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When Honour Permeates Shame

Abstract

In “When Honour Permeates Shame,” Lily Voituret reflects on her experience as a first-generation scholar during a month-long academic exchange across Southern California. Through vivid moments in coastal cities, gardens, and cultural landmarks, she traces her evolving relationship with identity, belonging, and familial expectation. What begins as internal conflict, marked by shame and discomfort tied to her first-generation status, gradually transforms into a recognition of pride and honour. The essay captures the tension between inherited struggle and self-discovery, illustrating how community, education, and intergenerational resilience reframe the meaning of success.

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When Honour Permeates Shame

lily voituret



Reflections on my first-generation scholar
experience following a month abroad.

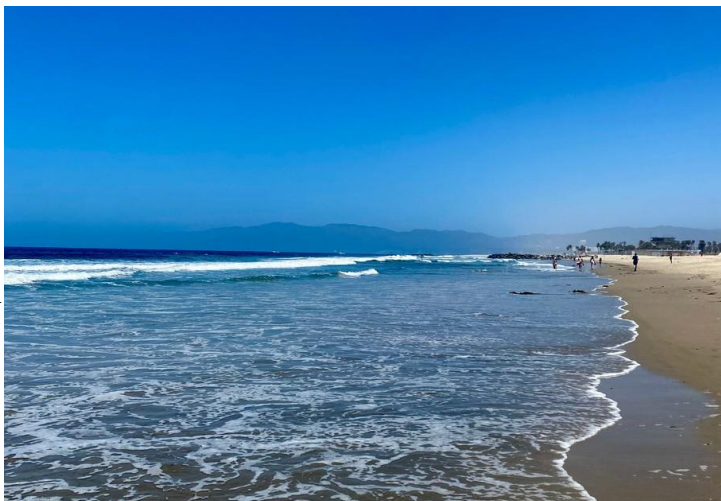
venice beach ... day two



I vividly recall standing in front of the Venice canals on day two and feeling such an overwhelming sense of unbelonging; as if I existed as an imposter within the group.

The question of identity has forever been a complex, nuanced battleground for me. Constantly fighting against ever-changing identity markers as they fluctuate and stray from the linear idea I had of my identity in my head has consistently caused a triggered reaction within me. My whole sense of being tenses up as I attempt to manipulate my brain into forced denial to neglect the concept of changing, and barricades begin to form inside my mind.

Exploring Venice Beach, I felt both a part of the group, feeling connected to everyone through our shared first-generation identity, yet also a sense that I was deeply disconnected from this unfamiliar environment I had found myself in.



Yet, dealing with the exterior reflections of new identities, and new perceptions from others that come along with this, was never the true issue for me; my identity markers have always been inside of me.

However, coming to the realisation that I truly belong to each category has always been where I've found myself struggling and retreating back into the encampments of comfort within my brain.

As the first week drew to a close, I felt myself begin to assimilate into the group, and come to terms with my newfound first-generation identity, for the first time since arrival. I become acutely aware of my place within the trip, and, as we watched the sun rapidly descend beneath the Hollywood Hills, I experienced an initial sense of pride within my identity.



long beach ... day seven



Therefore, when I initially heard the term ‘first-generation scholar’ upon beginning university, I automatically pushed aside the idea that I was one. Despite the fact that my grandparents, parents, and siblings had never reached higher education level, I decided I didn’t need any new identity markers. I didn’t need yet another label weighing me down and cementing me into a box of stereotypes I would have to either live up to, or spend my whole life working to defy.



Being a 'first-generation scholar' overcomplicated every identity marker I had already come to terms with. It threw a wrench in my familiarity of my pre-existing struggles, and destroyed the comfort I had found in previous pain.



Thus, I was so unaware of the drawbacks and disadvantages this unknown academic identity would provide me with, and just how much it would inconvenience my university experience.



I was so oblivious of my first-generation identity my entire life, with not having parents from higher education backgrounds being the norm amongst my peers growing up, and didn't stray from this until I came to university and realised it wasn't as common to have uneducated parents.



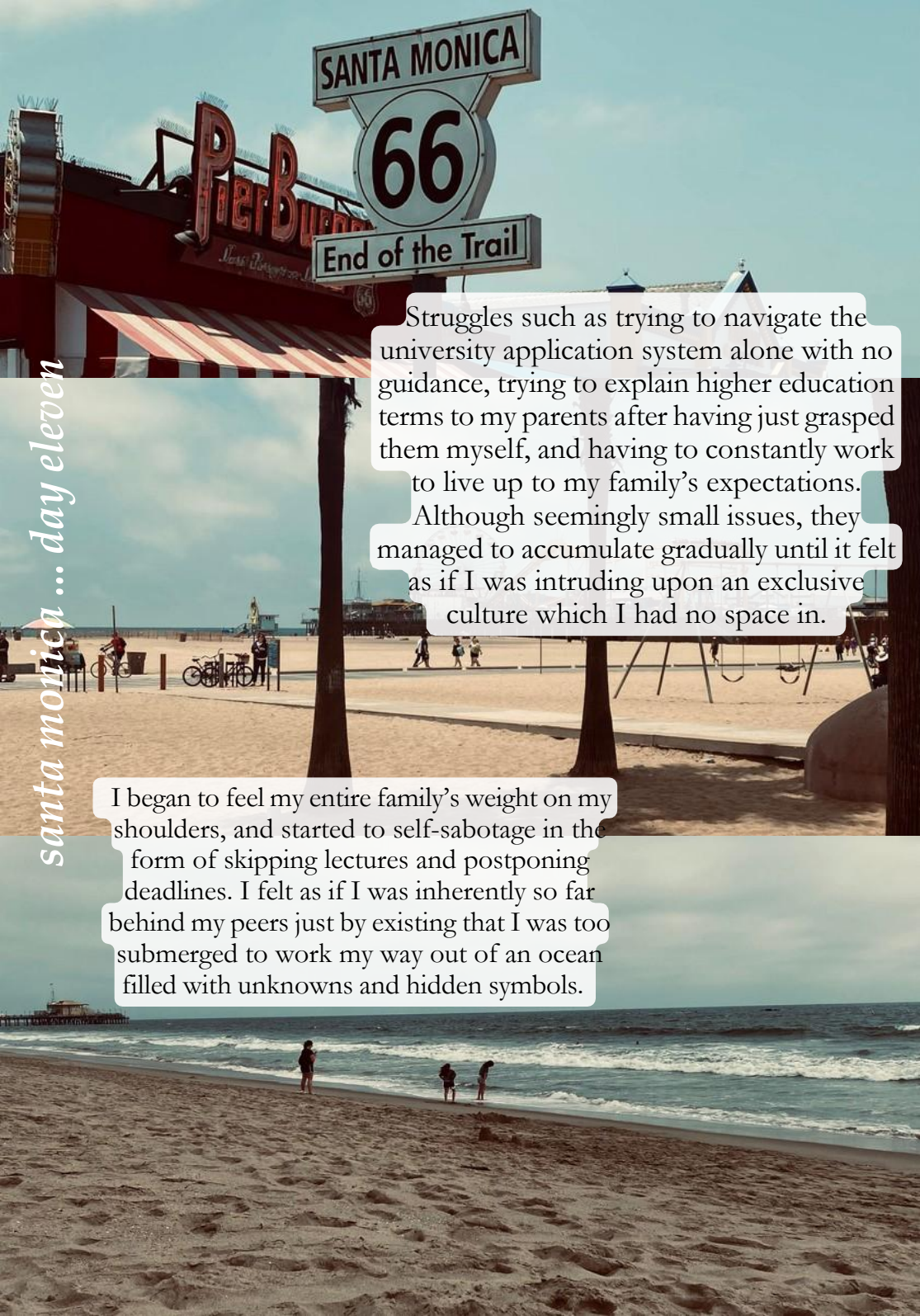
santa monica ... day eleven



Struggles such as trying to navigate the university application system alone with no guidance, trying to explain higher education terms to my parents after having just grasped them myself, and having to constantly work to live up to my family's expectations.

Although seemingly small issues, they managed to accumulate gradually until it felt as if I was intruding upon an exclusive culture which I had no space in.

I began to feel my entire family's weight on my shoulders, and started to self-sabotage in the form of skipping lectures and postponing deadlines. I felt as if I was inherently so far behind my peers just by existing that I was too submerged to work my way out of an ocean filled with unknowns and hidden symbols.



So much of my identity as a first-generation student is shaped and sculpted through my family, and their individual experiences with education.

Therefore, being the very first in my immediate family to go to university has added an immense, almost suffocating, type of pressure onto my studies. In lower levels of education, I largely felt like I was striving for academic success for myself and my own sense of pride, whereas now I can't help but strive for success for my family and the reward of their pride in me.



At times, being a first-generation student has caused me to feel almost paraded around and elevated on a pedestal that I find impossible to live up to without fabricating my university experience; my everyday struggles and hardships wouldn't fit into the romanticised, perfection-based narrative of university I've fed them.

santa fe dam ... day fourteen



Upon reflection, Santa Fe Dam was my favourite, most cherishable day on the trip. It marked a halfway point within our month away, and the serenity of the environment led me to unintentionally meditate on everything I had experienced in America thus far.

Swimming in the lake with everyone on the trip, I came to realise just how much we had in common, and the extent to which our shared first-generation identity truly linked us together. Laying on the white sand after our time in the lake, I felt the familiar sense of duty to my family creep up on me and settle within my mind, unable to free myself from the constraints of familial love entangled with generational obligation.

little tokyo + chinatown ... day fifteen

It wasn't until I heard about this exchange trip that I finally started re-wiring my mind to potentially see the positives that can come out of being a first-generation student.

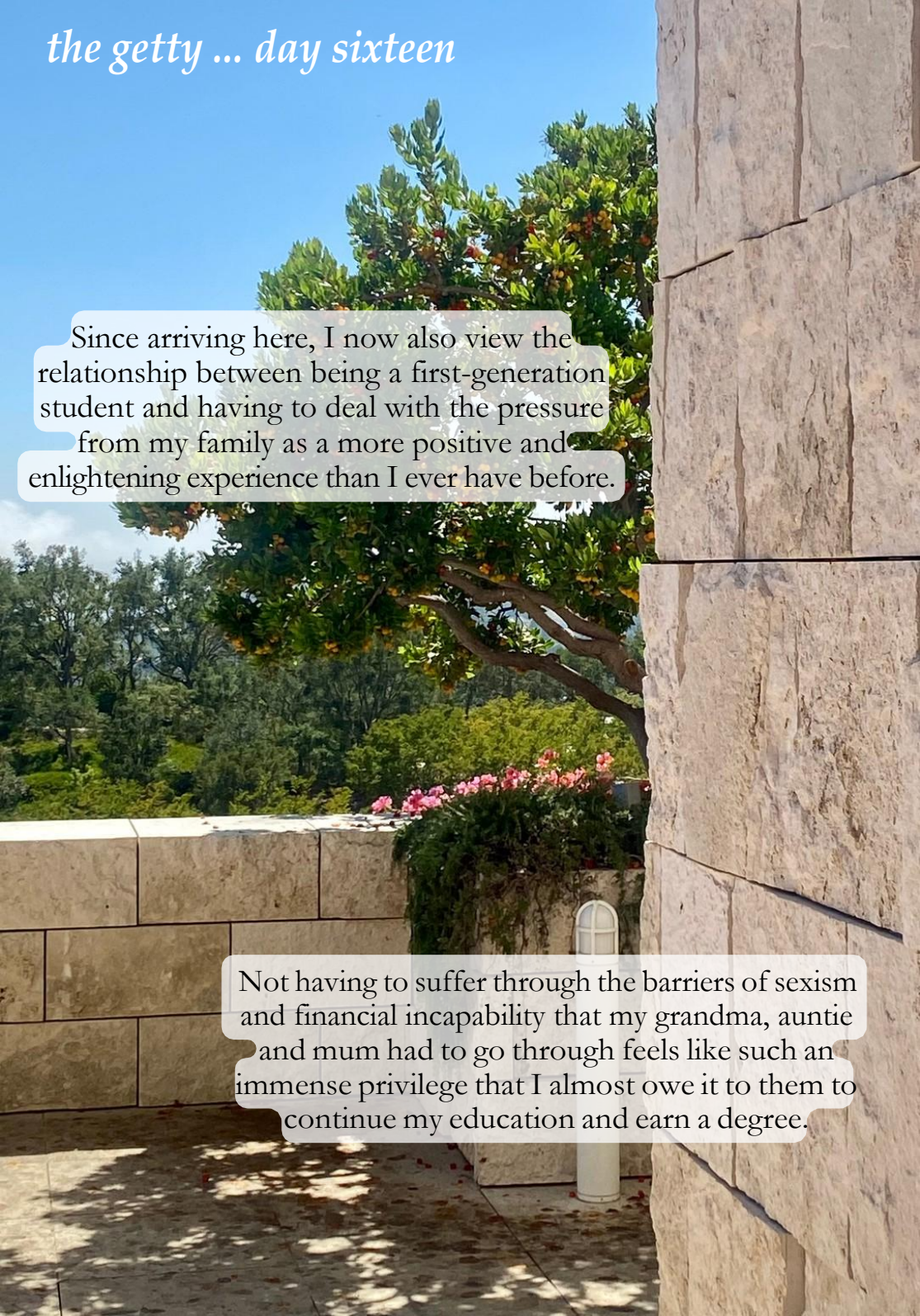


The sense of community I've felt being surrounded by people from the same educational background as me has been astounding...

Having the privilege of listening to everyone's individual stories whilst getting to explore a new environment and culture has been an experience I no doubt would not have had access to without my first-generation identity.



the getty ... day sixteen

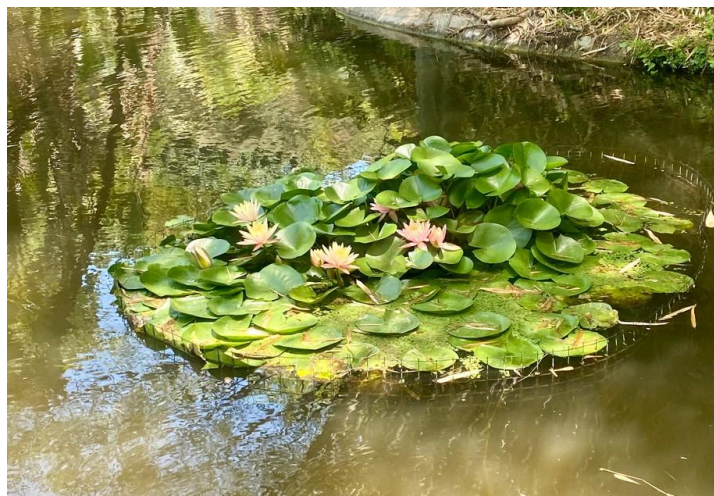
A photograph of a stone wall and a tree with pink flowers. The wall is made of large, light-colored stone blocks. A tree with green leaves and small pink flowers is in the foreground. The background shows a clear blue sky and more trees.

Since arriving here, I now also view the relationship between being a first-generation student and having to deal with the pressure from my family as a more positive and enlightening experience than I ever have before.

Not having to suffer through the barriers of sexism and financial incapability that my grandma, auntie and mum had to go through feels like such an immense privilege that I almost owe it to them to continue my education and earn a degree.



The foundations of my first-generation identity and experience, I believe, were subconsciously shaped through my grandma, and everything she's ever taught me. Despite only attaining a basic level of education, she has retrospectively taught me more about education, academia, and myself than any teacher, professor or therapist ever has thus far. I carry so much of her within me; her struggles, her interests and passions, and her insistent attitude to life and her general desire to be happy despite all external barriers.



Evidently, I strive to achieve academic success for the educations my family never got the privilege of experiencing. I now understand that, whilst there is pressure and a sense of duty that comes along with being a first-generation student, I am simultaneously so very lucky to have the opportunity to make my family proud.

laguna beach ... day twenty-six

On our last beach day of the trip, I recall sitting by the gentle waves of California and reflecting upon everything I had experienced during the month. I let the waves crash onto shore and retreat back out as I felt a surge of pride arrive in my heart. I finally let all barricades and manacles in my mind unclasp, and, just as the tranquility of the water met the shore with a quiet aggression, I allowed my honour and pride as a first-generation scholar meet my previous discontent and shame concerning the label. After years and years of pent up anger, conflict and embarrassment, I finally let my honour permeate the shame.





Thus, over this month more than ever before, I have slowly begun to appreciate my academic identity, and view it through a lens of pride and honour rather than shame and embarrassment. I've experienced such a magnitude of joy since being here that it's difficult to think back to a time where my first-generation experience was consumed by nothing but struggle and self-hatred.

Ultimately, this newfound euphoria would not have had the ability to feel as rewarding as it does without the years of struggle and feelings of disdain towards my identity.

