A *Mostly* Love Letter to UCL and the City that Made Me

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I've been at UCL for just over two years now. As a starry-eyed child, I had visited London in 2013 and fallen in love with the bustling city while weaving through crowds far taller and cooler than me. I vividly remember making a silent promise to myself that this was where I would build my life once I completed sixth form.

Hailing from Dubai, I was possibly the *world's most sheltered girl*™. But in the words of Donny from Baby Reindeer, "that's the thing about London. It red-carpets for no one." Moving here detonated a series of major changes in my life. For the first time, I didn't have a curfew, my parents' never-ending kindness to drive me places, or a running chain of where-are-you-now texts. What I had instead wasn't my misconceived notion of liberation so much as vertigo. 'Freedom' became a responsibility I had no idea how to hold.

But it's easy to spiral in a city like London when you aren't being held accountable by anyone. It's a lonely place – one where you pass thousands of people at Euston station every day and study amongst hundreds in the library – yet eat your meals alone. Making friends is harder somehow, possibly because the sheer number of people you can pick from means infinite choice and zero guarantees. I remember scrolling through my contacts one evening, realising I technically knew dozens of people, yet couldn't think of a single person to text. Independence and isolation began to blur into each other as I tried to get things done before the metropolis swallowed me whole.

Academically, the transition didn't offer much cushioning either. At school, I had been a success story: predicted four A*s, every teacher's favourite, and the dependable one classmates turned to before exams. University dismantled that identity with impressive efficiency. Studying at UCL felt less like an intellectual ascent and more like a systematic undoing of certainty. I arrived bright-eyed, idealistic, maybe even thinking I'd complete all my readings. By second term, I was calculating how many seminars I could skip without tanking my grades, and by second year, I had accepted that my degree was less about accumulating knowledge and more about cultivating resilience.

On another note, my accommodation also didn't help my delusions. I spent first year at the infamous Ramsay Hall in the era of the 'phantom defecators' (if you know, you know), but it was prime location; catered, and oddly reassuring with its prison-like turnstiles. In second year, it only got worse. I moved into International Hall, with better food, dangerously close to the Brunswick, and only a 4-minute(!) walk away from the Linguistics department. This year, I live off campus. I cook for myself. I take the tube to lectures. And I actually have to make plans to see my friends, not just go to the common room. London's convenience is a myth. The city forces you to grow up by steadily withdrawing its scaffolding. Each year has stripped away another buffer, until all that's left is me, my sticky notes, and an alarming number of takeout boxes.

Amidst the storm that is handling my dissertation, attending lectures, and running Pi Online with my fantastic co-Editor-in-Chief and team, I've come to savour the quiet and reflective minutes of my commute. London grants you tiny pockets of stillness only after it has completely exhausted you. Those twenty-odd minutes often feel like the only time I'm allowed to breathe. They may be unremarkable, but they are mine.

And yet, somewhere between agonising over my reading list and befriending a fox behind Ramsay Hall, I learned to live. Survival in London isn't glamorous. It's not the cinematic montage I imagined aged 8. It's

held together by overpriced matcha, ‘do it for the plot’ bad decisions, and the quiet, stubborn belief that the chaos is shaping you into someone you might eventually be proud of.

Over two years in, I’m still not sure I’ve mastered the city. But I’ve stopped expecting it to welcome me with open arms. London doesn’t love you back. But if you’re lucky, and patient (and a little bit unhinged), it teaches you how to love yourself. And that’s the angle I didn’t realise I’d been writing all along.

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