

Come in, Lie Down

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I was good at school, but I hated it. From the moment it began, I did not want to go, did not want to stay, and constantly sought ways to not be in the classroom, even when I was already there. Every morning I would run after my parents, the whole way down the long lane that led up to the Principal's Office, only to be returned to my desk, my parents distraught. Once I realised I had to stay, I looked for ways out. Not outright escape per se, but I noticed if a pupil raised her hand to say she felt sick or had a headache, the teacher advised the girl to put her 'head down'. I started to regularly raise my hand. Once when I was really small, 4 or 5 years old, I fell into a deep sleep with my head on the desk and woke up to 36 girls calling my name.

At home when we reported feeling unwell, my mother directed us to 'the sick chair'. It was a small, curved bamboo chair, and two white cushions with embroidered yellow, green and blue flowers. It didn't offer any supreme level of comfort, but it was an acknowledgement that the occupier should be treated with care. Sometimes, before dinner, my mom would announce that she was going to sit in the sick chair for ten minutes. The chair changed in form over the years. It is no longer a bamboo chair with cushions. At some point it was swapped for a cream leather, reclining armchair. Now it is a dark-grey, faux suede one with an in-built footrest, though it still sits in the same spot in the corner of the kitchen, looking out into the garden. That is where I edited my PhD thesis. I am a 'doctor' now. I still hate school, but apparently love education.

During and after my first degree, I worked various retail jobs. Mostly shoe shops and clothes shops, and a couple of stints in Urban Outfitters. One thing about retail is that staff, or 'sales associates', generally are not allowed to sit down. In most stores I worked there were no seats on the shop floor, anywhere—not behind the tills, not at the fitting rooms, and certainly not on the main floor. You stay upright on your feet until your miserable 15 minute break. When I was a child, I had that common fantasy of being locked in a store after hours, running around, testing out all the beds. That fantasy is strong too in popular culture, even in adulthood. I think of the scene in *(500) Days of Summer* when Zoe Deschanel's and Joseph Gordon-Levitt's characters saunter through IKEA playing 'house', eventually racing to the 'bedroom' where the pair collapse onto a perfectly-made IKEA bed. As a 38 year-old renter in Dublin, I have been playing house for almost two decades. I have owned mountains of cheap IKEA bedframes, armchairs, and desks. Equally, I have lived amongst a lot of IKEA furniture already in-situ—the landlord refusing to remove it. One of my best adult moments was buying my first (and only) mattress in Montreal in 2010. I too sauntered into the nearest mattress store, blissfully trying out each one with my best friend. In Dublin, I lie nightly on a mattress that has been shared by many strangers. I sometimes wonder how many people I am lying down with.

In 2020, tennis star Naomi Osaka won her third grand slam. Her first slam title in 2018 was a dramatic affair against her childhood idol Serena Williams who, during the match, received a point and then a game penalty following a code violation for illegal coaching.¹ The match spiralled from there. Osaka lifted the trophy to audible booing and her own and Williams's tears. I watched from my living room in Dublin, sad to see what was unfolding between two of my favourite players. Osaka recovered from the drama (and possibly trauma) of that win, collecting three more slam titles. She describes herself as extremely shy,² but has been open about her struggles with mental health. In fact, she opted out of press duties for the 2021 French Open to protect her mental wellbeing,³ but was promptly strong-armed by the four slam federations into withdrawing from the tournament completely.⁴

On winning the US Open for the second time, in an empty stadium due to COVID-19, Osaka asked if she could join her team in the player's box. For whatever reason, her request was not immediately enacted and, instead, she put her racket down, walked into the middle of the court and gently eased her body to the ground. She lay flat on her back for about 20 seconds with her knees bent and her feet on the court.⁵ Afterwards, she explained that she always sees the great players collapsing onto the ground in the moment of victory and "look up at the sky". She wanted to see what they saw, she said, adding that she was nervous of injuring herself and she wanted to place herself on the ground safely. In her press conference she furthered commented, "I'm really glad I did [it]".⁶ Another notable action during the 2020 US Open was Osaka's decision to wear a different face mask bearing the name of a Black person killed by police or in racially motivated attacks in the United States, seven masks in total, one for each match she played.⁷

I often return to the moment when Osaka lay down on the court, especially considering everything she has been through since her rise to the top: the difficult experience of her first grand slam final, her mental health struggles, the lack of support both from tennis authorities and some of her peers,⁸ and the enormous pressure of celebrity and greatness—she is now the highest paid female athlete of all time.⁹ I think more and more about her lying down and her activism for Black Lives Matter during the Open: maybe as an act of agency and possibly, exhaustion. Though she was referring to sports injury, her insistence that she wanted to lie down "safely" sticks with me. I think about how many times over those two weeks Osaka was asked to explain the masks and the message she wanted to send—and her unflinching response before raising the trophy:

"What was the message that you got?"¹⁰

¹ www.nytimes.com/2018/09/09/sports/serena-osaka-us-open-penalty.html

² www.espn.com/tennis/story/_/id/29169209/naomi-osaka-opens-struggle-crippling-shyness

³ www.theguardian.com/sport/2021/may/31/naomi-osaka-withdraws-french-open-press-conference-fines-tennis

⁴ <http://www.independent.ie/sport/other-sports/tennis/tennis-chiefs-issue-strong-statement-and-threaten-naomi-osaka-with-expulsion-from-french-open-over-her-media-boycott-40485130.html>

⁵ www.youtube.com/watch?v=g88Z9jbRsnI

⁶ www.youtube.com/watch?v=0U6RdUvMT2o

⁷ www.time.com/5888583/naomi-osaka-masks-black-lives-matter-us-open/

⁸ www.tennisuptodate.com/wta/bencic-on-osaka-feel-like-sometimes-its-just-about-to-remain-in-the-talk;www.tennisbuzz.net/naomi-osaka-press-boycott-french-open-roland-garros-mats-wilander

⁹ www.forbes.com/sites/kurtbadenhausen/2020/05/22/naomi-osaka-is-the-highest-paid-female-athlete-ever-topping-serena-williams/?sh=e4a3d821fd33

¹⁰ www.youtube.com/watch?v=IElytkCsqW0