

# Diagnosing *Homesickness*

Text by Melanie Chee  
Photo by Nicholas Lim

To diagnose a condition, you must first be familiar with the normal physiology and basic definitions surrounding it. If homesickness were a medical condition, how would it be diagnosed? The Oxford dictionary defines home as “the place where one lives permanently, especially as a member of a family or household”. How would this apply to overseas students who are constantly moving between countries, living far from their families for most of the year? How would you define home, beyond the simple confines of borders and time zones?

A somewhat surprising thought snuck into my mind last November. I had just returned from the Singapore Medical Society of the United Kingdom (SMSUK) Wider UK trip – a highly anticipated annual event where members gather in a

part of the UK outside of London. That year, we explored the charming city of Edinburgh, Scotland. It was a day filled with picturesque views, a tasty lunch at the Chinese restaurant San Chuan, laughter and delightful conversations. There was even time for some educational cultivation (in a fun way) as we visited the Surgeons’ Hall Museums and saw our textbooks come to life in the extensive collection of pathological specimens displayed there. I had thoroughly enjoyed my weekend in Edinburgh, but as I plopped my bags down on reaching my tiny bedroom back in Leicester, I could not help but heave a sigh of relief – *it was good to be home!*

This traitorous thought caught me quite off guard. When did this city so far displaced from Singapore become my home?

The concept of home is something many overseas students find themselves contemplating as they are faced with the strange contradiction of battling homesickness while simultaneously growing more familiar and attached to a new city. In this month’s letter, Sean reflects on his own journey with the idea of home and everything that comes with being far from it.

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Text by Sean Lim

Prior to my arrival in the UK for my studies, home was an ironically unfamiliar concept to me. For some reason, I had trouble attributing the idea of "home" to Singapore, and I saw it merely as a place I lived in. So, when I heard that others had cried on the plane or at the airport as they were leaving the country, I began to be concerned with my lack of connection to my "home". Was Singapore really my home? If it was, why? It would be a few months before I began to answer those questions.

### Characteristics of homesickness

In our first year, we were taught to ask patients for a characterisation of their pain when taking their history. Homesickness was a paradoxical pain that I could not characterise. I could feel it creeping up on me slowly, but it also hit me almost entirely at once. It had many exacerbating factors, like the ache for homemade *mee pok*, the striking absence of the calls of Asian Koels in the morning, and the sleepy, dreary weather. But it was also triggered by a single event. As I sat on a call with my family back in Singapore, my niece popped in to say hello. With the goofiest grin on her face, she held up two fingers for the Korean heart sign. That was when I really felt it hit me, welling up in my chest and settling between my bones. Looking at those two tiny fingers, I remember thinking: "Home is where the heart is, I guess."

Once I had answered the question of whether Singapore was "home", it was time for the "why". Was it the food? *Hokkien mee*, fried carrot cake, *char kway teow*, Milo with *kaya* toast, served on familiar red plates and bowls under the fan of a hawker centre. Or was it the place? The comfort of my bed and *chou chou* (term for an item of endearment one

grows up with), the views from Marina Barrage, the buzz of Shaw Centre or driving down Amoy Street looking for a place to eat. It was obviously the people as well. Not just friends and family, but also everyone I had previously taken for granted. Teachers, coffee shop uncles, the cashier at the McDonald's next to my place who laughed every time he saw my special order with no vegetables. Ultimately, I could not give a single answer to the "why". The correct answer was probably just all of them.

An unfortunate by-product of brainstorming reasons for why Singapore was home was the worsening of my homesickness. Initially, I was curiously enamoured with the feeling – it felt admittedly comforting that I was experiencing the homesickness that everyone had always talked about, that I was not some lost soul with no home. I even went so far as to create a playlist consisting of songs that evoked the feeling. I wore my homesickness like a morbid badge of honour. However, as the days drew on, carrying the homesickness around became much harder. I spent the long terms counting the days until I could return to Singapore and conversely, also spent the brief holidays dreading the day I would have to make the 14-hour journey back to the UK. I felt it in every step I took up Bristol's St Michael's Hill, every layer of clothing I donned, every 4 pm sunset.

### Discovering home away from home

Needless to say, my first year was definitely not what I had originally envisioned. However, this reflection does not end with gloom and doom. As novelist Cecelia Ahern wrote, "Home is not a place, it is a feeling." That was something I came to learn

as I reflected on the past year. Home, in my opinion, is not something that we are born into, or even born with. It is constructed from sepia-toned memories of smiles and laughter, from fond experiences of firsts and warm feelings. While I had initially taken these for granted in Singapore, I realised I should not make the same mistake in the UK.

All it took to dull the homesickness was a change in mindset. All the makings of a home existed in the UK; I just needed to know where to look and more importantly, how to look. It took a while, but eventually the steps up the hill became my daily exercise, the layers of clothing were comfortingly warm, the cold was refreshing, and the 4 pm sunset was oddly beautiful. It has scarcely been a few months since I have resolved to this new mindset, and I have already made many fond memories. Memories of Christmas dinners, SMSUK trips and late-night studio recording sessions. It may not be enough to outweigh the promise of supper nights at Samy's Curry at Dempsey, or watching my nieces roll their eyes when I tell them a dad joke. However, I believe it may be enough to at least call the UK a home away from home and ease the homesickness, even if just for a bit. ♦

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