

## **I Have Been the Good Immigrant, Now What?**



*Doing away with a single story*

My sister, Vale(entina), and I sit by our Christmas tree while weaving through old photographs, diplomas, certificates, awards, medals, and trophies from the past 20 years of her life. She has recently dyed red hair (against our parents' wishes) and insists on playing Spanish trap instead of Christmas music (against my requests). We remind ourselves of memories, both good and bad, of our schooling years and lives as a whole. We tear up at some points and burst into laughter at others. She never fails to make me laugh (don't tell her I said that). Our laughs simmer down and she tells me:

***"I read my [Yale] admissions file last year and regretted it."***

***"Why?"***

***"I realized I gave them exactly what they wanted. I gave them the "good immigrant." It was my authentic truth though, and I think that's the saddest part about it. I was kinda mad, really. I thought, 'what has my life really been?'"***

This started what became a five hour conversation delving into Vale's life story that has followed the "good immigrant" narrative. This conversation along with a heated discussion I witnessed in a dorm at Yale, a tweet about DACA recipients, and an amazing article referred to me by my professor Helen Beyta Rubinstein, "The Ungrateful Refugee: 'We Have No Debt to Repay'" by Dina Nayeri, aligned in my head to make me wonder: what to make of the "good immigrant" narrative that made my sister's life beholden to a single story?

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Vale started kindergarten at the Bicultural Bilingual School at E 109th Street—a public school. The fact that a six year old needed to show an ID to enter the school, that police officers patrolled the area everyday and that fights were a daily occurrence created an unsettling first impression of U.S. public education for our parents—the impression that that wasn't the best Vale could strive for, an impression that stuck. They turned to Catholic school instead.

And that's where it started for her. By that I mean, that is when she began her life trajectory of striving for "the best," striving for "success" because that was her duty, whatever that means. Every speech contest, every spelling bee, every science fair—she was there. She strove for the best. She did her best. She got the best. None of it ever made her *feel* good, but she knew it *was* good—more like

necessary. Her only way out of whatever it is she feared to become. Her only way to prove her parents' sacrifices worthwhile. Where did this come from?

Excelling in school for Vale also meant taking ESL ("English As a Second Language") classes until the 5th grade even though she had perfected English by 3rd grade and probably had higher grammar and reading skills than many of her American born classmates. She was taken out of regular class time to learn "extra" English with the implicit expectation that she was to exceed the speaking and writing abilities of the typical kid her age to be considered just as good. Because "*that hurted me*"—an honest, colloquial grammatical error—prompted a different response coming out of the immigrant child's mouth than that of another.

No but get this, besides taking ESL classes past required years, our mother would also buy her books in English and read them with her. So they could practice their English together. She spent every hour not spent mopping the floors of the apartment building we lived in (a condition for having reduced rent), cooking, or mopping her own floors, to ensure her daughter's English was practiced and perfected.

She recalls the first time she explicitly established herself as *one of the good ones*. It was in fifth grade and her class was having a discussion about illegal immigrants and how they are "bad." One of her friends turned around and asked her:

***"You're legal, right?"***

***"Yes."***

This was fully a lie, as she would not obtain legal status for another four years. Yet, she was taken aback by an unexpected question from a friend and, in that moment, felt compelled to say what she wanted to hear.

Then high school came around. After being admitted on a full merit scholarship and being ranked #1 in her class, she was introduced to the world of the *Ivy League*. Though she genuinely doubted her chances of getting into such schools, she was advised to list at least a couple on her Common App because they were the best and that was what she must strive for. Her guidance counselor, trying to alleviate her concerns and doubts, told her:

***"They'll like your story"***

**“My story?”**

**“Yes, they’re suckers for those kind of stories, you know, the success stories. Your parents focusing on your education, getting your residency three years after a deportation notice...”**

**“Oh. Right.”**

Vale made sure to apply to Columbia because that was the only Ivy our father recognized. He would frequently pass by the school when making deliveries downtown. After hearing a few coworkers talking about how it’s “one of the best,” he came home that day to tell his daughter:

***Deberías ir allí. (You should go there.)***

***Papi, that’s not how that works, you need to submit an application and it’s really hard and competitive.***

***Sí, sí, entonces solo trabaja duro y te aceptaran, verdad? (Yes, yes then you just work hard and they’ll accept you, right?)***

***Sí, papi. (Yes, dad.)***

She was not accepted into Columbia. But she *was* accepted at Yale, and a car ride explanation to her father of what Yale was—and how it was *the best*—made it all better. And here she is now. When she entered this unfamiliar elite space that is Yale, the mentality that had guided her entire life followed her. And now it seemed to have even higher stakes. She had gotten this far, how can she back down now? Of course, she found herself surrounded by people with a similar mentality. This mentality of “being the best” and “not giving up.” However, the difference for someone with an immigrant identity—the difference for her—is that the stakes felt higher. When your excellence has political and social implications, your options feel limited.

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**Then Vale read her admissions file.** She chose to do so for a paper on *how you got here* for the class *Education and Empire* early into her sophomore year. She recalls reading her personal statement back alongside commentary of the readers as shocking and hurtful. Her “story” read back to her as a subconscious profession of what a “good immigrant” she was—how she comes from a family of “good immigrants.” It read back to her as desperately trying prove something...to prove *I will be a good contribution to your school like I am a good contribution to this country.* She felt

compelled to express gratitude for her own struggle and that of her family's because it ended with her ultimate success.

This narrative of following the *rules*, always striving for the *best*, being *grateful* for the opportunity of being in this country and demonstrating that always, is what immigrants are praised and glamorized for. This is the *good* immigrant. This is the narrative immigrants are expected to uphold or else, they are subjected to *another* narrative—one that demeans them as criminals, lazy, unworthy, and greedy.

Such a single story that praises exceptionalism characterizes immigrants as debtors to this country. Like their existence and presence here somehow has to be repaid. Dina Nayeri explains it best in saying how immigrants' lists of accomplishments and contributions to this country take form as if that's the price of their existence and presence. Glamorizing immigrant "success stories"—the stories deemed successful by Western, white institutions, media outlets, politicians and fake woke white liberals—it places immense, crippling pressure on immigrants who believe this single story to be the only "right" story for them, the only acceptable path.

Yet, this narrow definition of immigrant success as exceptionalism also means that immigrants who are not able to or simply choose not to conform to this single story are left invalidated, as being seen less than. It also erases the reality of other, equally as valid, versions of immigrant success that don't necessarily follow the rubric of white American bigoted expectations and standards.

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Reading her file marked a radical transformation of Vale's mentality and being. It made her reckon with this harmful narrative about immigrants—about herself. This means not singularly defining immigrant success according to Western standards. This means spending the rest of college years focusing on an idea of success that makes her *happy*—a shocking choice she did not think she could have, but also a privilege to have in the first place. This means Vale's not going to law school (sorry to break it to you, Mami & Papi). This means recognizing that immigrant success can be simply surviving and getting through each day in a dangerous anti-immigrant climate. It can be living your life inside of a church because that's the only safe space for you. It can be working at an

Aeropostale store right out of college because you made really good friends there and that's enough for you. This means recognizing that many immigrants do not have opportunity to adhere to this "good immigrant" tale because of a lack of resources, legal conditions, financial struggles but also many others simply choose not to—and are just as valid, just as worthy of being in this country. There is no "good" immigrant. Just people who deserve to live life as they can and choose.

For Vale, this "radical transformation" also means to stop being grateful. I don't know how it came up, but a heated discussion inside the common room of a suite at Yale began with the question:

***"Are you grateful for Yale"***

***"No."***

***"You don't really mean that. How can you not be grateful?"***

Vale found herself trying to explain herself to a room of non-immigrants who were shocked and unsettled at her declaration. This room of non-immigrants felt entitled to an explanation of her statement that had complicated feelings attached to it that she herself did not fully understand yet or at least could not fully articulate it in words that would satisfy others' confusion or curiosity. That deeply bothered them. They could not fathom such a sentiment coming from someone who they presumed, of all people in the room, should have the most to be grateful for. They didn't get it and she supposed they never would.

They implied a desire for her to profess gratitude without understanding that she had previously devoted her life to nothing but being grateful. I assume Vale wanted to scream out something along the lines of:

***Saying you're grateful creates a sense of you owing something for your presence that is linked to a deeper, problematic pattern struggle that transcends the institution of Yale.***

***Saying you're grateful for an elite institution that glamorizes your immigrant struggle and hopes you get an ambitious job offer after graduation (because then their investment, them taking a chance on you, would have been worth it), saying you're grateful for a country that will call you an alien and call your community criminals while praising you for beating the odds, odds that here seem to be flaunted, no longer seems right or, at least, necessary.***

This discussion-debate reminded me again of Nayeri's article that I had read, ironically, a couple hours beforehand, and her discussion of "gratitude politics." She shows how affirming your

being the “ungrateful immigrant” or “ungrateful refugee” is in a way reversing the script of the “good immigrant narrative.” By not always maintaining a “grateful face,” by realizing, in the words of Nayeri, that a person’s life is never a *bad investment*, Vale’s newfound mentality can be linked to that of Nayeri. Like Nayeri, Vale now moves forth in the world knowing her worth and not measuring it with anything other than their happiness.

I’ll say, then, that Vale reading her admissions file was not all that bad after all, or at least not a regret anymore. Is the good immigrant narrative etched in her brain completely gone? No. Will she continue to work to do away with it for good, once and for all? Yes. I will too.