The lecture room in Scaife Hall is buzzing like a nightclub and bumping with bass as the Black Eyed Peas croon I’ve got a feeling that tonight’s gonna be a good night. Snapshots of the Class of 2011 flash across the screen, bringing laughter, shouts, and cheers from the actual members of the class, who swarm the aisles. They are glowing, as though lit from within. They embrace, slap hands. Handshakes are firmer than usual. Quiet, knowing nods and pats on the back are pregnant with meaning. It’s Match Day. Time to meet the oracle.

Across the nation, more than 22,000 new physicians are poised to learn where they will begin their residency training on this day. Prolonging the suspense here at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine’s Scaife Hall is Joan Harvey, associate dean of student affairs. Two-thirds of you, she says to applause, matched at top-tier programs (per U.S. News & World Report’s rankings). ... This year the Harvard programs, the University of Washington, Vanderbilt, and Michigan head up the list of other institutions.
(besides our own prestigious UPMC) which will be most populated by our students next year, with Duke, Brown, and Yale close behind.

Encouraging news, but it's all this crowd can do to keep from shouting. “The envelopes, please!” There are babes in arms, couples gripping one another's forearms. Finally, one by one, the members of the Class of 2011 are summoned by Harvey, by Arthur S. Levine, senior vice chancellor for the health sciences and dean of the school, and by Chenits Pettigrew, assistant dean for student affairs.

Cameras flash as students make their way to the front. Attire ranges from nightclub chic to Penguins game day. There are glittering green top hats for St. Patrick’s Day. Upon hearing her name called, the owner of a pair of spike-heeled boots takes approximately one half her med school career to descend 36 steps from the back of the auditorium. (What's the point of learning your future if you can't look stunning while doing it?)

Most open the envelope on the spot. Many borrow the mike to share their news. “I'm staying in Pittsburgh!” someone shouts into the microphone. He commences a vigorous touchdown dance amid a loud ovation and a series of high-fives.

One student reads her letter and pitches forward as she clutches at her throat. She looks at the paper in her hand again, takes the mike, and says, “Massachusetts General Hospital.” A student discharges a can of spray confetti indiscriminately as his classmates climb the stairs to their seats holding their letters.

In the back of the hall, a salt-and-pepper-haired doctor stands surveying the scene and grinning. He applauds vigorously each time another fourth-year says, “Pittsburgh!”

Some approach the stage like boxers entering the ring. One quietly sneaks back up the stairs with her still-sealed envelope in hand. I tried not to stumble on my walk to the stage. Dean Joan Harvey was smiling at me. Was it a pity smile? She knew I was trying to match with Tarini. As I approached Dean Harvey, pure fear raced through my veins. My hands shook, but I was able to grasp the letter and walk to a corner of the auditorium. I took a deep breath. A calm came over me. I knew my hard work would be worth it. I ripped open the envelope. Why is this letter folded so awkwardly? I couldn't find the words on the page. Finally, I saw some words. I refocused, glossed over the boilerplate “Congratulations.” There it was, my residency program based on a mathematical formula. Soon, I would find out what the computer had spat out. If Match Day is like a wedding, it's an arranged marriage. I felt like I had no control and that my fate was in someone else's hands.

Forty minutes into the Match ceremony, my palms became sweaty. I was hot and then cold. I was anxious. I was happy when my palms became sweaty. I was hot and then cold. I was anxious. I was happy. I smiled, and my eyes locked with my friends'. These were the people who had pulled me across the finish line. One had played Rock Band with me for hours to help me relax after a bad day in the hospital. Another had accompanied me on a 1 a.m. trip to the ER for a simple paronychia during board studying. They knew my deepest fears and my greatest dreams. They were family. I hadn't said a word, yet they knew how I felt. They cheered!

This was not like a wedding at all. No church bells. No ritual kiss. Only an aging auditorium and an awkwardly folded letter. There is no good analogy or apt comparison. It's just Match Day.

—Brian Lau (MD '11)

Read another Match story by Brian Lau, on the little-known Scramble: pittmed.health.pitt.edu/Summer_2011/web-extra.htm.