community need to make sure the schools have what they need. 🌟

The Armadillo

By Alexandra Bates, Washington, D.C.

My forehead was pressed against the cold window of the car. I looked up at the gray sky and tears rolled down my cheeks. Everything was wrong. The color of the sky, the streets I drove past, the faint smell of fish that lingered in the air. I started fantasizing about how I could make my escape. Perhaps I could jump splendidly off the car and hitchhike my way to the airport, and then, somehow, go back home – back to Bogotá. My chaotic fantasies were cut short by the loud honk of a passing minibus, and it spurred a single terrifying thought: Today is my first day in a new school.

I will hate it here. I will hate it here. I will hate it here. I kept repeating these five words to myself, partly so as not to give my parents – who had coerced me into being here – the satisfaction, and partly because I wanted to prepare myself for the possibility that it might actually be true. My feet dragged heavily behind me as I was herded by my parents into the elementary school office. I walked through the doors of a two-story red, white, and blue building, and the moment I saw other adults glaring down at me with a grin plastered on their faces, a shiver went down my spine. We were greeted promptly by the primary principal, who invited me to take a seat on a couch (which must have been older than my parents) while she spoke to my parents privately. As I sat on the elderly couch, I noticed that behind me there was a map that stretched the length of the wall and displayed the faces of students. Each face was connected to a different country on the map by a red string. Above, were the words “International Students.” I gawked at the faces on this map, at the foreign and exotic places some of these faces seemed to come from. Maybe these would be my friends. They certainly understood what it was like to leave a life behind and be forced to live in a strange place. I gently ran my finger across the soft pieces of red string and stopped at Colombia. Would this be all that connected me to my former home, a piece of red string hanging on the wall of a school office? Just as I felt my heart sink, as I reminisced about all that I had left behind, I felt a hand on my shoulder. It was time to go to class.

“Would this be all that connected me to my former home, a piece of red string hanging on the wall of a school office? ”

As luck would have it, just as I chained the straps of my backpack to my shoulders so that the principal might escort me down the cold halls of the building and lead me straight to my death – sorry – my new classroom, a blonde girl came into the office asking for a late pass. This girl was apparently a member of the new class I would be joining and would now be escorting me herself. I glanced at my parents for the last time. I wanted to seem angry, and yet I think all I managed to show was fear. The girl seemed hurried and impatient to get to class. She walked fast and aggressively, and I followed shyly, closely behind her. I remember thinking how awkward and desperately long the silence between us was. No words were exchanged, no eye contact was made; I simply followed in silence. Before I could brace myself, she was opening a door and walking inside it as if she had been doing so her entire life. I lingered briefly behind until the teacher noticed me and pulled me inside her classroom.

“This is Alex. She just moved here from Colombia.”

Silence. I could feel everyone’s eyes on me, and yet I kept mine locked on the floor. Before the teacher could say anymore, or even worse, ask me to introduce myself, a bell rang, and the once-still classroom suddenly became chaotic. The loud clanking of chairs being pushed in and the chatter of students echoed through the classroom as everyone began to make their way into the hallway. I followed my classmates to the very end of the building, and as I walked, I recognized someone – one of the faces on the wall, connected by a red string to Mexico. Maybe it was because she



Photo by Raina Smith, Boulder, CO

knew what was going through my head, or maybe because of how forcefully I was unintentionally staring at her, she approached me, and before I knew it, we were sharing each other's lives. Other girls joined the conversation, and I slowly began feeling less like an intruder and more like an insider.

The first class I attended that day was art. I walked into a room that smelled of fresh paint, humidity, and glue, and whose walls were covered in every painting, ceramic, and papier-mâché I could imagine. I joined my classmates at a large wooden table as we awaited the teacher's instructions. The art teacher sounded like a woozy happy magician, which for some strange reason I found comforting. She instructed everyone to resume the work they had been doing in previous classes, and then, as everyone left their seats and I remained still, she noticed me. She explained we were making *alebrijes*, carved and painted Mexican figurines that represent spiritual guides in the afterlife. She told me to make an armadillo. I didn't know it at the time, but the armadillo is known as the lone traveler, so it really was quite a fitting choice.

I don't remember what other classes I attended that day, but I remember my lunch break. The school bell rang loudly and everyone rushed out the classroom door, eager to savor every one of those 45 minutes. My new Mexican friend, Ximena, stayed behind and helped me navigate through the jungle that had become the halls of the building. Down some stairs and across the alameda was The Blue Toldo. It was a volleyball court-turned-cafeteria, lined with four rows of tables where students would sit to enjoy their lunch. We sat next to some girls in our class. They ate quickly, and therefore so did I. At this age, the line at which it is no longer cool to use the playground during lunchtime is fast approaching, yet not quite here. So having finished our lunch, we all sprinted toward the exciting play structures. Just as my feet were about to gently land on the sandy surface of the playground, I was caught in the arms of a vigilant teacher. "No hat, no play," she said. These four words would continue to torment my lunchtime adventures for all

the time I spent in elementary school. I don't know why I hadn't noticed before, but suddenly all the children that ran, jumped, and played before me were wearing the most unfortunate hats atop their heads. A beige, floppy fisherman hat that could cover your entire head. Sure, you were protected by the sun, but at what cost? As I stood in wonder at this unjust rule, Ximena took my hand and rushed me to a tall cabinet in a dark corridor. The Lost and Found, where I would find a hat whenever I was in need of one. After a quick search, we found a hat that seemed adequate. I buried my head into it, and we were off.

I will love it here. I will love it here. I will love it here. This is what I repeated to myself over and over as I gathered my things and began walking toward the exit where my parents were eagerly waiting for me. I felt happy and excited to come back tomorrow and the day after. Never could I have imagined I would've met so many interesting, diverse, and welcoming people during my first day. Almost intuitively, I could feel that Roosevelt was a place where I would thrive, a place I would never forget. I opened the door to my car and got in. "How was your day?" they both asked almost simultaneously, one more fervid than the other. "Horrible," I responded coolly. I would not give them the satisfaction.

As my last day at Roosevelt approached, I remembered every moment and person that I had come across in those years with nothing but love and gratitude. That day – my first day – is one that I will never forget because it was the beginning of some of the best years of my life. Roosevelt has been like a second home to me, and I cannot put into words how thankful I am to everyone who was part of my life. From time to time, I think of my younger self, looking up at Lima's iconic gray winter sky, and now realize it was never really gray. Not even a little bit. Not even at all. 🌧️

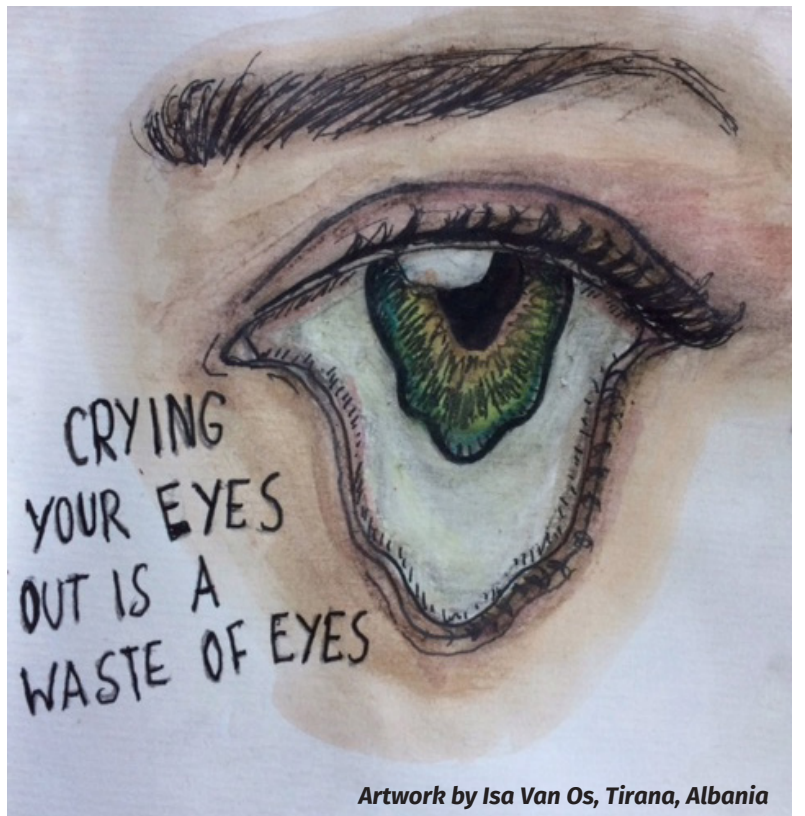


Artwork by Evelyn Brown, Murfreesboro, TN

Photo by Sarah Mendoza, Indianapolis, IN



Artwork by Genevieve Gungor, NYC, NY



Artwork by Isa Van Os, Tirana, Albania

The (Un) Restroom

by Bill Yan, Craryville, NY



Photo by Emily Taylor,
Hackettstown, NJ

Café

The world is kind of a big place. To many people, their country, or even just their state or city, is their entire world – even though there are 200 million square miles of land on this planet. To many people, how things are done where they live is how things are done everywhere. I had unknowingly lived by the same assumption until I encountered The Toilet.

The summer of 2019 was different from all the summers that had preceded it because I was actually going somewhere just to enjoy life, one-on-one with my dad. Previously, I had spent the entire summer at camps and hadn't left the US until 2018, when we had to go to Hong Kong to renew some complicated legal stuff and decided to tack on a journey through China to see some relatives. That trip was an eye-opening experience for me. My 10-year-old mind finally realized summer's potential and its possibilities beyond staying home and attending some random summer camps nearby. This time, I was venturing into a new, alien land. I had at least known what to expect when visiting China – I mean, I lived there for five years. Europe was sure to be a whole different story.

We had left Venice and were looping around the Eastern front of Europe en route to Berlin, our final destination. The drive would take nearly 15 hours and way too many old Cantonese songs. (I have no idea where my dad's obsession with '80s and '90s Cantonese pop came from. He doesn't understand Cantonese, yet he listens to these songs daily). We had just crossed the border into Slovakia, and I really needed to relieve myself. We pulled over at a gas station, and I rushed to the restrooms. I was met by a dirty gray turnstile that demanded I pay a euro to use the lavatory. Now, keep in mind, this wasn't the first time I'd been met with this strange, urban creature. I'd seen plenty of turnstiles in my daily life as a New Yorker and didn't expect this one would be different from others I'd encountered so far in Europe. Turns out, the turnstile served a much more sinister purpose than I could've ever dreamed of.

I deposited my euro into the turnstile, and a machine printed a ticket that I hastily stuffed in my pocket. I strolled into the bathroom, humming a tune, acting casual, and trying to deter any potential thieves,

which was actually one of my biggest concerns in this foreign land. There were one or two men in polos using the urinals, and a rhythmic plop plop quickly assured me that I knew what another man was doing in a toilet stall. I found a fairly clean urinal that seemed safely distanced from the men and began to relieve myself.

“*The last thing I needed was two Slovakian muscle men to force me out of a bathroom*”

I stared at the wall, calculating with annoyance how much longer this leg of the road trip would take. The men in polos left as I flushed my urinal. I looked in the mirror, checked my teeth, and used the water to rinse off some sauce I discovered had been stuck on my face from my lunch. (Thanks for not telling me, Dad.)

I'd finished drying my face and was nearly done drying my hands when I heard an ominous beeping noise. It sounded like my morning alarm, and gradually got louder. My first thought was that it must've been some weird European ringtone for the guy in the stall's phone, and did not pay much attention to it. I finished drying my hands while humming, but after a couple seconds of beeping, I grew concerned. The guy in the stall grunted and gasped in confusion, and that was when I knew something was wrong. My first thought after noticing his confusion was that it was most likely a bomb, as literally every action movie I'd ever watched would suggest.

I took a breath. No, that can't be it. Those are just movies. No one plants bombs in bathrooms in real life. Besides, there's no one around that's important enough to assassinate. Unless ... Maybe this is a terrorist attack? Or ... maybe the man in the stall is actually an important enough man to kill ... ? I just stood there, scaring myself with my own thoughts, until I forced myself to be rational. Chances are, I assured myself, that someone important enough to be assassinated probably wouldn't be using some old, half broken-down bathroom in a random gas station in the middle of Slovakia.

I still had no idea what this beeping was, so I just stood there, when two buff guys with scary names riddled with Ds, Rs, and Is on their employee badges into the restroom and started pounding their fists on the poor man's stall. They both looked like they were in their late forties, maybe early fifties. They both wore big frowns and some light gray stubble that made them look like they really had come out of a spy movie to assassinate someone.

I heard the man in the stall pull his pants up and watched as he awkwardly waddled out of the toilet stall, pants falling, belt unbuckled. He and the men had what sounded like a guttural rap-battle. It was as if I were an alien, observing a primitive species barter about the simple, human right to poop – which, when I think about it, was kind of what was happening. I considered leaving the three guys to do their business, but frozen by a mixture of shock, confusion, and curiosity, I stood there, watching two guys yell at a gesticulating man with his pants half down. The debate between them gradually got more heated, until finally, the man in the stall went to the turnstile and deposited another euro. The machine beeped and printed another ticket. The poor fellow hung his head in shame as he trudged back into the stall. He stopped to look at me for a moment with his sad, guilty eyes, in what almost seemed to be a warning.

This was a dangerous place, kid, his eyes seemed to say. Get outta here while you still can. I stood there, unmoving, then slowly started to make my way to the door.

The two men who had barged into the bathroom walked out muttering to each other, making wild hand gestures and talking in an annoyed tone. I stepped out of my way to let them go. The last thing I needed was for two Slovakian muscle men to force me out of a bathroom with my pants down. After the two men had passed, and I decided that I was safe, I took one last look at the ashamed man who was heading back to the stall, then decided that it was my turn to go. I opened the door and hurried back to rejoin my dad in the car, making sure that I had some extra coins in my pocket, just in case. 🍀



*Photo by Ava Fung,
Brooklyn, NY*



*Artwork by Arya Nadella,
Hyderabad, India*



Photo by Lyra Willows, Tirupati, India



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Photo by Macey Klein, Bismarck, ND