Eve C

Professor Wu

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Arise: The Untold Truth of Caltech

On December 1st, 2022, at precisely 4:23 PM, I found myself on the floor, knees trembling with an overload of emotions. Tears streamed down my face, blending with laughter, in a surreal mix of joy and disbelief. I had achieved what I had tirelessly pursued for four long years. The prestigious California Institute of Technology had chosen me to join them to be part of their class of 2026. I had not just been admitted but also granted a full ride scholarship that covered 88,600 dollars for four years.

Months later, on a freezing day in March a new letter arrived at my doorstep. As I opened it and read, “Congratulations for being accepted into Caltech. You are now invited to the admitted student weekend: Discotech!” Once I finished reading all the details from the letter, I found out that Caltech was inviting me and my dad to an all-paid weekend in California, to connect and meet with other accepted students. I ran to tell my dad, who could be found every morning in the kitchen rushing to prepare his dough to sell churros under the same freezing and busy station beneath the 6 train in The Bronx.

“Apa, mi universidad me invitó a visitar el campus y tú puedes venir. La escuela va a pagar todo!”

“No puedo ir contigo, si la migra me agarra en el aeropuerto te vas a quedar aquí sola” My dad spoke angrily as he began to mix the dough.

My dad refused to accompany me, not because he didn't want to, but because he was terrified that going to the airport might result in his deportation.

“Pero Apá-” I tried to convince him.

“Te dije que no puedo ir, aparte no tengo tiempo que perder. Tengo que ir a vender para mandar dinero a tu mamá.”

“Entonces voy a ir sola” I sobbed.

The thought of my dad getting deported was our family's worst nightmare. He was the main provider for my family. Without him, my family would surely starve to death due to the lack of jobs and opportunities in Mexico. Despite feeling hurt by the realization that my dad would never be able to visit my college, I knew I couldn't decline such an invitation. I had to go even if it meant to go alone.

Weeks after the letter invitation, the day of the event finally came. I arrived at Los Angeles International Airport alone. I was picked up by a Caltech private driver which made me feel special. On my ride to the hotel, I looked up at the window. By looking through the window, I noticed steam rising from the pavement and a ray of sunshine began to slowly burn my leg. Unlike in NYC, the heat was merciless. Near the airport some of the buildings were giants trying to touch the sky similar to the ones in Manhattan. As we moved further away, I began to see tiny houses that were falling apart; they looked just like the ones in Mexico. Nevertheless, the nostalgic memories and being there alone made me feel rather uneasy.

I arrived at the hotel Hilton in Pasadena, California, and I was greeted by the admission officer. She simply asked my name and handed me a key in which was written “3-F”. I held the key to my room as I walked through the hotel hallway and began looking around to see my future classmates. The first thing I noticed was that their skin color was not similar to mine or to my friends in The Bronx. They all looked more like those people who lived in Manhattan: Manhattanites. Every one of those students came with at least one parent. I observed them as they cheerfully talked to each other. It was like watching a movie in which I was nothing more than just a spectator.

I walked away and waited for the elevator, lowering my head and looking at the floor, trying to hide away the small tears that were slowly forming in my eyes. It had just hit me. I was in a different place, surrounded by strangers who did not even look like me. Loneliness pierced a hole in my heart as if I had suddenly been shot, causing insufferable pain which I would carry for the rest of my Caltech career.

The weekend went by, and I was not able to connect with anyone. Every breakfast or lunch time, I was alone while others sat in groups. I heard parents talking about stocks, investments, and bragging about what other schools their kids were accepted to such as Harvad, MIT, Stanford, UCLA, and USC. The students talked about traveling, expensive hobbies like skiing and all the competitions they had won in high school. It was a world I did not belong to. Hell, I hadn't even known half of those Ivy names until a few months ago while they were trained their whole life to belong there. I questioned my own place here. *Was it just luck after all?*

I did not have a rich parent like they did. My dad was a simple man who earned his money from selling churros on the streets. Just like the day I received the invitation; my dad was always trying to earn money to survive. That was the world I belonged to and the only reality I knew. At some point, I told myself to not judge them, they all probably worked hard. I was trying to be like Obama, “I tried my best to be cool at times, but why did such comments always set me on edge?” What put me on edge was not the way they talked or dressed. What set me on edge was the fact that they had an advantage throughout their whole life. One that I craved every day of my life knowing that I could never have it. I was surrounded by brilliant students in the world, and it did not fit me. I was the wrong piece of this puzzle called Caltech.

When I came back to NYC to my high school from the event, I lied. I lied to everyone and told them that Caltech was the best experience, that I had so much fun and made many friends. I lied because they all believed that Caltech deserved me as much as I deserved Caltech. I lied because I did not want to be pathetic telling the truth. Yet, I felt like the most pitiful person in the world. Everyone cheered for me to go to Caltech, the second most important research and engineering college in the world, and that is how I decided to be remembered.

I was once again back in California on September 18, 2022 to start my college journey. I was determined to fit in even if it meant I had to fake it.

Rather soon my plan failed. The first week of Caltech I had more panic attacks than I ever had in my whole life. At the end of every day, I would come back to my room to cry tirelessly for hours and hours until I fell asleep. It was all because I could not connect with anyone. I had multiple conversations with other students, yet I could not hear my own voice. I was nauseous from being asked the same questions, What state are you from? What is your major? Why did you choose Caltech?

I had no answer to why I chose Caltech besides that I wanted to be an astronaut but it seemed rather like a joke to everyone else. *Why am I not allowed to dream big?*

During the first two months at Caltech, I fell mentally ill: I was depressed, living within the four walls of my dorm. I had no more than one meal a day, always running in a dose of three to four hours of sleep. I did all that to keep up with the workload, but the pile of weekly homework and tests, together with the insane demanding schedule of having to attend classes as early as 8 AM and as late as 10 PM left me with no time to study, drowning me in an endless sea of academic pressure. I was no match for my classmates, at least not for people like Elon Musk’s son, like the governors of Las Vegas grandchildren and like China’s prime minister's daughter. I was nothing but the daughter of a street seller with no private tutors or help from their own parents. I remember how in high school. I was the brilliant number one student, but here at Caltech I was nothing more than the lowest grade in the class. I was helpless, no matter how much I tried I eventually fell behind.

One year later, on December 22, 2023. I was called to the Dean's office.

“Eve, I was notified that you did not perform so well this semester. Is there something going on?” The Dean was a white woman: tall with short blonde hair. This wasn't my first time visiting her. Each time I found myself in her office, a sense of discomfort washed over me, leaving me feeling unsettled.

“I tried my best. I always do. I do not understand what the concern is. I already passed all my classes.”

“I am sure you are aware that getting C’s will not allow you to keep your scholarship.”

“My scholarship minimum GPA requirement is 2.0. My current GPA is 2.9.”

“Exactly.”- She paused, “Eve. If you keep these grades, you will eventually lose your scholarship and will be asked to leave. One solution is you can take next semester off again and come back more prepared.”

*Again.* Just like it wasn't my first time in the dean's office, it wasn't the first time I was asked to “take a break” and come back another semester. It felt as if it was all a plan. I remembered when on my first visit to her office she mentioned,

“Your scholarship covers six years of college.”

I questioned her “empathy”. It was like forcing me to extend my stay at Caltech for their own monetary benefit.

“No, I will not leave. I cannot leave. I will do better next semester. I just need to study harder.”

“Eve, just think about it. If you change your mind, come visit me again.”

After leaving her office, I felt my chest squeeze, slowly forcing all the air from my lungs out my body. As an electric anger rushed over my body, I silently murmured to myself, “*Again? She is asking me to leave again?”*

The mix of anger and despair formed an ironic laugh. The echoing of the laugh as tears streamed down felt like a descent into madness, driven by the overwhelming emotions. I found myself trapped in one of those all-too-familiar panic attacks that seemed to gradually destroy my sanity.

I began to remember the slogan of the school: “Caltech; the place where your best isn't good enough.” In fact, it was not enough. *It was never enough*.

After an endless hour of crying outside the administrative building, I rushed with a sense of urgency to my dorm. I sat on my desk and opened my computer, “Flights from LAX to NYC.” I booked the first ticket that was departing in just 4 days. I couldn't bear another moment inside Caltech. It felt as though I was drowning, and I was the only one that could save me.

When I told my family and friends about leaving Caltech none of them judged me despite this impulsive decision. My older sister simply helped me out with a script to tell my parents about how her favorite and only successful daughter was dropping out of college. I called my mom first since I knew she would be the most supportive,

“Vive tu vida, que yo ya viví la mía.” She said.

My mom meant that I should live my life the way I wanted it since she has already lived hers. I honestly knew that she would not criticize me since she always trusted me to make my own decisions. Yet, I was embarrassed to accept my defeat in Caltech.

My dad, on the other hand, was the hardest to confront. He first denied my decision to leave Caltech. He thought I was just being lazy which was driving me to not succeed, but after crying to him, telling him the truth, he finally accepted.

“Vente, después de todo eres mi hija, y siempre estaré para ti.” He said over the phone.

I knew my dad would always be there for me no matter what. That is the kind of dad he is.

Finally, my best friend encouraged me to apply to New York City College of Technology since she, unlike anyone else, knew that I could not possibly live without education.

Education has been my only source of oxygen for the past four years. I could not simply give up. In that moment of despair, I picked up a book that had been collecting dust in the corner of my desk waiting for me patiently while I was in the chaos of Caltech. It was the book, *Parable of the Talents* by Octavia Butler, which said,

“In order to rise

From its own ashes

A phoenix

First

Must

Burn.”

I was burning. Yet, I arise.