MOVING.

The word loomed like a monster, tearing my 8th-grade life apart. I had lived in one tiny, New England town my entire life. My friends were the younger sisters of my sisters’ friends – and we had all known each other forever. I knew nothing of Memphis, Tennessee, a place where I would be called a “YANkee” and the churches looked like malls. At thirteen I was nerdy and shy. I didn’t know anything about country music, or that people still reenacted the Civil War.

And so, on the first day of 9th grade, I stepped – FRIENDLESS – into a giant high school with a population half the size of the town where I grew up.

And everything was going great – I thought. I even found my homeroom after only five minutes of panicked wandering!

A diminutive girl pointed to the seat next to me. “Hey, can I sit here?” I nodded.

“I’m Shari,” she said, wearing a huge smile. “What middle school did you go to?”

“Um, I just moved here from Boston.”

“Oh really? My dad is from Boston. Well, he’s Irish. But my mom is Iranian. I was born here in Memphis, though.”

Shari grabbed my schedule out of my hands. “Oh look! We have lunch together!”

I perked up at the mention of LUNCH. I was terrified of the prospect of entering the cafeteria and sitting alone. So – though I was painfully shy, I knew Shari had just thrown me a life-line.

“Maybe we can sit together?” I offered.

“Sure! I might be late, though, because I’m coming from gym.”

Before I knew it, the bell was ringing for lunch. As I made my way to the cafeteria in the crush of students, I heard an announcement over the PA system: “Gym will have D-Period lunch. That is D as in Dog.” If I could have, I would have stopped in my tracks. This was B-Period. B, as in Boy.

My new friend Shari was in gym! That meant I was on my own for lunch. Who was I going to sit with? There were 600 people in my lunch period and I didn’t know a single soul.
I grabbed a seat at the closest table, and took out my Tupperware. Unfortunately, I was a fast eater. So I just sat there, alone, for the entire 25 minutes. That was Monday’s lunch period. And that’s what happened on Tuesday. And Wednesday. And Thursday.

Finally, on Friday, as I was leaving Geometry class, one girl turned to me and said, “You’re new, right? You can sit with us if you want.” Walking into the cafeteria together, she asked me where I had been sitting all week. I pointed to the far side.

“Oh, well. That explains why we never saw you. You were sitting on the wrong side.” I looked at her – confused – and she rolled her eyes. “You were sitting on the black side of the cafeteria, Julia. You just can’t sit over there. It isn’t done.”

I looked back at the cafeteria and saw what she meant. Black on one side, white on the other. Latinos and Indians mostly at one end of the white section, but freer to mix.

Once we sat down, Krista turned away from me and for the rest of lunch spoke only with her regular friends. By the end of the week I realized that while I had people to eat with, I was still alone.

It was Shikha, an Indian girl, who became my first real friend in Memphis. She struck up a conversation with me on the school bus. And the next day we sat together, plotting how to get the cute boy across the aisle to stop listening to his MP3 player, and talk to us instead.

And so, with Shikha – who was neither black nor white – I began to belong. Shikha didn’t care about the cafeteria rules of racial division. She had moved to Memphis from a village in Gudrati in India the year before. She knew what it was like to be the new kid.

The next year, we had as close to a solution as we could find to our cafeteria problem: we ate OUTSIDE, where there were two adjoining picnic tables and it was too crowded for segregation.

Shikha helped me grow up in Memphis, forcing me out of my protective shell, backing me up as I made new friends and planned my first party. By the time I arrived here at Harvard, I wasn’t afraid to sit with anybody at all in Annenberg. In fact, I was that girl who was still sitting down next to people I didn’t know in April, even though everybody else had stopped doing that back in October.

Eight years after Memphis, I have Lowell House – a community which has meant the world to me. Here, in the Lowell Dining Hall, because of all of YOU, even when I choose to sit by myself, I know I am never alone.