

Four, Three, Two...
By Grace Bo-Youn Hwang

As a third culture kid who has had to move every three years of my life, I thought I could finally settle down for at least four years at a nice little college in Boston and rest my butt for just one second. I guess God had other plans because I'm sitting in Seoul where I've never lived despite being Korean.

According to Wikipedia, third culture kids "are people who were raised in a culture other than their parents'... and also live in a different environment during a significant part of their child development years." Basically, when someone asks me "Where are you from?" I want to say, "Earth, and you?"

By the time I was in my second high school, I just wanted a break. Due to my mom's rotations in the United Nations, I'd been moved suddenly from my home in Santiago de Chile to a small French international school in Cambridge, Massachusetts between my tenth and eleventh grade years. I was spiteful of the situation because I finally felt settled in Santiago. I had a good group of friends, I felt comfortable with my teachers, and considering my extreme shyness all through elementary and middle school, I'd made quite the name for myself through the Musical Theatre company I was in. The whole math department knew me by name because I was probably the only student who said hi to all the teachers, including the ones that never taught me.

This in contrast with my new school made Cambridge seem pale, bleak, and cold. But I landed in Boston, and I jumped through all the hoops that kids like me jump through. I made friends, I made friendly. I filled in confusing American-oriented college applications. I ran through the hellfires of the International Baccalaureate. (The IB is the equivalent of AP or A-level classes except you take six of them simultaneously for junior and senior year.) I did this all in the name of getting to stay in one place for four years in college and *having a life again for God's sake*.

Despite my frustration, here are a number of things that I've learned from moving around over the years.

Thing I Learned from Moving Around, No. 1:

I take one year to settle down, sift through friends, find my circle. Two years to build relationships, feel secure, feel grounded. Three years to sink in, find home, feel rooted. Uprooting is always hard, but to do it after the third year is like an oral surgeon bearing their weight down on a sharp instrument lodged into your upper jaw at some unmerciful angle to wrench that bloody wisdom tooth out of your body. It hurts. Also, [No. 1.5] dental records are a pain to track.

Four years was a luxury in my mind. I knew that the longer I stayed, the more painful it would be to leave, but I also just wanted to make it past the third year to see how my relationships would continue to bloom in person, not over FaceTime or WhatsApp or the occasional comment on Instagram.

So when I visited my current college and felt the Art Kid Vibes rolling through the empty campus in almighty waves, I felt weirdly at home. I've never been able to choose where I'd go next. I've never been able to choose how long I'd be there. So I found solace in the standard four years of college. I would be independent of my mother's work rotations; that would be the longest I've lived somewhere in a row since I was born in Switzerland. I chose my school. I chose my city. For an indecisive person, that's a real feat.

Then came the letter in the middle of the summer. Apparently I'd managed well enough in the hellfire that my college was giving me IB credits to fill my first year. My brand new student account read *Sophomore* instead of *Freshman*.

“What.”

Thing I Learned from Moving Around, No. 2:

Going to an American college costs roughly \$100,000 per year in total for an international student. This is a well known fact in Korea, where the greatest not-so-humble brag of a parent is sending your kid to Harvard, because it shows that 1) Your kid is better than *that* person's kid and that 2) You're *loaded*.

I did not expect a US college to give me so much credit for my high school work. And the scholarship money was huge. It usually doesn't work this way for international kids. I was grateful. I *am* grateful. But in return for that year shaved off, my freshman year was gone.

It wasn't gone in spirit; I still had to learn how to do my laundry, and when I ran out of utensils in my dorm room, I had to eat my cereal with a plastic knife.

But my four years were down to three again. After just two semesters of college, I already need to start thinking about graduate school.

I still enjoyed my first year of college. Sydney got me into K-pop during the dinners following our Intro to Lit class—*finally*, after my embarrassing eighteen years of Koreaness. Sam and I watched Avatar the Last Airbender in my dorm while we sprawled with facemasks that I'd saved the entire one and half semesters I was there. And I gave my second ticket to Trevor Noah's comedy show to Verita after holding onto it for five months, scouting for the perfect person to go with during my first semester. We cried laughing until our bodies hurt. I was lucky to meet some

lifelong friends very quickly. Having moved seven times, this was the first time I'd found my people that fast. It almost felt like a wake up call. *Hey, hey, you don't have that much time left, make the most of it.* But at least I had two years left, right?

Wrong. Because we entered "an unprecedented time in our lives."

At the beginning of the pandemic, I'd joked that I'd been in the US for three years now (two years in high school and one year in college), so it was time for me to "get the hell outta here." In some sense, I'm so used to moving that it feels weird to stay longer than three years. But I think God took it too literally because I ended up having to leave the country due to visa paperwork.

I was on my mom's diplomat visa through her work with UNICEF in New York. When her term ended, I also needed to skadaddle. If I wanted to return to the US, I would need to fly fourteen hours to South Korea, get an F1 student visa through the college, and return to resume classes.

Thing I Learned from Moving Around, No. 3:

Visa paperwork is fucking complicated.

Thing I Learned from Moving Around during COVID-19, No. 1:

Visa paperwork during Corona is even more fucking complicated.

Of the many places where I have lived, I have not really lived in Seoul. But we are in an unprecedented time in our lives! The best course of action was for me to leave New York where I had been sent home to be with my family back in March, take classes from Seoul, and somehow find my way back to Boston in the spring.

So I've been taking online classes from Seoul for a couple months now. The time difference is another pocket of hell that I did not realize existed. I have a class that goes until five in the morning.

Thing I Learned from Moving Around during COVID-19, No. 2:

Daylight Savings in the US is a horrendous idea for anyone not in the US. I went from thirteen hours apart in the first half of the semester to fourteen. Starting class at 11 pm and 12 am makes a huge difference mentally.

I've kept in touch with my college friends through FaceTime and WhatsApp and the occasional comment on Instagram. I even dragged Sam into the K-pop blackhole with me. Although I desperately wanted to get back to Boston, with the rising COVID numbers, I've decided not to return for the spring. I would be traveling with my grandmother, and it doesn't sit easy with me.

I've also decided that going nocturnal would be a detriment to my health, my patience and therefore, everyone who lives with me.

My mom left New York for the UN in Myanmar, and Yangon has a +11:30 hour difference from Boston as opposed to +14 hours in Seoul (during Daylight Savings). For the sake of my sleep schedule and sanity, I've decided to travel to Yangon. I had three years of college left in Boston, and somehow, I spent two halves of a semester of it in New York, one half of a semester in Seoul, and will hopefully spend one full semester of it in Yangon. I'm not betting on things going to plan. [Dear Lord, it's a joke, please don't make me move again.]

I've always known that time was short. As I left Chile, I was reminded of the lesson I've learned seven times (so far): goodbyes are inevitable, whether they are easy or hard. Just like I will never be able to travel the Atacama desert with my Chilean high school friends again, I will never get to spend these months in Seoul with my grandma again. I will never be able to spend a good chunk of time in Myanmar with my mom again.

Thing I Learned from Moving Around, No. 4:

It's a blessing to leave a place filled with sadness because it means that there was something worthwhile there.

My time in college with my friends in Boston may be getting shorter and shorter. My four years turned to three, to suddenly two. I feel sad many days that I don't get to sit in the noisy dining hall, escape the library that gets grossly stuffy during exam season, or listen to the musical theatre kids belt in the middle of the night. But I choose to be grateful. It's a blessing to have something worthwhile to miss.