

## YOUTH FROM EVERY QUARTER

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WHEN I WAS TWENTY-FOUR, my then-boyfriend and I taught at a high school summer program at an elite New England boarding school, which I will call Elliot Academy. The summer school was a kind of cash cow, trading on the Elliot reputation, catering to a wealthy and not very diverse student body. Students were promised rigorous classes, stimulating friendships, field trips to area colleges and idyllic swimming ponds: a glorious New England summer.

One of the students in my boyfriend's English class was a rising sophomore, whom I'll call Ana. Ana was from rural Oregon. Her parents, farmworkers, were Mexican—and, though Ana did not say, I suspect undocumented—who traveled around the state following the crops: cherries, plums, pears. Ana was shy and serious, with frizzy black hair escaping her ponytail, off-brand sneakers, and modest, too-long khaki shorts. At home, she translated for her parents; she took care of her younger siblings; she excelled in school. When she and another girl from her town were granted one of the few scholarships to Elliot Academy's summer school, their conservative Christian church raised funds to cover the rest.

Ana had never been out of Oregon, had certainly never been exposed to the level of privilege on display at Elliot, with its columns and cupolas and manicured grounds. The other students were used to jetting off to this or that summer enrichment program, and arrived equipped with iPods and Tiffany necklaces, sleek new laptop computers and spending money for shopping trips to Boston.

"She's having a hard time," my boyfriend told me. "She feels isolated. Maybe you can talk to her." He meant because I was also Latina, because I'd also been a bookish kid, because I'd also moved around a lot as a child, and money had always been tight.

And I'd also found myself an outsider in this prep school world. A decade earlier, when I was thirteen, a recruiter from another elite boarding school, in an effort to seek "youth from every quarter," had visited my rough public middle school on Tucson's southwest side. I took a pamphlet, and, despite my parents' bafflement and skepticism (boarding schools *existed* outside of Victorian England?), submitted an application. I was awarded a nearly full ride. I bought six mock turtlenecks in jewel tones from the Fashion Bug, and set off across the continent to New Hampshire.

Those mock turtlenecks were only the beginning of what was wrong with me. I was one of a handful of Latino students, the only one, to my knowledge, not from either New York City or from wealthy families in Venezuela or Mexico City. I'd attended nine schools, mostly in the Southwest, but had never heard of field hockey or crew or many of the universities in the Ivy League. Social signifiers that were tossed around—North Face, Nantucket, Greenwich, Guerlain, Majorca—meant nothing to me, and I was sharply aware that I did not speak an essential language. Who knew that the category "middle class" was capacious enough to fit any number of summer homes?

My time in boarding school was, on the whole, pretty good. I made friends. I took classes and read books that changed my life. But I was desperately shy, skittish around teachers and peers alike, vaguely ashamed of my family and background: of sharing a bed with my sister, of having once lived in a trailer, of growing up without a television, of having a violent, alcoholic biological father. And I felt guilty, too, because even with the generous financial aid, the plane tickets were a burden on my parents. The distance between my experience and others' felt impossible to bridge, so I didn't even try to explain myself. For four years I revealed remarkably little about my life beyond the school grounds.

My time in boarding school was a tremendous, astonishing

gift, and it did, as the pamphlet promised, open doors—yet I always felt that my presence there was provisional. Certainly I never felt it was *my* school. I always had the sense of my inferiority, that my role was to be invisible and studious and grateful, to write tidy and effusive thank-you notes to the donors who'd funded my spot.

Which was all part of why I'd come to teach at Elliot Academy. That summer was my opportunity to return to boarding school, but to return as the person I wish I'd been in high school: poised, articulate, worldly, and with a clearer idea of how my jeans should fit.



Ana's difficulties had started early in the session. Her roommate, a moneyed and well-traveled French girl, with a healthy sense of what summer school should be, was having a great time. This roommate and her new Elliot friends stayed up laughing late into the night, talking about parties and hookups and drinking. They compared notes on their SAT coaches and college application consultants. They whispered and rolled their eyes at Ana, who, on the other side of the room, tried to do homework or fake sleep.

In the second week, Ana and her friend from home had asked if they could switch rooms to live together. No, she was told. Roommate assignments were firm, and the girls needed to extend themselves, meet other people.

When my boyfriend introduced me to Ana, I realized I'd half-seen her on campus, standing apart from the happy clumps of students, either with her friend from home or, increasingly, alone. Her expression was strained and wary.

In addition to her English class, Ana had signed up for a pre-calculus class that she wasn't prepared for, and by the end of the second week it was apparent that she was failing it. She told me this as we sat on a curb in a campus parking lot, the wide, sweeping lawn behind us. Far above, the leaves of a massive, ancient tree tossed the sunlight.

Ana didn't seem particularly surprised at my interest in her

situation, but she also didn't seem especially eager for my mentorship.

"I have to go home," she said, resigned. "I can't do Elliot."

"But surely the teacher can give you extra help?" I asked.

"He said I'm too far behind." She paused, then explained that she'd always gotten As at her Oregon public school and had registered for the class so she could graduate early. "I need to help my family."

"You're just in the wrong class," I said briskly, cheerfully. "You just need to be in a more appropriate level. We'll get you switched."

I was jolly along, optimistic, but Ana's fatalism seemed impervious. "They won't let me switch," she said.

"Nonsense. We'll figure it out," I promised. "Another math class. Or maybe creative writing! I'll talk to the dean. This summer should be fun for you."

"Okay," she said, and though she didn't smile, I thought I detected a glimmer of hope.

That summer I'd seen plenty of rules bent; I'd been in the office making copies when parents called, demanding this or that for their kid. Some students had switched roommates or been given singles. When a student hadn't signed up in time for a college tour or field trip, a parent called, and a space was found on the bus.

So my hopes were high when I spoke with the dean about Ana. I understood, of course, that these other, wealthier kids belonged to a world where their needs were accommodated, and that Ana did not, but with my advocacy, surely, everything would be sorted out.

When I explained Ana's predicament, the dean shook her head regretfully. The other math classes were full, she said. I looked at her in disbelief. I liked the dean—or had. She had a kindly pink face and a soft white bob. In her shapeless linen dress, she resembled a liberal children's librarian. She was a grandmother. Surely it mattered to her that Ana succeed.

"Okay, then," I said. "What about my etymology class? Or the fiction workshop?" My boyfriend had already offered to let her join his fiction class, I told her. I spoke in the sweet, reasonable, good-girl voice I used around people in authority.

The dean told me that she would not allow Ana to switch classes. "The session is already under way and I can't set a precedent." She looked back at her computer, where, doubtless, many demands awaited her.

I shifted my weight uncertainly. "Well, then, what about getting her tutoring?"

There wasn't time for that, the dean told me; summer school was only six weeks long, and they didn't have the resources.

"But the class is just too advanced for her," I said. "That's not her fault. She feels like she's failing Elliot. She actually thinks she needs to *leave*."

The dean held my gaze and nodded. "It would be a shame if Ana left," she said, her voice even. "And you're nice to show concern. But not everyone belongs at Elliot."

I was stunned. But then again, not. I remembered my friend from high school, who, when she was deeply depressed, suicidal, and sleeping through her classes, was never offered mental health support, but was instead punished and put on academic probation. I thought of my own isolation and depression and the indifference of my dorm faculty.

I ought to have argued with the dean. I ought to have told her that Ana *did* belong; Elliot itself had made that call when she was accepted to the program. I ought to have said that if Elliot was, as it claimed, committed to diversity, then it had a moral obligation to support the students it accepted. I should have pointed out that the rules needed to be in service of students' learning; or that if rules were going to be bent right and left, then they should be bent for Ana, too. I should have made her see that Ana's leaving would be a loss for the whole Elliot community as well as for Ana.

"It's just summer school," the dean told me kindly. "It's not the end of the world."

But it wasn't just summer school; it was Elliot Academy. I understood what that scholarship represented to Ana, because a similar scholarship had represented the same thing to me: escape, welcome, possibility.

Even a decade later, my anger at the dean and at Elliot Academy is raw and personal. I have to guard against overidentification with Ana, whom, let's face it, I knew only fleetingly. I had so many privileges that Ana didn't have: both my parents went to college, and I always believed I would, too; my dad, who is technically my stepfather, and who has always been extraordinarily loving and supportive of me, became a college professor when I was twelve; my family became middle class; I was never in the position of having to translate and navigate the adult world for my parents. Over and over I've benefited from institutional largesse, and have been the first in my family to have the option of pursuing an uncertain career as a writer.

But there was a time, when I was a kid in Albuquerque, when my life could have unspooled in a very different way. We were poor, and my single mother, who was without emotional or financial support, worked two and three jobs. We were constantly negotiating the role my violent and addicted biological father played in my life. I've always been aware of a shadow life running alongside my own, a life of curtailed possibility.

I was a smart, hardworking kid, but my acceptance to boarding school was a fluke. It was a fluke that the recruiter chose my middle school to visit; it was a fluke that I happened to be there the day the recruiter came (my parents frequently took us out of school when my geologist dad had fieldwork); it was a fluke that I managed to hang on to the pamphlet and request an application. And it was a fluke that I happened to fit the particular demographics that they were seeking to diversify the student body and that among all those other smart, hardworking kids, I was chosen.

And yet that first fluke was followed by others—scholarships to college, graduate school, fellowships, residencies—until it became clear that they were no longer flukes—that I'd been accepted into a rarefied world where such opportunities came more frequently. I'd learned how to navigate that rarefied world and to behave more or less as if I belonged there.

I didn't fully understand this when I was twenty-four. I don't flatter myself that in the end I could have made a difference to the dean's decision. But as I stood before her, I couldn't shake the sense that I was myself in that rarefied world only on sufferance, and not just because I was a new teacher at Elliot. My own sense of gratitude and indebtedness for having been allowed a seat at the feast kept me from fighting for Ana as hard as I should have.

I dreaded reporting to Ana that I'd failed her. But I never had to, because the next afternoon, Ana approached me, walking stiffly across the grass. "I just wanted to tell you that I'm leaving tomorrow morning."

"Ana. Please don't leave." I was begging now. But for what? For her to stay and be told each day that she didn't belong at Elliot?

"I'm letting them all down," she said, meaning her parents and the people at church who'd donated to cover her flights and expenses.

"You're not," I told her. "They'll understand. It's just summer school."

Ana's head was bent. There was a long pause, and I knew she was crying only when the tears dropped onto her pink shorts. "I just really, really wanted to go to college."

I hadn't understood until then that Ana actually believed that her chances for college had been ruined by this summer school math class. I was furious that Ana was leaving this place feeling so diminished. Elliot Academy was supposed to broaden her horizons, to expose her to new ideas and friends. It was not supposed to crush her. "You'll go to college," I said when I caught my breath. "Of course you will. There are so many ways to get the things you want in life."

She nodded, unconvinced.

But we both knew that the one way, if you are born to a family without money, is to prove yourself smart enough and pleasant enough and eager enough to convince the gatekeepers to let you

in, and then, once you're there, to try with all your might to convince them to keep you.

It's a worthy, essential aim to seek "youth from every quarter." Institutions and individuals have a responsibility to work against centuries of structural inequality. And I've seen both as a student and as a professor the myriad ways diverse voices do indeed make for a richer learning environment. But it should go without saying that it's not enough for elite institutions to accept students from racially, ethnically, and economically diverse backgrounds if those students are then told in a thousand ways—ways tiny and large, oblique and direct—that they are there only at the whim of the powers that be, that they haven't paid for the privilege to err or falter, that, at root, they don't belong.

I think about Ana frequently. I've imagined many futures for her. In my favorite, most self-indulgent fantasy, she's a leader in her field, a mathematician, say. She's invited to give an assembly at Elliot Academy, and when she stands on the stage before the dean and the rest of the Elliot community, she gives them hell.

What I really hope is that Ana is happy. I hope she went to college and found other mentors who did right by her, that she's doing a job she loves and that challenges her. The chances are good. The Ana I met that summer was smart and driven, and there are a lot of good teachers out there ready to encourage talented students to fulfill their promise. Someone, after all, told her about Elliot Academy. And Ana, who was, no doubt, already well aware that the deck was stacked against her, nevertheless found that application and filled it out.