

Model Minority

by Linus Yamane

During the summer of 1977, I was getting ready to go off to college. I got together with my high school friends in New Jersey quite often. Occasionally we would imagine what college would be like, and express our fears and hopes. I was going off to MIT, because I did not get into Harvard. For my Japanese parents, there was Harvard and then all the rest. On one occasion I mentioned to a friend that MIT had a reputation for being a pressure cooker, and that they were rumored to have the second highest suicide rate in the country¹. My friend said that, if things ever got that bad, she would just get on a bus and go home. For some reason, that thought stuck with me.

My first year at MIT was spent mostly trying to adjust to college life. Since all courses are pass/fail for first year students, I wasn't under enormous academic pressure. I was mostly trying to figure out what college was all about. I was generally unhappy with the social life, and I missed home. So I tried to transfer to Princeton, which had more women and was less than an hour from home. But I did not get in, and returned to MIT for my sophomore year.

The fall of my sophomore year was much more academically challenging. Since I liked science, but cared a lot about public policy, I was double majoring in chemistry and political science. But that fall I spent every afternoon in a chemistry lab, and soon realized that I did not want to spend the rest of my life in a chemistry lab. And while I enjoyed political science, I had no idea what a political scientist did for a living². So I didn't see the point of studying either chemistry or political science. I had no idea what I was doing with my life, and thus was not motivated to study and was not doing well in my coursework.

By the middle of the semester, I decided to drop out of college. I told my Dad that I wanted to go home and just work at McDonalds. But he said the only thing I would learn by working at McDonalds was that I did not want to work at McDonalds. I ultimately decided to finish out the semester mostly for financial reasons. If I dropped out in the middle of the semester, all the tuition my parents had paid would be for naught. It made more sense to finish the semester, gather as many credits as I could, and then take some time off.

As it turns out, I was enrolled in an introductory economics class that fall semester. I signed up for the class because I needed an elective and a bunch of my friends had signed up for the class. But I was not paying any attention to the class because I was mostly thinking about what to do with the rest of my life. It was in early December when I decided that I should start doing some of the readings for the class because we had final exams coming up. I remember reading some stuff about anti-trust regulation, and having a sudden epiphany. Since I loved math and cared about public policy, all my interests came together

for me in economics. I realized that I wanted to become an economist!

After I discovered my love for economics, academics became much easier for me. I had direction and motivation in life, and so my grades went up. During my junior year I became a research assistant for a professor, and set my sights on getting a PhD in economics. I eventually decided to complete all my requirements for graduation during the fall of my senior year, and spend the spring of my senior year studying in Tokyo.

But these plans made my fall semester of senior year an extremely difficult one. I had to write a senior thesis, finish up my coursework, apply to graduate schools, take the GREs, and set up my study program in Japan. And so by the middle of the semester I was just completely overwhelmed. I dropped out of the MIT Symphony Orchestra to give myself several more hours every week. I abandoned any pretense of a social life. And when I had to go for a couple days without eating or sleeping because I just didn't have enough time, I knew I had been pushed to my very limits. I didn't know what to do.

I remembered the conversation I had had with my friend about just going home. So I pictured myself walking down Mass Ave to Central Square, and taking the T to South Station. Across the street would be the Greyhound terminal. From there I would take the bus to the Port Authority in Manhattan, and then get on a Lakeland bus to my hometown in New Jersey. I would call my Mom from the phone booth, and ask her to pick me up. I wondered about what my Mom would say about having me show up at home in the middle of the semester just out of the blue.

For reasons I don't understand, I never went home. I just stuck it out and managed to get through it all somehow. But for the first time in my life, I was forced to look over the abyss, and I didn't like what I saw. Nietzsche writes that "what does not kill me, makes me stronger." But I didn't feel any stronger. I felt scared and scarred. And for years I hated MIT for putting me through all that, though I am not sure exactly where the blame really falls.

During the fall of 1998 Elizabeth Shin began her first year at MIT. She was a Korean American who grew up several miles from my home in New Jersey. And at MIT she lived in Random Hall, the same small dorm I had lived in two decades earlier. So I knew her life pretty well. But during the spring of 2000 Elizabeth became depressed and set herself on fire in her dorm room. She died several days later. When I heard about Elizabeth, I thought "there but for the grace of God go I."

(Footnotes)

1[1] Cornell was rumored to have the highest.

2[2] The thought of eventually becoming a professor never entered my mind.