

## What the Whiteboard Said

The equation was still on the board when I walked in.

It had been there since Thursday, left by whoever taught the 4 o'clock section a long, unresolved proof that trailed off at the right edge of the whiteboard as though the mathematician had simply run out of space, or patience, or both. Someone had drawn a small question mark after the final line. In green marker. It looked less like punctuation and more like a confession.

I was early for my 8 AM seminar, which meant I was alone in the room with thirty empty chairs, the smell of dry-erase marker, and an unfinished proof that was not mine to solve.

I sat down anyway and looked at it.

This is the thing about college that nobody prepares you for: the loneliness is not the kind you expect. It is not the loneliness of not knowing anyone, though that exists too in the first weeks, a specific social vertigo that hits hardest on Sunday evenings. The loneliness I mean is the loneliness of sitting in a room full of people who are each, privately, staring at their own unfinished proof. The question mark in green marker. The thing you cannot yet solve and are not sure you ever will.

My seminar was on the philosophy of language. We were reading Wittgenstein, who believed that the limits of your language are the limits of your world that you cannot think a thought you have no words for, which means that learning new language is not just communication but expansion. You are literally growing the borders of what you can perceive.

I had read the chapter twice and understood it once, partially.

Professor Reyes arrived at 8:03, set down a coffee that was already half finished, and looked at the whiteboard the way you look at a piece of furniture someone left on the sidewalk curious but not invested. She picked up an eraser, paused, and then put it down. "Leave it," she said, to no one in particular. "It's good to work next to an open problem."

For the next ninety minutes, we talked about language and meaning and whether a word could exist without a referent. Three people said things I had never considered. I said one thing I had not known I believed until I heard myself say it. Outside the window, the campus moved through its morning students crossing the quad, a maintenance worker pulling a cart of tools, two pigeons conducting what appeared to be a serious disagreement near the fountain.

When the seminar ended I gathered my things slowly, the way you do when you're not quite ready to re-enter the world.

The proof was still on the board.

I looked at it one more time on my way out. I still couldn't solve it. I didn't know the question mark in green was going to stay with me for weeks appearing at odd moments, in the shower, on the bus, in the margins of my notes not as an anxiety but as a reminder. That the most valuable thing a place can offer you is not answers but better questions. That education is not the filling of a container but the slow, uncomfortable, occasionally thrilling expansion of what you are able to hold.

I took a photograph of the whiteboard before I left.

I still have it.



College Essay