

ALIEN

The strident screeching sound of metal against metal penetrates my ear-drums painfully. It finds its way to my frontal and parietal lobe, squeezing them tightly and temporarily impairing all motor-function and coordination, before making its way down the back of my head to compress my spine. A sudden push to my right shoulder makes me jump as a person hurries past me. The child in its stroller a few meters away starts crying and its shrill voice takes the same route through my body as the screeching of metal just a heart-beat before. Everyone around me rushes towards the doors. I stumble forward. I have to make it this time. Careful not to fall, I try to ignore the stench of urine and alcohol, the stickiness of the floor, and the cacophony of sound waves that crash into me like a tsunami. I take a few steps into the crowded wagon. A man whose body odour can only be described as a violent assault on anyone's nostrils, stands much too close to me. He doesn't even seem to notice that other people are here as well. He just keeps moving around and smashing his grimy backpack into the unfortunate passengers around him. Somewhere behind me I can hear the disgusting, squelching sounds of saliva trying to escape chewing gum. It gives me goose bumps. I look straight ahead to avoid accidentally focusing on the same person's teeth crashing into each other. I hate this part of the day. There is enough sensory input to entertain a toddler for a year and I didn't bring my headphones. My dear, sanity-saving headphones. But I made a deliberate choice: I want to be part of this strange place. I want to belong. I want to fit in, so all I have to do is find out how people do...well, life here. *Get your act together. Breathe. Everyone else does it this way.*

By the time I get off the tram at the university I can't see. *Great. Awesome start to the day.* I stumble off the tram as gracefully as I stumbled onto it. *What class do I have now? Wait what day is it? Oh. Linguistics.... I think. It is Wednesday, isn't it?*

Deep breath.

One,

two,

three,

four.

Hold.

One,

two,

three,

four.

Let go.

One,

two,

three,

four.

Why four?

One,

two,

four,

I should stay on topic.

Did I forget three?

I rotate my wrists quickly a few times before I start tapping the side of my right leg with my fingers. My vision clears up. This is what I imagine short-sighted people to experience when they put on glasses. Right in that moment the tram doors close and it leaves the station, and with it my vision - again. *Mental note to self: bring headphones tomorrow, this is ridiculous.* I try to make out the time on my phone through the milky floaty-thingies that cloud my vision. It's pointless. I'll try again later.

Miraculously I manage to navigate my way to the brown doors that lead to my first lecture, without tripping on the stairs, running into a closed door or bumping into a recycling bin. The lecture hall is still empty. No one is there yet. Someone once told me empty lecture halls are eerie, but I find them peaceful. And practical! An empty lecture hall allows you to choose your seat wisely. I find my regular spot on the right hand side, a few rows from the front. This particular one doesn't get too warm during the summer

term, I can see the blackboards and any slides the lecturer could show and hear them well from this distance, I'm not in the middle of the room, and I could leave at any moment should the need arise. It's perfect for me. Slowly, other students enter the quiet lecture hall. *This is my chance to learn.* Some sit together in small groups while others find single seats. Some stand at the door for a few moments before locating an acquaintance in the one of the rows. *Now, watch carefully, what exactly is it they do?* A young woman joins a group of people two rows behind me. She smiles and gives a quick wave with her hand. *So far, normal greeting behaviour.* The first girl in the row stands up and the two exchange high-pitched "Hi"s before leaning in and lightly placing their arms around each other, barely touching. *I know this one:*

Hug, noun: "a close embrace with the arms, especially as a sign of affection." Merriam-Webster online dictionary

Okay. So they are showing affection. I get that. Why would you only hug someone so lightly, though? If you like someone, don't you want to show them all the way? Also, how is it not too intense this way? If there's no noticeable pressure, how do the people here not get overwhelmed by all the smell, the little burning sensations that all the barely touching clothes leave, and the whole discomfort of the situation? How do they do it? I watch every movement closely, suddenly one of the girls points at me and waves. I wave back. They laugh. *What was so funny? What did I miss? Did I move my hand weird? All right. Look somewhere else.* Clanking of chairs – two boys a little further to the right do not hug. Papers and folders ruffling – The bigger guy's facial expression does not change the slightest as they share the most elaborate handshake I have seen in a long time. Shuffling of shoes – I've seen the other boy before and his perpetually bored face puzzles me once again – banging of the heavy wooden doors – smashing of seats – tapping of feet – instinctively, my hands cover my ears. The boy's facial expression is going to remain a mystery because the dropping of backpacks around me is playing the Imperial March as the orchestra of doom to my brain. *Stop. Move your hands. You wanna fit in, remember?* Slowly I manage to peel my hands off my ears. My mouth is dryer than the teabag your grandmother put next to the sink three days ago and then forgot about. Almost as if on autopilot my fingers reach into my pocket and grab a small, bumpy package of extra strong chewing gum. The young woman in the row in front of me is playing Minecraft on her laptop. My eyes follow the row towards the centre of the lecture hall. A person whose giant grey scarf covers most of their upper body has their right hand raised. *Weird. I haven't observed that kind of*

behaviour prior to a class yet. I wonder what function that serves. Suddenly they lower their arm and speak to the front of the room. *I thought it was considered strange to just speak aloud in public? Wait a minute.* As I turn my head further towards the front, it dawns on me that I may have missed something important. Spoiler: I have. While I was busy gathering field data about social interaction among students before class, my lecturer has walked in, set up his laptop and started his lecture. I look at him, but I can't make out his voice among the buzzing noise around me. I can see his lips moving, but all I am able to hear is the scratching of a pencil on a notepad on my left. *The gum!* I'm still holding it. I quickly put a piece in my mouth and inhale deeply. The strong mint clears my sinuses and recalibrates my senses. The floaty-things in the way of my vision start to disappear while I focus on the strong taste in my mouth. I tap my fingers on my leg to refocus my hearing. *That's better!*

I'm walking past the big, yellow, main building, trying to not get disoriented by the traffic going by. My legs are shaky, they feel as if I've just finished a half-marathon - almost numb. I just can't seem to get used to the end of classes in big lecture halls; and the day isn't over yet. I make an effort to straighten my back, actively noticing the straps of my backpack on my shoulders, and focus on the cool air that rushes past the back of my throat as I inhale deeply once again. It fills my lungs and gently expands my ribcage. It is surprising how stiff muscles can feel when one consciously breathes. I'm pretty sure my upper back is as hard as plate armour right now. I pull my shoulders up a few times to loosen everything up a bit. *Hey how are you? I'm fine thanks. How is your term paper coming? Have you read the text for that class later? – List of questions: check.* I approach the small group of students waiting outside the building. They are all in my next class. Some are smoking, one girl is eating a clementine, all of them are engaged in conversation. *You wanted this. You came here to learn their language, to learn their customs and conventions.* I join the group and position myself right in front of the recycling bin, awkwardly grabbing the straps of my backpack. "Hi". Some of them raise their hand briefly, others nod. "Hi", Lisa replies and smiles brightly at me. I smile back. "How are you?" "Ah you know...uni and stuff. How about you?" "I'm fine, thanks. How is your term paper coming?" Lisa gives a faint laugh. I nod understandingly, not having understood anything. "Have you read the text for class later?" "Sorta". And with that I've run out of questions, so I look around the group trying to spot an opportunity to join a conversation. It's not like I couldn't talk to them. Well, I guess I could talk at them. I could tell them all about Jespersen's cycle for example, I read this super amazing article about it last night, but I remember my mum

explicitly telling me to refrain from talking to fellow students about things they will most likely find boring.

Boring, adjective: “causing weariness and restlessness through lack of interest: causing boredom: TIRESOME” Merriam-Webster online dictionary.

Now, how do I spot that? And what does weariness look like in people anyway? “Could you throw this away?” Lisa disrupts my thoughts while handing me her lunchbox. “Sure”, I turn around and dump the bright orange lunchbox right into the recycling bin behind me. I turn back around and smile at Lisa who just stares at me. In fact everyone is staring at me. Suddenly it’s dead quiet. No one says anything. Oops. I know this silence.

Pragmalinguistic failure, noun: “a misunderstanding of the intended illocutionary, or pragmatic, force of an utterance.” Teachers and Students Learning about Compliments, Brown and Holmes, 1987, p. 526.

In other words: I went wrong somewhere. *Okay, we can fix this. Rewind!* I laugh and turn around to fish Lisa’s lunchbox out of the bin. *She did say to throw it away though, didn’t she? Oh! Maybe she meant the contents!!!* I dump the clementine peel into the trash and hand the box back to Lisa “Here you go”, I try to keep my tone joking. *I really hope this is what she wanted me to do.* Lisa chuckles and takes her lunch box. Most of the others give small laughs, too, before returning to their conversations. A feeling of intense relief washes over me. *Pheww. Close one. Slightly embarrassing.* “Alright, I’m gonna head up to the classroom”, I announce and leave the circle. *I need to stop messing up! I need to get what they mean! I need to understand!* I take two steps at a time, darting up the familiar stair case. I’m truly looking forward to my next class.

Oh no.

I stop dead in the doorway. What’s that? Someone is already sitting in my spot. But... I **always** sit there! My body has forgotten how to move. My mind is racing, thoughts chasing each other... *The class can’t take place. We can’t have a lecture like that. Everything is going to be different! It mustn’t be different. This is how that class is supposed to go.* I want to scream. *I must sit there!* In this particular classroom I’ve been sitting in that particular chair for two years. *It is my spot. That is where I go. Now a stranger is sitting on that chair. What do I do now? This is my routine!*

Routine, noun: “a regular course of procedure” Merriam-Webster online dictionary, Entry 1a.

Regular procedure! I don't like irregular procedure. I can't have irregular procedure. Irregular makes everything suddenly unpredictable. How utterly horrible! “Liam? You alright?” Alice asks. I can't answer. I heard the question, but most of my brain is stuck on not being able to sit in my spot and since my brain is busy, my body can't get the signal to move. I can't even nod. *Come on. Get a grip. It's not that bad, you can make it work. It's just a chair.* I tap my fingers on my leg. *Calm down. Be normal. You want to belong. Don't be strange now.* “Liam?” Alice asks again. “Ehh. Yeah. Sure. Sorry, I was just...trying to remember if I had locked my door.” I make up looking around the classroom. There are about 25 empty chairs. I'm overwhelmed. *Where am I supposed to go now?* “Come sit next to me”, Alice suggests, patting the table on her right. I can only nod. This is so wrong. I walk over to the unfamiliar table. *This is not my spot.* I'm determined to be okay, though. *Normal. Just normal. Don't stand out.* I sit down and take out my folder for the next class. Grammar. *Oh how I love grammar.* “How are you?” Alice inquires. “Stressed”, I answer while opening my folder to look at last week's notes. “Yeah, the exams are so close already!” she continues. “Yes”, I agree hoping she won't somehow figure out that I'm stressed because I'm sitting next to her instead of in my regular seat. “Have you read the text for today?” she goes on. “Yes” I say again. *Why does she keep asking me questions?* I'm starting to panic a little because I don't know what is expected of me. *Oh! Wait! I think I know what's happening...*

Snall talk, noun: “light or casual conversation: CHITCHAT” Merriam-Webster online dictionary.

Light or casual? Light as in: not heavy? How could words be heavy? Unless you wrote them on stone tablets, of course. And casual? As in: while not wearing a suit? Doesn't that make any conversation at university small talk? I'm not prepared for this. *How do you make small talk? Come on! Think! Come up with a question!* “What's your favourite irregular verb, Alice?” “What?” “What's your favourite irregular verb?” I repeat. The confusion on Alice's face is apparent even to me. “Eh... you know, I've never considered that before. Ehm... Sometimes you are so random! But well, eh, I think I like put. – put, put, put – it always makes me think of someone putting their chicken on a shelf somehow.” “Ah” I say and am thankfully rescued from further small talk by our lecturer entering the classroom.

“Good morning, everyone”, she starts “did I give you guys homework last week?” “Yes.”, I say immediately. I can hear Alice sighing exasperatedly. “Why did you say something”, she hisses at me. *Great. Another Hagrid moment: “I shouldn’t have said that. I should **not** have said that” I know that! Why do I keep forgetting that I’m not always supposed to answer when I’m asked?! It so confusing!* If I’m asked directly, my brain panics and I just answer honestly before being able to consider the social implications, I once explained to a classmate. It didn’t help. He was still angry at me. I honestly don’t mean to upset anyone, it just sort of happens on its own. *Mental note to self: Keep remembering Social Rule 437: Figure out how to be your classmates ally against the teacher/lecturer, act accordingly. Easier said than done. How do I know when they think what I think and when they don’t?* Half way through the class I desperately wish I could have taken a sound break with my headphones between classes. The cars outside seem to get louder and louder. Their honking keeps capturing my attention. There’s the clock ticking on the wall, most students’ pencils seem to be writing directly on my ear-drums rather than on the notepads on their desks. I want to ignore the chainsaw roaring in the bushes and trees in front of the building, but I can’t! The noise is everywhere. I try very hard not to move my hands. *Listen! Listen! Listen! Don’t move. Don’t stand out. BE NORMAL!* But I fail. Eventually, I start silently tapping my leg with fingers again. I take a deep breath. *Can someone please turn off these horrible lights!* I keep tapping and choose a spot on the wall to stare at. Minimising sensory input.

I tap

And tap

And tap

I finally manage to pick up my lecturer’s voice when she starts explaining the etymology of a word. *Uhhh yes. That’s awesome! That’s so interesting!* I love these details. “Is that relevant to the exam?” Alice asks quietly. “Probably not”, Lisa whispers back. “But it’s sooooo interesting!” I say to Alice. “No”, she whispers, “it’s just confusing! It distracts me from the important stuff.” *But it is important! It’s the small details that distinguish things from one another.* A pig’s DNA only differs from a human’s DNA in details. The detail of final-obstruent devoicing, common in German speakers of English, makes a significant difference in the sentence “I saw a huge crab on the beach”. Details are important. In maths, in language, in culture. Everywhere. I

- I like empty lecture halls
- I don't understand why people like to hug wrong
- I like sitting in the same spot every week
- I have an almost obsessive love for the Merriam-Webster Dictionary
- I don't like the smell of urine
- I can't listen properly without stimming
- The word deer derives from the Anglo-Saxon word deór, which means animal
- I'm autistic.

Maybe I need to change my approach. Maybe I can make experiment 8143 work by changing a parameter. Maybe tomorrow I won't try fitting in by pretending I perceive the world like most people here. Maybe tomorrow I can try being alien and finding the spot on this planet where I can fit as being Liam. Liam, who is different. Liam, who has ASD. But also Liam, who is just Liam. And Liam, who is happy.