

Not Much Feels Right

Kaylee Novack¹, MD

There is not much to do that feels right on the day before Match Day, as I wait to receive life changing news for the second time. At first, I try to cross items off my to-do list: thesis writing at 6:00 AM, a run at 8:00 AM, class at 9:00 AM, and a research meeting after that. But as time ticks by, completing these tasks seems increasingly absurd and meaningless in the grand scheme of things, especially when I could be out in the early spring sunshine, enjoying whatever remains of my pre-Match innocence.

This innocence is not trivial. The first time I went through residency applications, it was the one thing that got me through the overwhelming stress. It was this innocence that allowed me to surf on a gentle wave of hope each time I received an interview invitation email, even if these emails mostly brought bad news, and I was constantly let down like a kite on a still day. And it was this innocence that convinced me that mentally preparing for a no-Match was possible after I interviewed at just a handful of universities and my prospects were, effectively, grim.

However, on the day when the no-Match finally happened, I was so shocked that I didn't feel much at all, just numb. The scary thoughts appeared later, thinking I should give up on medicine entirely. Then, worse, wanting more than ever to be a doctor and realizing I might not get that chance, wondering how I'm supposed to go through it all again without the innocence when the first time left me feeling completely defeated. And, lastly, asking myself what I should do differently the next time. There were no clear answers or straight paths forward and it was this uncertainty that made my second residency application year so worrisome, that made me constantly afraid of last year's events repeating.

Despite this, I decided to approach the no-Match year with curiosity. I started the master's degree in psychiatry I had been quietly contemplating from the day I finished my undergraduate degree. I got involved in a number of research projects in fields I was passionate about and I finally found time to invest in new activities that had long been collecting dust on my to-do lists. I used this time to learn from new mentors and from friends who had been through

similar challenges. They taught me that I shouldn't interpret this year as a failure and showed me that I could not only live with the uncertainty that came with a no-Match but that I could thrive in spite of it. As such, many days of this no-Match year were also full of optimism and thankfulness. There were even many golden moments I wrote to friends about in ALL CAPS and with exclamation marks! Even so, I was never quite able to forget how fleeting these golden moments can be.

So today, as I stare outside, all of these thoughts and feelings crash over me; the entirety of 2 years of hope, fear, anxiety, and eagerness, distilled and relived completely in every second, as if each moment held within it all of the contradicting emotions I've experienced throughout this process. Today, this tension is palpable and it appears every so often as a tightening in my chest, especially as I stare longingly at the sun streaming in and falling just shy of where I'm perched at my desk.

As all of this passes through my mind, like I said, there's not much to do that feels right. I decide to go for a walk, hoping it will let my mind shift into a more attentive mode, narrowing my focus to what is happening in the here and now, like the exertion I feel in my legs when I've been moving at the right cadence for long enough. This is more or less helpful. So, eventually I decide to just sit. On a bench. In the sun. Hoping simultaneously that time moves more quickly and that I don't get sunburned.

As I sit, I question what exactly it is that I'm feeling today. Unsettled, for one, because I'm terrified of disappointing myself but more importantly others. I go over and over how I will feel sharing the news with my family, friends, and mentors, saying it is one university or another or even no university at all, but it's an elusive concept that my brain refuses to hold more than just momentarily. I also feel somewhat reassured because this time around, I have done enough interviews. And based on the statistics everyone keeps telling me about, that means that it's more a question of *where* I'll be accepted than *if I will be*. And yet, I'm still distressed because I know better than anyone that I can easily be a statistical outlier. I feel alone and inadequate as I imagine old classmates busily finishing long days as first-year residents while I've been aimlessly roaming the city and sitting on benches. I take stock of this and, it turns out, what

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4300/JGME-D-22-00512.1>

I'm feeling is a hellish mix of everything, the worst and best of excitement and dread and dreams made and shattered.

So, having tried both movement and stillness to silence my anxiety—with neither quite assuaging it—I decide that nature might help, as it had in the past 2 years. I watch the sun as it sinks below the buildings and then, once I can no longer see it, I quickly make my way toward the mountain for a better view. At each corner, when the sun peaks between buildings I feel hugged by its warmth. Eventually, I reach the mountain just in time to watch the sky as it softens into a mess of pink clouds and fading orange-yellow sun.

Witnessing this beauty in and among the quiet of the trees certainly doesn't make the stress worse. But still, when I finally make my way home, I am equally restless and I am still wondering how to fill the remaining hours of this interminable day. Listening to music seems like a reasonable option. The album I switch on, my application year anthem—so chosen for its sweet crooning about never giving up—fills the space smoothly and allows my mind to slip away, making me feel unburdened. My phone rings a few

times, interrupting the music. It is my family and friends, just checking in. The fact that they reached out at all is enough to make me cry, but they also make me smile and laugh and forget about tomorrow for the first time in 24 hours, which is worth way more than its weight in gold.

At the tail end of the night, I run out of things to do and think. I imagine myself tomorrow, ecstatic or broken, sitting on that same chair as last year, in the kitchen of my parents' house. And that's all I'm able to do.

Because there was not much to do that felt quite right on the day before I received life changing news for the second time.



Kaylee Novack, MD, is a PGY-1 Resident, Department of Psychiatry and Addictology, Faculty of Medicine, University of Montreal, Montreal, Quebec, Canada.

The author would like to thank Dr. Nicholas Chadi, who thoughtfully provided feedback on this essay.

Corresponding author: Kaylee Novack, MD, University of Montreal, Montreal, Quebec, Canada,
kaylee.novack@umontreal.ca