

Colliding Communities

I plop down on my bed, sinking into the plush cushions, sighing. My muscles finally relax after two hours of dance. Every inch of me just wants to go to sleep, to melt into my bed.

Suddenly, a loud *ding* pierces the air. My phone lights up, immediately catching my attention. I feel too lazy to move, but it keeps going off.

Groaning, I drag myself out of my pillows, grabbing my phone. It's the "ALL-AMERICANSSS" group chat. All my friends from my former song-pom dance team, are on it. All kinds of people, too: Latino, White, Black, Asian...

The one ethnicity I almost never saw on our pom-dance team was Indian. There'd only ever been one other girl in my three years that shared the same caramel skin, chocolate eyes, and raven hair as me.

I think it's because of our parents. As immigrants who came overseas for a better life, getting a good education and a high-paying job was the only way to get there.

"Focus on the things that matter most," my parents had said obscurely, but I knew what that meant.

In their eyes, I was throwing my education to the side for a life of cheering. It didn't matter that I still got straight *As*. Song pom was a distraction from my studies. They would much rather I join our school's science club instead, or some other academic society.

It's not that I don't want to do both. I want to be smart *and* spirited. But seems I can only do one and be good at it. So I left the song-pom team to focus on what I believe my parents want: academics.

Another *ding* pulls me from my thoughts. I open my phone and read the barrage of messages. *There's more than 50 of them*, I notice, frowning. Sighing, I read till I understand what's going on.

My friends are planning a July Fourth party, and they want me to join.

Sure, I'm free, I text in response

Great, I'll see you then! my friend Alyssa, who is hosting the party, texts back.

I smile, excited. I can't wait to go to that party! I'll finally get quality time with my song-pom friends! It's going to be so fun!

Then, by habit, I find my way to Instagram and start scrolling.

The first reel that pops up is of an Indian classical Bharatnatyam dance performance. I watch it completely, mesmerized by the dancer's intricate footwork and vivid expressions. I should be sore after a 2-hour long practice, but I'm filled with excitement at the thought of learning a new choreography. After

12 years of learning, Bharatnatyam is the one thing I'm really good at that I'm still doing. I think my parents still believe it's worthy of my time. I try to keep that passion alive as much as I can.

Once that reel finishes, I scroll to the next one. It's completely different from the previous one but also similar. These are also performers, members of our school's cheer team, but they wear sparkling dresses and high ponytails with shiny bows. They do a cheer and I naturally start grinning with them, sucked in by their enthusiasm. I miss getting to be a part of that.

Well, I made my choice already. It's time to stop being all over the place and start organizing who I am. It's like an aesthetic: I have to choose one for my life, and song pom doesn't fit into it.



A low hum fills the air. It's the sound of the crowd minutes before classes start. Hundreds of high school students walk and talk around the quad, waiting for the bell to ring.

In the midst of the hustle, I find my friends talking with each other. They are pretty much all Indian. It's funny how that works, how I'm drawn to them because of how similar we are. They understand me, the foods I eat, the festivals I have, the clothes I wear. They appreciate the effort that goes into my Bharatnatyam discipline.

Rina sees me first.

"Diya, come over here!" she shouts, trying to be heard over the din of noise.

"Coming!" I yell back loudly. I jog over to the group quickly, spurred by the excited looks on their faces.

"What's going on?"

"Pari's holding a party for the upcoming puja!" Rina exclaims joyfully.

"Oh my god, that's gonna be so fun!"

"Yes!!" my friend Sana responds enthusiastically, while Pari just smiles.

"What day is it?" I ask curiously.

"It'll be on the 4th," Pari says confidently.

"Of August?" I ask skeptically. That's so far away!

"No, July, you dummy. July Fourth."

My grin fades. July 4th? That's the same day as Alyssa's Independence Day party! I can't go to both, no matter how much I want to! What do I do?

"Well?" Pari asks.

Panicking, I just respond yes to her. The conversation continues, but I'm frozen in place, deep in thought. These are two things that both matter so much to me. And now I have to choose one or the other? Do I choose fun music and dance with my Indian friends or chatting and baking with my song pom team? Do I choose my Indian or my American traditions? Two vital parts of me, yet I can only go with one.

I'm torn out of my thoughts by someone calling my name. It's Alyssa, surrounded by the rest of my old song-pom team. They start walking towards our group, but I hurry up and walk their way instead, hoping to meet them in the middle.

I don't want them to come meet my Indian friends. I don't want my Indian friends to think badly of me if they find out about how I was on the song-pom team, and I don't want my other friends to think badly of my Indian side either. It's tiring to keep things separate all the time, but my life is fine the way it is. Who knows what would happen if those two worlds collide? I don't want to find out.

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By fifth period, my legs are dragging. The school day is almost done, and I'm so tired. Only two more classes to go!

I walk into my journalism class. It's something new I started doing this year, especially since I began focusing more on academics, but it's actually really fun! Turns out I'm a really good writer, and I've learned how to use the light to take good pictures for the newspaper, too.

"Everyone, settle down!" Mr. Hobbs says loudly. "Let's get started! Today we will be deciding roles."

The whole class *oohs*.

"There are four roles: reporter, columnist, editor, and photographer. Come up and tell me your role when you're ready!"

I start thinking about what I want to do. Columnist sounds a bit boring, and I want to be someone who creates things, so not an editor. That leaves reporter and columnist. I love talking to people and I'm a good writer. I enjoy photography, though, and I've learned how to utilize the light to take amazing pictures. Unsure, I ask my friends.

"Alisha, do you think I should be a reporter or a photographer?"

"I don't know, you'd be good at both," she says. "Why don't you ask Mr. Hobbs if you can do both?"

“No,” I respond. I don’t want to hassle Mr. Hobbs for no reason.

I ask all my other friends too, hoping for a different response, but they all give the same answer. Finally, I sigh in defeat.

“What do I do?” I whisper silently to myself in defeat.

“Do you need some help, Diya?” Mr. Hobbs interrupts suddenly.

“Mr. Hobbs!” I exclaim, surprised.

“What’s up?”

I stare at him for a moment, contemplating, and then explain my dilemma.

After listening, he gives his verdict. “Yeah, sure, of course you can do both!”

“Really?” I ask, surprised. “Just like that?”

“Mhmm. Look, Diya, I don’t want you to limit yourself. Do what makes you happy. Express every part of yourself. Don’t suppress yourself just because you think you can only do one thing. If you have multiple talents, use them all. Be creative and find a way for it to work.”

And suddenly, something clicks. All this time, I’ve been trying to keep myself stuck to one version of me. The truth is, I have many talents, and I am many things. And that’s okay.

I can be academic, and athletic.

I can be a writer, and a photographer.

I can be a Bharatnatyam dancer, and a member of the song pom team.

I can be Indian, and American.

There are so many aspects of my identity, yet I’ve only been letting myself be one part of it. Only been letting myself be part of one community. Why, when every community is so different and unique from each other?

It’s my fear, I realize. I’m so afraid of my life crashing down that I haven’t let myself be myself fully. It’s like I’m forcing myself to be less of a person. But now I finally see what I’ve been doing to myself. And I will fix it.

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After school ends, I go looking for my friends to hang out. I find my Indian friends and my song-pom friends mingling. I'm about to go and try to save the situation when I realize what is happening.

My Indian friends and my song-pom friends. Talking with each other. Interacting. My two worlds colliding. And nothing bad happened. They all seem to be smiling, enjoying each other too.

I've been so blind. I never realized that they were all friends all along.

With that realization comes another revelation. It's about me. I mean, there was no point in trying to keep them separate. Which means the divides were in my mind. All the awkwardness I thought I saw between them, the horrible opinions I thought they would have of each other were all made up. In my head. I have been boxing myself in, caging my person. I have been so afraid of the different parts of me not getting along that I haven't even given them the chance to.

Now I see the truth. And it's that I'm part of many communities. Each talent I have connects me with a community of people. And that's a good thing: I meet so many new people.

For so long, I've been trying to find a place to belong solely and completely. I never realized that in reality, I belong in many different places. I can belong to multiple communities, and I'm not bringing them down. I'm uniting them, all these people, and that's the way it should be.

I guess, I can belong everywhere.

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Later, I talk to my parents about my new realizations. They tell me how they never wanted me to feel limited. They were only trying to guide me in the right direction, and remind me to focus on what mattered to me the most. I misinterpreted it as a sign to fit myself into one identity.

With this knowledge, I later talk to my song pom coach. I explain my dilemma, and after some persuasion, she finally lets me back on the team.

Now I'm doing everything I want to do: academics, Bharatnatyam, and song pom. There's just one thing left to fix.

A few weeks later, on July Fourth, I hold my own party. All my friends are there. Because that's what they are: simply my friends. There is no divide amongst them.

We bake cookies with red, white and blue sprinkles. We play Bollywood music in the background. Our decorations are half rainbow themed for my Indian festival, and half Independence day themed.

It's all my friends, so many communities, coming together. And yet, no one is out of place. No one is alone, and I am not divided.

I belong everywhere, just as I am meant to.