Stolen Toilet Paper

Danielle Schaf

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Stolen Toilet Paper

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at Syracuse University

Danielle Schaf

Candidate for Bachelor of Degree of Arts and Renée Crown University Honors Spring 2019

Honors Capstone Project in Writing Studies, Rhetoric, and Composition

Capstone Project Advisor: _______________________
Dr. Tony Scott, Associate Professor

Honors Director: _______________________
Dr. Danielle Smith, Director
Abstract

*Stolen Toilet Paper* is an argumentative creative nonfiction piece, that illuminates and illustrates an invisible narrative on this campus: that of being a low-income, first-generation college student. This thesis is composed of three vignettes—*The Bridge to Academia, Falling between the Ivy,* and *Three Naked Mattresses*—that articulate struggles that low-income, first-generation undergraduates encounter. *The Bridge to Academia,* exhibits the literacy needed to successfully navigate the terrain of academia. *Falling Between the Ivy,* highlights the stress of providing for one’s family, the lack of institutional support and resources for low-income students’ needs, and the impact that class has on academic performance. *Three Naked Mattresses,* demonstrates the massive guilt of leaving one’s family in order to receive an education, and large sacrifices that low-income students must make to receive a degree.
Executive Summary

Since my sophomore year of college, I have stolen rolls and rolls of toilet paper. But since then these stolen rolls, and in my opinion small acts of defiance against this institution, have come to represent something much larger than just convenience. The paper that I would stuff in my book bag represented, at the core, a low-income student struggling to have their basic needs met at this institution.

Therefore, this thesis, *Stolen Toilet Paper*, is an argumentative creative nonfiction piece that illuminates and illustrates an invisible narrative on this campus: that of being a low-income, first-generation college student.

Though, I have been working on this project throughout my junior and senior years, it has been my lived experience these last four years. It was during my sophomore year, right around the time I started stealing toilet paper, when I started to recognize the weight of my socioeconomic identity. I realized this while I was working 4 jobs and also being a full-time student. I learned very quickly that my grades were slipping because I was working 20+hours a week, and didn’t have the time needed to study. And it took me time to learn that my poor academic performance, or what I viewed as my poor academic performance, wasn’t a reflection of me being lazy and not working hard—which can easily be perceived as such in the classroom. Instead it was really a reflection of my socioeconomic identity.
And it was difficult coming to that conclusion, because I thought that the reason why I was struggling was because my circumstances were unique. My mother is disabled and a single-parent, and I helped to financially support her. And though that is unique, I think we have to admit that whether it be indirectly or directly, class (SES) and first-generation college student identities, can (and often do) have an impact on one’s academic performance and career. Which is due to academia, especially at elite institutions like SU, being traditionally made for white, upper-middle class students.

Not first-generation, low-income students.

This is the reason why I wrote “Stolen Toilet Paper”—to illuminate not only this invisible narrative but also to illustrate the unique and very real struggles that first-generation, low-income students face throughout their four years. I wrote three different vignettes—The Bridge to Academia, Falling Between the Ivy, and Three Naked Mattresses—that encompasses those experiences that have left me feeling utterly small, experiences that are too difficult to engage in meaningful conversations about, too taboo to speak about in a classroom setting, and too often neglected in diversity and inclusion dialogs. Of those three vignettes, I wrote one that takes place the summer before I attended Syracuse and the difficulty I faced before my first fall semester. My other two vignettes take place during my time at Syracuse: one during my sophomore year and one during the summer following my sophomore year, which highlight specific instances of stress, struggle, and marginalization.
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Advice to Future Honors Students

To future Honors students: find the community in Honors that is waiting for you. Pick a thesis topic that you are proud of, and that you want to be married to for your two upperclassmen years. Find friends who will hold you accountable on your writing, while you hold them accountable for theirs. Create a group chat with other Honors seniors as you embark on your thesis writing to provide support to one another and occasionally send a funny meme. Take care of your mental health, and don’t be ashamed if it affects your writing. Know that your thesis may change or take many different forms from what you imagined—that’s okay. Learn about the other amazing research and projects that are being done—you’ll be blown away by your peers. Pet Butters when you need a pick-me-up. Communicate early to your faculty advisor and Honors advisor if you have an issue with your research or thesis. Talk to Karen Hall, she will always be there to support you and provide resources if you are struggling with your thesis. And don’t be afraid to let your thesis become a part of you and you a part of your thesis.
Chapter 1:

Introduction

Since my sophomore year of college, I have stolen rolls and rolls of toilet paper.

There have been rolls lying out around campus in: Bowne Hall, Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF), Life Sciences Complex, and Peck Hall. I started stealing rolls of toilet paper when I was an RA, originally because I had forgotten the toilet paper supply in my room was low and didn’t have time nor the ease of access to replenish it. And one night while I was up at an ungodly hour completing work in Bowne Hall, I discovered that if you stayed late enough the custodial staff will eventually clean the bathrooms and leave out any excess toilet paper.

Hence started my thievery.

But since then these stolen rolls, and in my opinion small acts of defiance against this institution, have come to represent something much larger than just convenience. The centric paper that I would stuff in my book bag was, at the core, a low-income student struggling to have their basic needs met at this institution.

Therefore, this thesis, Stolen Toilet Paper, is an argumentative creative nonfiction piece, that illuminates and illustrates an invisible narrative on this campus: that of being a low-income, first-generation college student.

Though, I have been working on this project throughout my junior and senior years, it has been my lived experience these last four years. It was during my sophomore year, right around the
time I started stealing toilet paper, when I started to recognize the weight of my socioeconomic identity. I realized this while I was working four jobs and also being a full-time student. I learned very quickly that my grades were slipping because I was working 20+ hours a week, and didn’t have the time needed to study. And it took me time to learn that my poor academic performance, or what I viewed as my poor academic performance, wasn’t a reflection of me being lazy and not working hard—which can easily be perceived as such in the classroom. Instead it was really a reflection of my socioeconomic identity.

And it was difficult coming to that conclusion, because I thought that the reason why I was struggling was because my circumstances were unique. My mother is disabled and a single-parent, and I helped to financially support her. And though that is unique, I think we have to admit that whether it be indirectly or directly, class (SES) and first-generation college student identities, can (and often do) have an impact on one’s academic performance and career. Which is due to academia, especially at elite institutions like SU, being traditionally made for white, upper-middle class students.

Not first-generation, low-income students.

In the recently published, “The Privileged Poor: How Elite Colleges are Failing Disadvantaged Students,” Dr. Anthony Abraham Jack, an Assistant Professor of Education at Harvard University, performed research at an unnamed elite institution for two years, investigating the experiences of low-income, first-generation college students. Jack complicates the homogenous group that low-income undergraduates are often lumped into, by distinguishing students between the classifications of the “privileged poor” and the “doubly disadvantaged.” His research illuminates how and why the “privileged poor,” whose experiences at competitive private
schools have primed them for academic success, outperform their “doubly disadvantaged” peers, who have languished in underfunded public schools.

Jack prefaces the significance of his research, which is the corresponding significance of this thesis, by stating, “Higher education in America is highly unequal and disturbingly stratified” (Jack 2019). He notes that, “first-generation college students are disproportionately relegated to community colleges, for-profit colleges, and less-selective colleges… institutions [where] resources are few, aid for students is scarce, and retention is low” (Jack 2019). Further, according to a study by Anthony Carnevale and Jeff Strohl of the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, surveyed the most selective academic institutions from Princeton to Stanford from the years of 1982-2006 (Carnevale and Strohl 2010). This study determined that students from the bottom half of the country’s income distribution accounted for merely 14 percent of the aforementioned prestigious colleges’ student body (Carnevale and Strohl 2010).

Despite the thirteen-year separation between today and Carnevale and Strohl’s survey, new data has also shown the disparity of low-income students gaining access to academia compared to their rich counterparts. “Students from families in the top 1 percent—those with incomes of more than $630,000 a year—are 77 times more likely to attend an Ivy League school than are students from families that make $30,000 or less a year” (Chetty et al. 2017). Furthermore, Chetty and his colleagues found that the percentage of low-income students who attended any college at all—two-year or four-year—was the same percentage of students from the top 0.1 percent who attended _elite_ universities (Jack 2019).
It’s no secret that there is an income disparity among students in academia, especially at private, elite institutions like Syracuse University. The college admissions scandal revealed how money and power creates access to academia while simultaneously preventing accessibility to first-generation, low-income students. This scandal has brought to light not only the absurd illegal ways the rich have manipulated the process of gaining entry to education, but also the actions that are legal. There has been great ridicule of this schemery, because many of us know that the “proper” way for the rich to gain access to academic institutions is writing a large check made out to the appropriate university. This scandal has created necessary conversations about the true experiences of first-generation, low-income students and the ways in which academia perpetuates marginalization and oppression far beyond admission into the ivory towers.

And though the Daily Orange put out an article stating that SU was not involved in the college admissions scandal, that doesn’t mean this institution is innocent from being inaccessible to first-generation, low-income students. Above all of the statistics that exhibit the magnitude of this problem, this spans far beyond Syracuse’s $70,000 tuition and their financial aid disbursement. “Lower-income students may be entering elite colleges in greater numbers now than they did 50 years ago, but these campuses are still bastions of wealth, built on the customs, traditions, and policies that reflect the tastes and habits of the rich” (Jack 2019). Despite the financial aid, grants, and scholarships that an institution may provide to offset the total cost of attendance, students from lower income backgrounds face problems that are rarely recognized, and affect their ability to perform as a student. These issues range from not having the literacy to successfully navigate a classroom, advising, financial aid, and professorial mentorships; to balancing the responsibilities of part-time work and full-time study; to supporting one’s family;
to learning to live with the guilt of leaving one’s family; to not having adequate attire for professional events and interviews; to receiving hand-me-down snow boots and a winter coat in order to survive the winter climate; to stealing toilet paper.

This is the reason why I wrote “Stolen Toilet Paper”—to illuminate not only this invisible narrative but also to illustrate the unique and very real struggles that first-generation, low-income students face throughout their four years. I wrote three different vignettes—The Bridge to Academia, Falling Between the Ivy, and Three Naked Mattresses—that encompass those experiences that have left me feeling utterly small, experiences that are too difficult to engage in meaningful conversations about, too taboo to speak about in a classroom setting, and too often neglected in diversity and inclusion dialogs. Of those three vignettes, I wrote one that takes place the summer before I attended Syracuse and the difficulty I faced before my first fall semester. My other two vignettes take place during my time at Syracuse: one during my sophomore year and one during the summer following my sophomore year, which highlight specific instances of stress, struggle, and marginalization.

*The Bridge to Academia*

This first chapter takes place the summer following my high school graduation. This piece begins in June 2015 when I first received my bill for the fall semester. It illustrates the difficulty I faced coordinating my scholarships with the Office of Financial Aid, and learning the large chasm in my bill that would result from many of the scholarships’ conditions. It also serves to highlight the amount of literacy needed—that many low-income students do not have access
to—when attempting to enroll in classes, coordinate scholarships and pay one’s bill, and complete necessary forms all before the semester and one’s college career even starts.

_Falling Between the Ivy_

The second chapter of this thesis takes place during the spring 2017 of my sophomore year of college. At the time I was working four jobs—a lifeguard at SU and Upstate Medical University, a Main Desk Assistant, and an RA—in order to support my disabled mother at home, whose disability check was reduced from $70 to $40 a week. While working 20+ hours a week, I came to the realization of the significant effect my employment was having on my ability to perform as a student, causing me to fail my first ever exam. I then reached out to two professors for guidance, and found the lack of institutional support to help low-income students. Though I failed my exam and felt in many ways SU failed me, what didn’t fail was the work of two devoted professors, who dug in their own pockets to ensure my financial support. The purpose of this vignette is to exhibit the struggles that many first-generation, low-income students encounter while trying to support not only themselves but also their families while attending college, and how their class has a direct impact on their academic performance. Further, it also identifies the lack of systemic and institutional support and resources that low-income students are in need of to be successful at college, becoming a place where many students can fall between the ivy.

_Three Naked Mattresses_

For my final chapter, this takes place the summer after _Falling Between the Ivy_, a month prior to my departure to my Fulbright Summer Institute in Durham, England. Its purpose is to illuminate the unrecognized responsibilities that first-generation, low-income students carry with them
daily. These responsibilities impact not only them as people, and as students. For first-
generation, low-income students, it isn’t rare to carry the burden of supporting one’s family and
also the guilt associated with leaving one’s family to pursue a degree. *Three Naked Mattresses*
takes place at the end of my sophomore year and upon my return to Nebraska, where my mother
and I drive to my sister’s in Norfolk for my niece’s preschool concert. Here, I come to the stark
juxtaposition between my life on the hill and my life in the Great Plains.
Chapter 2:

The Bridge to Academia

“Amount Currently Due: $6539.50.”

I stared at the amount at the top of the bill; the number resting on the surface of my brain, not soaking in. I blinked three times to make sure I wasn’t misreading the number.

No, this can’t be right. I did the math and this isn’t right. How was I this far off? Oh my god. We can’t afford this. Where are we going to get the money to pay for this bill?

Mom, I think you should come look at this.” I said, motioning her to come look at my newly-purchased-by-graduation-money laptop screen.

My mom gazed at the screen just as I did. I watched her mind attempt to comprehend the four-digit number.

“I thought you said we wouldn’t owe anything?” She asked after taking a deep sigh.
“We shouldn’t! My scholarships should cover the cost!” I raised my voice out of frustration.

I went to the living room and grabbed my scholarship packet, a manila envelope that I received at graduation providing me with the information needed to gain access to the funds. On the front of the packet, it listed the names of the 13 scholarships I received. Shelby-Rising City Public School (SRC) National Honor Society. Shelby Lumber. NAIFA Nebraskaland. Olympic Spirit. CRC Activities. Polk County Foundation. Blue Valley Community Action Partnership. Shelby Scholars. Order of the Eastern Star. Shelby American Legion. SRC Student Council. Hagan Foundation. Access College Early (ACE).Thirteen scholarships out of the 32 I applied for. It’s funny how months of Saturdays and Sundays; 4:00am weekday mornings; second, third, and eighth periods; and away game bus rides; condensed into this 9” x 12” envelope.

I started to pull out the materials for each scholarship, and spread them out across the floor. I ran the numbers again, compared it to my financial aid report, and then contrasted that to my current bill.

I don’t understand. This doesn’t add up. Why are the numbers so different?

And then I noticed on the second page of the bill that detailed each expense, my scholarships weren’t listed.

Well where the hell are my scholarships? I thought that they would reach out to my school? This is so freaking stupid.
“Mom, look! This bill doesn’t list any of the scholarships that I have.” I said, pointing to the spreadsheet on my laptop.

“Why’s that?”

“I don’t know, but I’m going to call the office and find out.” I said, as I pulled up the financial aid website on my computer.

I dialed the number listed on the bottom of the screen, and was left on hold for 20 minutes. The representative that I spoke to told me that they had not received any information from my scholarships. I was concerned that since it was so early in the summer, they wouldn’t be able to disburse the funds until August. He informed me that in order to have those amounts appear in my student account either a check has to be received or documentation explicitly stating the amount of the award and signed by the disbursing scholarship official has to be submitted to the office. I understood the procedure and told the financial aid representative that I will be in contact with my scholarship officials.

“Well, how did that go?” My mom asked as I walked back to the living room and the scholarship-covered carpet.

“It went okay. I have to contact all of my scholarships and ask them to send their payment early or have in writing the specific amount of the award to send to financial aid.”
One by one I went through the piles of pages; I sent emails and called each respective advisor or official. But I learned that amount that was supposed to cover fall semester’s bill rapidly decreased. I learned that my scholarships would be split in half to cover both semesters not just the fall. I discovered that some of my awards were only applicable after the completion of my first semester. I found out that some of the scholarships only covered books and not tuition, and some were just checks written out to me, not the university. And I came to the realization that my largest scholarship, the one worth up to $5000 per semester, would not provide funds until November and couldn’t provide me with a written statement because I had to complete paperwork in September that determine the amount I would receive.

This can’t be happening? What am I going to do?

Maybe I can’t afford to go to Syracuse.

All of a sudden, the road of applying to college without assistance, submitting applications after applications for scholarships, deciphering the FAFSA and CSS Profile—navigating terrain that nobody in my family had done before—seemed to narrow.

Costs continued to add up throughout the next week. Health insurance was a $2000 charge, because my Nebraska Medicaid would only be viable for emergency room visits in the state of New York. My financial aid decreased because I didn’t understand that in my package some amounts were government loans, not grants.
The bridge to academia that my scholarships were supposed to create, seemed to transform into a
gaping chasm.

I didn’t know how to take out a loan. All I knew was that my mom and sister couldn’t sign for it
because of their terrible credit from past and on-going debt. So I decided early in my scholarship
application cycle, that I would have to receive enough to cover the cost of attendance. I had to do
this for two reasons: 1) I was all too familiar with the crippling effects of debt, and it absolutely
terrified me—I wanted to stay far away from money lenders; and 2) I had no one to sign for any
potential loans.

It was too late to apply for any scholarships, so I kept calling the office of financial aid, hoping
they could give me more money or a solution. And after each unsuccessful call, doubt started to
grow about my ability to attend SU.

I sat at the rickety, wooden computer chair in our kitchen staring at our HP desktop screen that
had my financial account on MySlice on display. And as I stared at the numbers, hoping for a
financial miracle, I thought back to the day I was first accepted into Syracuse:

--- --- --- ---

The overcast sun shone through my bedroom curtains. I forced my eyes open, examining the
minute details around my room. My wooden desk that had my book bag spread across it. My
gold gym bag on the ground with my track uniform hanging out of it. My TV that continue to
replay the DVD Main Menu for “Bridge to Terabithia.” My three comforters that fell to the floor in the middle of the night. And my basketball laying on top of my bookshelf.

After making sense of my Saturday morning, I grabbed my TV remote to turn off the repetitive symphony of Katherine Paterson’s adaptation. I then stretched in my bed and rolled over, thinking I could get a few more minutes of shuteye until I heard my phone ding. It was a text from my older sister, Tina, asking how my track meet went yesterday.

But there were two emails below her message.

From “SU FIN AID."

They were from Syracuse University.

THEY WERE FROM SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY.

I immediately threw my feet to the floor and sprinted upstairs in my oversized t-shirt and basketball shorts. As I tripped up the carpeted stairs I screamed, “MOM! MOM! MOOOOMMMM!”

“What? What’s wrong!?” My mom responds startled and panicked.

“I GOT AN EMAIL FROM SYRACUSE!!! It’s here, Mom. This is it.”
So we grabbed the folding step ladder and wooden stool and pulled them up to our kitchen counter and sat. We both stared at each other, our eyes capturing and communicating more than our mouths were able to move. Time seemed to stop in that moment. We just sat there, living in the state of in between—oblivion. We didn’t know if we had the heart to open it. It’s funny that it had been four long months of not knowing, and when it came down to finally knowing, we hesitated. Because it seemed as if my entire future were in those two emails.

We exchanged silent nods, letting each other know we were ready.

I opened the Gmail app on my phone. Clicked on the unread messages.

I couldn’t seem to process what the email meant. The first email congratulated me on my selection as a Syracuse University Dean’s Scholarship. The second email notified me that my Financial Aid award is now available for viewing on Myslice.

Why did I receive a Dean’s Scholarship? Do they give out financial aid packages to people who aren’t accepted? No, right? That means I’m in, yes? Please be yes.

I immediately went to Myslice, and clicked on the tab I had repeated refreshed for the last 120 days. This time it finally revealed an answer.

“Mom?”
“Danielle?”

“WE DID IT! I GOT IN!!”

We both held each other and cried. This was it. Everything that I worked for the last four years. A door finally opening. Something good, that came out of all that happened junior year.

We did this.

---- ---- ---- ----

My mom walking back to the kitchen, snapped me back from my memory. I missed that joy and excitement of finally achieving my dream school. Well… so I thought. And I laughed at how I thought it was fitting that I received a financial aid email before my official acceptance letter into Syracuse. I now understood the power of the financial aid office holds, not the office of admissions, when determining whether a student can attend SU.

The $6539.50 bill was due July 24th. Though I had added the scholarships that I could to my student account, my mother and I avoided the problem for weeks. I continued to work 50 hours, and did my best to keep up with all other paperwork and forms I needed to submit. I went and got my physical and faxed my immunization records. I had always gotten physicals each summer for high school sports, but I thought it was ridiculous that I had to take off work to go in and have one completed for college—a place I wasn’t playing a sport at. At the appointment, I
realized though I associated a physical with playing sports, they serve a preventative measure and are good to have regularly.

I was also assigned a math placement test that I didn’t understand the concept of nor grasped the purpose of when I already completed 5 college credits of pre-calculus/trigonometry. It made me suspicious, but I completed it while sitting at our kitchen counter one evening after work. Because my school did not offer a calculus math class, I was afraid I wouldn’t be able to be placed in that required math course for my Forensic Science major that the student working the Forensic Science table mentioned when I visited Syracuse. *What if I couldn’t major in Forensic Science?* My results showed that I could be placed in MAT 194, MAT 221, and MAT 285. The mixture of three letters and three numbers, were foreign to me, a completely different language. So I called the College of Arts and Sciences advising office, to inquire about seeing if I could be placed in that required math class for forensics.

“Hi, this is Danielle Schaf, and I am calling about my Math placement exam.”

“Hi Danielle. This is Jacqueline, could you please provide me with your SUID number?”

“Umm… yes. Let me look through my email really quick and find it.” I said, attempting to log into my Outlook inbox as quickly as possible.

“You’re supposed to have your SUID number ready when you call the Advising office.” She said annoyed with my lack of readiness of those 9 digits.
“I’m sorry. I didn’t know. I have it right here in my inbox.”

“Can you just spell your last name for me, Danielle?”

“Yeah, it’s Schaf. S-C-H-A-F.” I spelled the letters as I just pulled up my SUID number. I wrote the nine digits down as she pulled up my information, to not encounter this problem again.

“It looks like the results to your placement exam has placed you in 194, 221, and 285.”

“I know. I am calling to ask if one of those three classes is the math class required for the forensic science major?”

“Yes, 221 is that required course.”

“Okay, could you enroll me in that then?” Asking, not knowing how the enrollment process works.

“Your classes have already been chosen for you by me, your advisor, based on your major.”

“Oh okay. And those classes are for forensic science?” I asked, not realizing I had my classes already picked out for me.
“A few are. Others are counting for your core.” She spoke in a patronizing manner that assumed I should know this information.

“And what’s my core?” I asked, completely lost.

“Your liberal arts core.” She answered as if she didn’t have time for this conversation.

“Okay. That’s all. Thank you for your help.” I said, trying to quickly end the conversation and prevent any more annoyance.

“Okay. Have a good day.”

I had no idea what classes I was enrolled in, or how to check, or what a liberal arts was. A week later I received an email from Jacqueline, inquiring about what major I would pair with forensic science since it is an integrated learning major. Not knowing again what those three words meant, I mistakenly learned that Forensic Science was not a stand alone major and needed to be paired with something. I chose anthropology, but was worried that forensic science wouldn’t appear on my diploma. Jacqueline condescendingly informed me that majors do not appear on diplomas, and that the only thing that changed was the switch from a Bachelor’s of Science to a Bachelor’s of Arts. I didn’t know what that meant; all I was told was that a B.S. was worth more than a B.A.
As someone who graduated valedictorian, mere preparation to attend college made me feel stupid and incompetent. I didn’t know how to read my financial aid package. Couldn’t comprehend scholarships and their disbursement. Didn’t understand how to enroll in classes or the basic functions of a four-year degree.

I thought it was me. I thought I was stupid. And that I didn’t read a website or missed an email that was supposed to explain all of this.

After taking care of my health forms and enrollment, I finally addressed my financial situation. I was guided back to those loans in my financial aid package I fiercely avoided. I learned that I didn’t need someone to sign off on the Perkins Subsidized Loan, so I was able to use it as a substitute until my Hagan Scholarship would be disbursed at the end of fall and then I could cancel it. And the remainder of the bill I paid with my savings, my money I received from Social Security Disability, and my last five checks from my summer job. I was able to enroll in classes that fulfilled anthropology, forensic science, and liberal arts core requirements. Thanks to my Hagan Scholarship I was provided with a $1000 Amazon gift card to pay for college necessities that included my bedding, my school supplies, books, bookbag, printer, towels, and many other items that my mother and I couldn’t afford.

After fighting for my place to be at Syracuse, that chasm that seemed to separate me from my dream school, became a bridge once more.
I sat in my usual third chair in the last row closest to the windows. I came to class about eight minutes early because of my impatient anticipation. I violently bounced my right leg up and down, waiting for Professor Mohammed to arrive. I unzipped my bookbag and grabbed my FSC 440: Anatomy & Physiology binder. It was filled with loose-leaf notebook paper that only received attention from paper crumpling. I placed my green ten-cent notebook full of notes from each class’s PowerPoint in between two periodic tables and a gray Five-Star folder that was overflowing with printed-off lecture slides. There was no book for the class, so I printed off the lecture slides like I would for class readings.

I slid the syllabus out that was hidden between my cardiovascular and nervous systems notes. I studied the grading rubric, memorizing the intervals between each grade.

\[ A=94-100\%. \ A-=90-93\%. \ B+=87-89\%. \ B-=83-86\%. \ C+=77-79\%. \ C=73-76\%. \ C-=70-72\%. \ F=below \ 70\%. \] Anything below a 70% is failing? That seems a little harsh. But I’m just going to keep my fingers crossed for a B+. I didn’t feel great, but I didn’t feel terrible either after taking our first exam, so I’m hopeful for a B+. If I get a B+ on Exam 1, I have to get an A on Exam 2. They’re our only two grades. Fifty percent Exam 1 and 50% Exam 2. That’s it. For a once-a-week, three-hour Anatomy and Physiology class. So if I don’t get a B+, there’s no way I can get an A-. Dear God please, please help me.
Dr. Islam interrupted my syllabus studying and mediocre praying as he walked through the door in his predictable khakis pants, button-up, tie, and wool blazer. He placed his black leather briefcase on top of the computer system. His Upstate Medical University badge dangled from his left pant pocket. He didn’t hesitate to just jump on in it.

“I graded your exams. I will be showing you your results. The exam was out of 50 points. Your score will be listed under your SUID number.” His words were brief—his medical doctor vernacular.

Professor Islam clicked the mouse a few more times, and then pressed the screen display. We all sat there in silence as the screen warmed up, anxiously waiting for visibility. Then the numbers began to appear on the screen. My eyes frantically chased each number looking for my nine digits.


*Thirty-four out of 50.*

*Thirty-four out of 50?*

My brain read the numbers, but they didn’t translate. All of sudden I lost the ability to do a simple division problem. I just froze and stared blankly at the screen while other students
hurriedly pulled out their phones and typed in their score into their calculator app. I finally gathered the courage to type each digit after what seemed like the whole three-hour class period.

*Three-four divided by five-zero. Equals.*

.68.

.68? A sixty-fucking-eight? Oh fuck. No no no no no, this can’t be happening. This has to be a mistake. I can’t... anything below a 70... only two grades... what am I going to do? Shit! SHIT!

My eyes kept jerking from the screen to the syllabus, wanting to believe that there must have been a mistake. That this can’t be real.

But it was.

There were only 14 students in the class. I took each student’s grade and calculated the average. It was a 68. I was average. I deserved a C. But my eyes fell to the syllabus again: “**There will be no curve.**”

I sat there in shock, realizing that I would have to withdraw from the class or fail it. Tears welled up in my eyes, and remained there throughout the Nephrology lecture. It seemed ironic that we were learning about the kidney, yet I felt as if someone punched mine.
Around 6:30pm we took our short 10 minute break in class, and I drug my feet to the bathroom. I didn’t have to go, I just closed the stall door and sat there trying to make sense of what had happened. My gaze focused on the orange and dark gray sticker advertising support for sexual assault, abuse, and violence.

_How am I going to tell my mom? How am I ever going to be accepted into graduate school? My GPA is in ruins. What do I do? Who do I talk to about this? Where can I get help? What help can I even receive in this moment? I should have studied more than two and a half hours before the exam. Fuck. I should’ve dropped one my morning shifts at Sibley, or my shift at Upstate, or the main desk. Damnit. But I couldn’t while my mom’s weekly check was cut from $70 to $45. And I couldn’t make time to study while being an RA who had residents, programs, incidents, and a 2:00am curfew. I couldn’t while being a student enrolled in 16 credit hours. Jesus._

_How am I supposed to be a student while supporting my family?_

My thoughts were interrupted when I heard the bathroom door open. I didn’t know how long I sat there, but I knew I had to get back to class. I walked back. Sat in the same third desk in the last row; my physical self present, but every other part of myself elsewhere--lost in anxiety, fear, and regret. Each slide passed by without waiting for me, like the future opportunities that seemed to diminish in front of me.

It felt like everything I had worked for was taken away by this one exam grade, diminishing my 3.98.
In any other class I would have had other assignments, exams, participation, and maybe even the opportunity for extra credit. In any other class my 68 would have been a D+, not an F. But no, not this class. We only had two grades: Exam 1 and Exam 2. And we had a different grading scale. I should have studied more. But I didn’t think I could sacrifice any more sleep than the four hours I was getting.

I left the classroom hollow. Just a shell. Empty inside. I felt like I slept-walked back to my dorm room. Tears rolled down my face, as I tried to steady my breath, preventing hyperventilation. This can’t be real. This can’t be happening. But I still mindlessly pulled out my phone, opened my recent phone calls, and pressed the first name that appeared. The dial tone seemed more monotonous than it ever had before, but it cut abruptly.

“Mom?” I choked out in, tears falling harder.

“What’s wrong?”

“Mom… Mom…” I tried to utter between my tears and sporadic breathing.

“Danielle? What is the matter?” My mom raised her voice with panic.

“Oh my, Danielle.”

The silence hung in the air between us. My mom listened as I sobbed, not knowing what to do or say. She wanted to do something. I know she felt as if she needed to, but she was caught up in not understanding what my failure meant.

“So what do we do now?” My mom asked, wanting to know how to move forward.

“I don’t know. I don’t know. I don’t know, Mom. I don’t know if I can withdraw from the class, because that will be on my transcript.” Panic began rising from my stomach.

As my anxiety bubbled, I hung up the phone with my mom, telling her I needed to figure this out. That I was going to look online and talk to my friends what I could do. So I went downstairs to my friends’ dorm room. I didn’t text them or call, I just went. And had my approaching breakdown in their room.

I cried.

Paced back and forth.

Laid on the linoleum floor.

Rambled, not knowing if the words coming out of my mouth were making sense.
So Lily and Sophie just let me vent and purge my emotions and worries that began to overflow since I read that “34” on the screen in Anatomy. They didn’t say much. I don’t think they knew what to say. They had never seen me like this; I wasn’t normal “put together” Danielle. But once the tears and fears stopped raining, Lily spoke.

“You know, Danielle, Student Assistance has helped me these last few months since my mom’s passing. Maybe they could help with your situation?” Lily said, instilling in me hope, though little as it may be, that this could be fixed.

*Student Assistance? I remember learning about that office as a resource during RA training. I thought they were for students who were struggling in class due to a family death or emergency, or for students needing a medical leave of absence. I thought they were used to communicate to professors? Maybe they could help me? I know that I can’t solve this on my own.*

“Oh.. okay… could you give me their contact?”

“Yeah, of course. Tyrone has been working with me. Here is his email address. Just email him.” Lily spoke with a confidence I needed to hear.

“All right. What do I do when I email him? What should I say?” My anxiety speaking, not me.
“Well, just say something like, ‘Hi Tyrone. This is Danielle Schaf, one of Lily Klass’s friends, and I am experiencing a really difficult situation right now and need some help. Et cetera, et cetera.’ You know, something like that.”

“Oh okay. Thank you so much you guys. I’m sorry I barged in and forced my burden on the both of you.” I spoke, feeling terribly guilty of the last 56 minutes.

“Danielle. We. Are. Your. Friends. This is what we do for each other.” Sophie said with an honest compassion that minimized some of my guilt.

“And you know we are always here for you. Now go write that email to Tyrone, and if you need help or someone to be with you--let us know, okay?” Lily added.

“I will. I promise.”

So I went upstairs and began typing the email. The email was a short paragraph. Less than 100 words, but each word was excruciating to write. I knew I needed help, and I know that there was strength in admitting that, but I still felt ashamed for asking. I felt like all of this was my fault, and that if I only studied more for the exam everything wouldn’t feel so fragile right now. I hated how precarious my college career was because of that, because of my identities. How at any moment I would be called home, needed to take care of my mother, needed to help with my nieces and nephew, or needed to have another income. And I hated how with the limited opportunities I had this exam would shrink them even more.
But I began to type.

Hey Tyrone,
This is Danielle Schaf, Lily Klass's close friend, and she referred me to you. I am in a very delicate and unique circumstance, and it has been affecting my life as a student here at Syracuse. I don't know if there is any way you could help me, but I wanted to reach out and ask for assistance. May I set up an appointment to come and meet with you and discuss my circumstances and potential resources? If so, please let me know of a time that works best for you.

Thank you for your time,
Danielle

**Danielle R. Schaf**
Anthropology Major | Forensic Science ILM
Writing and Rhetoric Major
Renée Crown University Honors Program
Syracuse University Undergraduate | May 2019
Email: drschaf@syr.edu

I thought it was funny that I was an RA, used to referring students to resources on campus, but yet here I was not knowing where to turn for help. So the next day, I went to class and work, trying to hold everything together minute by minute. And then my last class of the day was Historical Bioarchaeology with Dr. Novak. This was my fourth class I had taken with Dr. Novak, and I really connected with her as a mentor. The class was three hours long, and it seemed to grow painstakingly slow. In Paleopathology that class we discussed spondylitis, the fusing of vertebrae. Then for the last hour of class we moved to the lab to work on our research project.

When the class ended, I walked back to the tables to grab my books, articles, notebooks, and pencil. I saw Dr. Novak come to the table, too, to grab her black coffee mug. And though I didn’t know what to say or why I thought I should, I stopped her.
“Um Dr. Novak, could I speak with you for a moment?”

“Yes, of course.”

So I told her. I told her while students were still packing up their things, leaving the classroom, within listening distance. I told her everything. First about failing my Anatomy & Physiology exam, then about how I was working three jobs to support my disabled mother. I remember telling her the bills that I paid for my mom. How much each bill was. How my mother’s disability check was reduced to an unlivable amount, which is why I had to work. How my sister is a single mother of three, and why she hasn’t been helping like I have. How I don’t sleep much at night. How I’m sorry that I have not been performing up to my standard in her class. Everything. I told her about all of it, and then looked at her with tears in my eyes.

“Dr. Novak, I don’t expect you to do anything. To be honest, I don’t know what you can do. I don’t know what help there is. I just wanted to tell you that this is what I have been experiencing.”

She told me that she can only imagine how difficult it must be. How she’s sorry that I’m in that position. That she comes from a working-class background, too, and can relate to some of the struggles I mentioned and the importance of work and income in a household as such. She asked if she could discuss this with Dr. Pellow, a professor I was also close with, and so they could work together to help find me a solution—I agreed. And lastly, she looked at me with emotion in her eyes.
“Thank you for telling me that, Danielle. I know it was hard for you to ask for help. And I just want you to know I am going to do everything in my power to help you.”

I walked home from Lyman, not knowing if I felt any better. Maybe I did because I finally told someone what I was going through? Maybe I didn’t because I doubted whether there was anything that could be done? But I went home. I called my mom to let her know that I told my anthropology professor. That I would try to stop by Dr. Pellow’s office tomorrow to discuss with her my circumstance. That Tyrone had emailed me back and we were meeting early next week--help that seemed too far away. I spoke defeatedly without hope. And before we said goodnight, my mom said something that revealed her doubt.

“I am worried about you… I… I just hope you make it through college.”

Her words shattered inside me, truly instilling fear. My mom was never the woman to question my ability to accomplish what was in front of me. But she couldn’t neglect the gravity of this situation, and how detrimental it was to my education.

The following day I met with Dr. Pellow. Dr. Novak had already informed her of the unique predicament I was in; however, I still narrated a condensed version to Dr. Pellow, wanting her to hear my own words. I informed her that I would be meeting with Student Assistance to try and find a solution through the Office of Financial Aid. And that I emailed Professor Islam, asking to meet to discuss the exam.
But we had to play the waiting game until Tuesday.

Tuesday: appointments with Student Assistance and Dr. Islam.

I first met with Tyrone from the Office of Student Assistance at 2:00pm. And just like I told Dr. Novak and Dr. Pellow, I spilled everything. The car accident, my mother’s traumatic brain injury and disability, my head of the household role, my 4 jobs, the failed exam. All of it. I wanted everything on the table, because I needed this to work. I was desperate for a solution. And though, I knew I have had meager help from Financial Aid, I thought that maybe Student Assistance would be better, would make my voice actually heard. And though I needed relief that day, I had to make another appointment so Tyrone could try to connect with the office.

I left with little reassurance.

This meeting was followed by Dr. Islam. We met in the hallway of the back entrance outside of our classroom in LSB where people passed by on their way to class. In our conversation, I tried my best to advocate for myself and articulate why I had received the grade I had. But my words were purposeless. He didn’t care. He told me for the next exam I needed to study more. That I need to hold myself responsible for my own actions. That this would not fly in medical school. As he finished, tears were rolling down my eyes. Tears that expressed fear and frustration. And before he walked away, he told me, “Just wait til class, we will discuss Exam 1 and Exam 2. Just wait til class.”
That class I tried my hardest to hide my red, puffy eyes, when he revealed to us that he was so concerned with the grade average, that he created a new equation to calculate our final grade in the class.

“Here’s what we will do, okay? Now pay attention to what I’m writing on the board. Here’s Exam 1, right? And here’s Exam 2. We are going to drop the lowest exam grade. Replace it with a 100%. And then average that with our highest exam grade. Do you guys get it?”

After Dr. Islam wrote our new equation on the board, everyone in our class stared at the chalk board with utter shock. No one made a noise until, a graduate student asked, “Is this for real?” And it was. I didn’t know if this solution was out of compassion or if it was originating from the fact that half of the class failed or if he recognized the difficulty of a 3-hour, once-a-week Anatomy and Physiology class that had no lab. I didn’t know, but I knew that this meant I didn’t have to withdraw from the class. And that maybe I could even still get an A.

So I found a solution to my FSC 440 issue. I wouldn’t have to drop the class, and I still had the potential to receive an A in the course. And though it should have felt like all was address, it wasn’t. I still didn’t have an answer as to how to resolve what caused this dilemma in the first place: my socioeconomic identity.
Dr. Pellow and Dr. Novak called me that night after my FSC 440 class. First, Dr. Pellow and then Dr. Novak. They wanted to know how my meeting with Dr. Islam went, and if I had to withdraw from the course. They had both communicated and proposed a solution.

“Danielle, we’re both going to give you money so you can quit two of your jobs.”

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Danielle —
I’m SO GLAD you talked to someone. Shannon and I were on the phone this morning. We are both prepared to lend you money — this is not charity! — to get you through. You just cannot be in school and work 4 jobs.

Let me know what happens with the guy. Brett was in this afternoon and apparently has the same problem. It’s moronic.

deborah

---

I didn’t like it.

I froze and hesitated.

I knew not to take money from anyone. My mother taught me so. So I told them no at first.

“I’m sorry, but I can’t accept your money. I think I will be fine if I quit one of my jobs; I won’t need your money.” I lied straight through my teeth, shame and guilt causing me to.

“Danielle. Don’t be ridiculous. You need this money. You can’t be a successful student and work four jobs. You just can’t. Let us help you.”

“I don’t know…”
They wouldn’t accept that as an answer because this was different. This was different than all those time before. This was to invest and serve me, while this institution was failing to do so.

This was a solution.

Well a temporary one.

So we met a few days later, where Dr. Pellow gave me the money. Four $100 bills. And though I had accepted their help, the instant I saw the money that acceptance started to waiver and my apprehension grew.

I started to back away. I was beginning to change my mind. But they wouldn’t take no for an answer.

“Danielle, this is what we do in Anthropology. We look out for one another. Do not think of this as a loan that you have to pay back. No. You just have to promise me to pay it forward.”

“I will.” Speaking, knowing that I will full well still pay back every cent, or at least try to.

“Also, yesterday I was in the College of Arts and Sciences speaking to a few Deans and Associate Deans. And I brought you up in conversation and talked about your circumstance, and asked if there was anything the college could do.”
I nodded my head, trying not to reveal my discomfort and fear of my personal story being shared beyond those who already knew.

“Dean Salomone first pulled your transcript and said, ‘Oh. Good student. But unfortunately, there’s nothing we can do here. Maybe try Hendricks Chapel.’ So I contacted Hendricks Chapel and they are also going to be giving you a $450 check from their Emergency Fund.”

I stared blankly back at Dr. Pellow, trying to fully understand the two sentences she just spoke.

“Okay? Now we won’t give you this money until you promise us you will quit two of your jobs.” Dr. Pellow said with her fierce confidence.

“I don’t know if I can quit two jobs, because I work three morning shifts at Sibley and I know they wouldn’t be able to find someone to cover those shifts. But I promise to quit my job at Upstate immediately.” I said with the words spewing out of my mouth.

“All right. Now, you need to go to fill out some paperwork with Ginny in the Dean’s Suite of Hendricks.”

I went to the Dean’s Suite and they turned me away. Despite what my professor had previously communicated with them, they told me, “This emergency fund is for rather immediate and temporary issues. And your circumstance seems rather chronic and ongoing.” It took another aggressive email and phone call from my professor before I received the check. The Office of
Financial Aid told Tyrone that there was nothing they could do, and suggested that I try a loan. The College of Arts and Sciences viewed my transcript first before determining their capacity to assist me as a student, and then provided no internal resource. Dr. Pellow and Dr. Novak, tenured faculty in the Maxwell School, didn’t advice me to seek support through Maxwell nor searched there themselves.

There was no system to support me.

No College of Arts and Sciences or Maxwell School support of resources. No help from Financial Aid or Student Assistance. Even Hendricks Chapel wasn’t a resource created to assist students in my circumstance. I don’t blame those institutions, though. They couldn’t provide me the support I needed because Syracuse, and other private, elite colleges aren’t very accessible nor are they made for low-income students. These universities may identify class as being a marginalized identity, but fail to recognize the ways in which poverty disadvantages low-income students far beyond what is revealed on their student financial account.

Because of that, I almost fell between the vines of our ivy.
Chapter 4:

Three Naked Mattresses

My mom woke me up 9:00am.

It was refreshing compared to the 6:00am mornings I was used to from finals week. I laid in bed for a few minutes, enjoying the collision of the sunlight shining through my basement window and the beams cast out from my basketball Scentsy. But before my mom could come back downstairs and yell at me for still laying in bed, I quickly hopped in the shower.

I spent ten minutes in the shower mostly trying to get all the conditioner out of my 28 inches of dirty blonde hair. Once I was done I grabbed my two large blue towels—one to twist up my hair with and one to wrap around my body—and walked to my room and sat down on my bed. Both of my closet doors were open as my eyes traced coat hanger after coat hanger for an outfit to wear.

*I could wear a tank top and jean shorts. No, this is Ali’s preschool concert; I have to dress nice. What about a dress? Would a dress be too much? Danielle, it’s a YMCA end-of-the-year sing along. But it’s the first concert I am able to go see of my niece’s. Okay. You know what, I’m going to do it. I’m going to be that aunt—a dress is.*
I stepped over my black Walmart suitcase that had clothes spilling out of it, a reminder of the recently finished semester, and grabbed my peach/khaki dress. I dug through my spilling clothes and found my only “real” bra I own.

I got dressed and brushed my hair. Once I was ready I snagged my mom’s brown three-year-old Sperry shoes to wear, and began walking up the brown carpeted steps. My mom met me at the top of the basement steps. She was ready and was about to walk down the stairs to tell me to hurry up (if there’s one thing my mom cannot stand is being late—well more accurately being late to being early).

My mom told me I looked nice. And as she looked at my outfit, she saw what were on my feet.

“Are those my shoes?”

“Awe, Mom, is that coffee for me?” I replied, entirely avoiding the question.

She gave me my coffee mug that held my favorite Keurig French Vanilla coffee and the pickup keys. As she went out the back door to the garage, I hurriedly picked my $450 check from Hendricks Chapel and my wallet off of the laminate kitchen counter.

I checked my dress pocket to make sure I had my cell phone before I locked up the back door. I got in the Dodge Dakota and opened the garage door, backed out and headed to the Pinnacle Bank.
Once we got to the bank’s drive thru, I put the truck in park and signed the back of my check using the middle console as support. I deposited the check into my savings account. I had the check since April. It was the reason I was able to quit my 6:30am lifeguarding job a few weeks ago. My professor was the one who connected me with the emergency fund at Hendricks Chapel after she couldn’t find financial support for me in the College of Arts and Sciences.

I put the check in my savings to be used for the fall semester when I didn’t have that extra income.

Well, at least I thought.

Once I got the receipt from the deposit, we drove away and were on our way to my sister’s. Tina lived in Norfolk, which was about an hour and 15 minute drive of fields of Nebraskan corn and soybeans mixed with alfalfa here and there. Mom and I didn’t talk much on our drive down, we normally don’t. We just let the Beach Boys “Sounds of Summer” CD fill the silence. We passed by small towns and some cattle feedlots, but it was mostly farmers sporadically finishing their planting that caught my eyes.

It was around 11:15am when we got into Norfolk. Ali’s concert was at 1:00pm, but Ali had to be there at 12:30pm, so we wanted to stop by the apartment for a little bit before (and of course Mom had to be early).
“Mom, do you think it would be okay if I stopped at Hy-vee before and bought Ali some flowers?”

“Why don’t we wait until after her concert, when we go pick up the groceries to make lunch?”

“Okay, fine.” I begrudgingly responded.

*But if I am wearing the dress to be that aunt, I need the flowers, too.*

So I continued on and drove past the grocery store, and turned into Tina’s apartment complex on Syracuse Ave (convenient that our homes were both Syracuse in a way). We parked next to her rundown, metallic gold Chrysler Town & Country. Tina’s father gave her the van, because her three children, and her two soon-to-be twin girls (to put it lightly) wouldn’t have fit in the previous 1996 Buick Roadmaster station wagon. Tina’s back left tire of the van was missing a hubcap, and her front windows were cracked open about a thumb’s length because of her broken air conditioner. The car was turned off, but I could still hear the roar and rumbling of her broken muffler. There were two car seats in the back, one for Jackson and one for Sammie. Ali outgrew her car seat so she sat squeezed next to the car seats and the window, buckled up like a big girl, until my sister could afford a new one.

My mom and I talked about what we would make for lunch, as we got out of the pickup and started walking on the sidewalk to the apartment.
“What are we going to have? I was thinking goulash, green beans, and cottage cheese.” I turned and asked my mom while stepping over the sidewalk chalk etchings.

“I think that will be fine.”

I opened the glass door, much like the one that belonged to our town’s doctor’s office that was only open on Tuesdays, for my mom and we walked down the blue-carpeted, cigarette-smelling six steps. I could hear the kids screaming and my sister yelling.

I didn’t think twice about it until we opened the door.

My sister was standing in the living room on the phone. Her hair was in a bun and was wearing a pair of oversized maroon basketball shorts and a white spaghetti-strap tank top full of stains that snuggled around her pregnant belly. You could see the grease in her hair, showing that she hadn’t showered for a couple of days. The living room had food ground into the stained carpet, the same blue carpet from the complex entrance.

Smashed Oreos here.

Mangled pieces of Burger King fries there.

Smushed off-brand Fruit Loops here.
And, what I think, was ground-in white bread there.

Tina stood with her bare feet in between rubbed in chocolate pudding and a spilled-over, partially-empty McDonald’s McFlurry cup. Her glasses hung slightly down her nose. My nieces and nephew were playing with toys that seemed to cover the rest of the living room floor that didn’t have food on it. I could smell the pungent, ever-present odor of cattle feed from Custom Feed where Tina’s ex-husband, Rob, worked. Rob, who was standing next to Tina in his worn cowboy boots, Levi jeans, and cut-off high school wrestling shirt, was yelling at her while she was yelling at Jackson, Sam, and Ali to be quiet.

Mom and I froze until Tina’s call ended, trying to understand what happened. Or was happening.

Once Tina got off the phone, she didn’t say anything. We all were waiting for her to fill us in on the heated call. My mom, being the protective woman that she is, spoke first.

“What’s going on? What happened?”

“Well, my electricity has been turned off!” Tina snapped.

“What do you mean? Did you pay the bill? How long has it been turned off?” I concernedly asked.
“Well I missed the last month’s payment and now May. And this morning, I found out they disconnected it. And I can’t afford it! So that’s why none of us are ready yet. And my landlord told me if I don’t get it reconnected by today, we are evicted.”

“Oh my.” Mom’s words stumbled out of her mouth.

“How much is it the bill?” I asked in part out of fear.

“That’s what I was just on the phone about.”

“Tina. How much is it?” Asking in way in which I didn’t want to know the answer.

“It’s going to be over $400.”

“What? That’s ridiculous! How is it $400 for a two-bedroom apartment? That doesn’t make sense!” I responded out of anger and frustration.

And before my sister could respond, Rob, who hadn’t spoken a word to my mother or I since we entered the apartment, just walked out. Without a word. And slammed the door behind him as if we weren’t having a critical conversation. But honestly his past behavior of walking in and out of his children’s lives, deciding to be a dad only when it was convenient to him, didn’t leave me taken aback.
My sister just blinked her eyes at the door, and then turned her head back to my mother and I, and said, “Last month’s bill was $89. May’s bill is $92. And since they disconnected the electricity, it is now a $225 fee to reconnect it.”

“So, what are we going to do?” My mom’s catchphrase for whenever we are in a really tight situation.

“I DON’T KNOW, MOM! I’LL FIGURE IT OUT!!”

“You don’t have enough money in your account to pay for the bill?” I asked already knowing the answer.

“No, Danielle, that’s why I’m kinda panicking right now!”

“Well you know I don’t have any money.” My mom blurted out, reminding us that her weekly $45 disability check doesn’t cover her groceries or gas, let alone an additional $400.

“I know that, Mom. I’m going to call my dad, and see if he can help.”

“And what about Rob? What is he doing about this? I can see he is staying here again based on the can of dip next to the lamp, his jeans on the laundry pile, and the cattle feed smell.” My mom asked, expecting more from the so-called father of her grandchildren.
“He’s going out to find work right now.” As she said the words, my mom scoffed.

“Well you call your dad, and see what he can do. And I will get the kids ready for the concert.” I said, bringing us all back to reality of the concert that we had to get Ali to in under an hour.

While Tina called, I brought the kids, who had gone silent by this point, back to their bedroom. It was only a few steps down a short hallway, but an overflowing volcano of dirty clothes stood in the way. I picked each of the kids up and lifted them over the pile, which they thought was one of Aunt Danielle’s fun games and tried coming back again for another turn, but I wasn’t amused like I normally would be. As I took a big stride over the pile, I saw the kitchen overflowing with dirty dishes. Dishes, pans, and cups sprawled across ever counter surface, including the stove. And next to the garbage can was a full trash bag with diapers piled on top.

Their bedroom door was open. Just like the living room, there were toys and books scattered across the floor with a dumped box of Walmart brand HoneyComb cereal on the ground. The window along the wall wasn’t shielded by curtains, but instead with one of Ali’s purple princess blankets. The dresser that my mom and I kept in the middle of our small kitchen for months refurbishing and airing out the previous owner’s cigarette residue, was in the corner with all of its drawers open, clothes dangling over. The white walls had crayon and marker drawn all of them, begging for their mother’s attention. And the beds were bare children mattresses that had the white plastic on them torn with the foam exposed. They rested on the ground. No frame. No sheets. Just important stuffed animals. One pillow. And their blankies.
Oh my god. They can’t be living like this. This apartment is in terrible shape. While I was living in a dorm room with my own bathroom and two sets of sheets, my nieces and nephew were sleeping on naked mattresses without bed frames. What kind of aunt does that make me? Who am I to just leave for college for four months at a time, pretending like my family isn’t suffering at home?

Ali grabbed her teal Target dress from the torn apart closet, dissolving the guilty tears that were welling up in my eyes. I helped her put the dress on over her five-year-old head and buttoned the back. Sammie then brought me her purple hand-me-down shirt with the words “I’m the best sister” stamped across the front. Before I snuggled the shirt on her, I laid her down and changed her soggy size 3 Huggies diaper. Once I was done, I gave Sam my pointer fingers to grab on to and lifted her up, blowing a raspberry on her little one-year-old tummy.

“Okay, Sammie Swammie, help Ali find her white dress shoes, and she will help you find pants to wear.” She just smiled back at me, so I gave her a kiss.

This little girl has me wrapped around her finger.

Jackson then came and tried to tackle me, giving his best effort to take down his aunt.

“Bubba? Whatchu try’nna do?” I said in my macho, wrestling voice.
He just giggled with his lopsided grin and ran at me again. I grabbed him and then laid him on his back and gave him a new *Cars* pullup. I helped Jackson to his feet, tickled his skinny belly, and gave him a kiss on his cheek. I got up off the floor and helped everyone find their clothes and shows, which was turned into another one of Aunt Danielle’s fun games again.

I heard Mom and Tina talking in the dining room, well I wouldn’t say dining room, it was more of a corner not in the kitchen but not really in the living room either. All there was was a table covered with bills and bowls of old cereal and milk and plates with leftover Hamburger Helper that were never taken care of. I cut the game short and walked out to the living room, stepping over the monstrous laundry again, to see what was going on.

“What did your dad say?” I asked, wishing for a solution.

“He said he can’t help either, and he doesn’t get paid until next Friday.” Tina said hopelessly.

*Wait. Danielle, you just deposited that check this morning. I know it’s supposed to be used for next semester. Your professors will understand, plus you will make it back lifeguarding this summer. But I won’t be working the full month of July because of Fulbright. Danielle, just shut up. Stop being an idiot and help your family.*

“I just deposited a check this morning.”

“Danielle, isn’t that money supposed to be used for school?” My mom asked concerned.
“I know, Mom, but don’t you think Tina needs a roof over her head with electricity?”

“How much was the check?”

“$425. Enough to cover the bill to get your electricity reconnected.”

Tina let out a big sigh. That look on her face that looked like everything was crashing down around her evaporated off of her face.

“I don’t have my checkbook to write you the check, but I know Mom does. So I will transfer the money from my bank account to hers, and then she can write you a check to cash it. Does that sound okay?”

“Yes. Thank you, baby sister.”

“You’re welcome. Now you better get ready!” I said to my sister, still dressed in her spaghetti strap top and shorts.

Tina hiked back to her room, while Ali escorted me to the bathroom with her to grab her comb. With no electricity there was no light, and she was afraid of the dark. I took a seat on the broken recliner in the living room, and started brushing her hair.
“Jackson and Sam, grab the rest of your clothes and get out here so Grandma can dress you.” I yelled as I plucked at a big blonde knot.

I didn’t Ali’s hair up, but I wrapped Sam’s into two pigtails. After velcroing Sam’s and Jackson’s Walmart shoes, Tina came out with black yoga pants, the ones she wears to work at Casey’s gas station, and the faded white Syracuse long-sleeve t-shirt I gave her. We leave the apartment 5 minutes before Ali is supposed to be at the Y.

We all piled into the van, buckled everyone up, and we were off.

Mom sat in shotgun, even though she argued with me to sit in the back instead. I told her no. As she sat up front with the window rolled down because she was overheating because of stress, she turned to my sister and asked a question we had to ask.

“I was just thinking how we are going to have to rethink lunch, and then I realized: What about the food in your fridge? Won’t it go bad?”

“I think the milk and any red meat you may have in the fridge might, but hopefully besides it spoil anything else.” I responded, thinking of all the times my mom, sister, and I spent in our house without electricity.

Besides Aunt Danielle being requested to sing the popular, homemade hits: the Donut and Dinosaur songs (songs I beautifully crafted spontaneously at Christmas to get the kids to eat

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breakfast), the ride was fairly quiet because of the roaring muffler and wind blowing in through the windows.

We got to the YMCA ten minutes late. I unbuckled Ali and ran her inside while Tina and Mom helped with the other two kids. The YMCA wasn’t organized very well, but once we passed the pool and walked through two gyms, we made it.

Ali’s preschool teacher, Miss Danielle, didn’t say anything when I apologized for bringing Ali late. I went back through the maze and met my sister, mom, niece and nephew at the door. We walked back together and ended up sitting in the second row of chairs. I made sure I got a good spot to take pictures of the star of the show. It seemed odd, maybe even funny in a weird way, sitting down me dressed in a dress, my mom dressed in slacks, waiting to hear my niece perform while my sister’s apartment just reached its fifth hour without electricity.

But let’s be honest, it hasn’t been the first time we put on a mask and pretended for that brief moment that everything was okay.

I cheered loud, like the proud aunt I was, when Ali timidly sang in front of the audience. There were about eight 1-minute songs that they sang and danced to. It was really cute. We watched the little end-of-the-year video of moments of the preschool classroom, and captured a video of Ali receiving her second preschool certificate (Tina kept her back a year, because Ali was behind in development). Rob and his father decided to show up and stood in the back. Again they didn’t say anything.
And after we went to celebrate by having a $39 lunch at McDonald’s in replacement of our homemade Saturday lunch of goulash. We lived high on the dollar. My mom even leaned over and mumbled in my ear, “I didn’t realize McDonald’s would be so expensive.”

Three Happy Meals, one Big Mac, one Filet-O-Fish, and Chicken McNuggets later, we went to Tina’s bank and cashed the check that my mom wrote to her. We got back in the van and buckled, and drove out to Nebraska Public Power District.

Once we pulled up to the newly remodeled building, Tina put the van in park. Her and I got out, while my mom stayed in the car. We walked to entrance fiercely. I was fired up, ready to brawl.

_They seriously fricken turned off electricity to the apartment of a family with three kids under the age of six. What the hell? They think they are going to push my sister around, they have another thing coming. I’m going to make them explain to me what they did and why, and let them know that there’s a person and family that need to survive on the other end of that bill._

We walked into and talked to the lady teller. We told her who we were and why we were there. She seemed to be pretty nice, so I didn’t let her have it yet. I waited while she pulled up my sister’s account. She then pulls out a 2003 calculator that prints out receipts (something that did not mesh with the HP flat screen desktop she was sitting in front of) and typed up the total bill.

“Your total is $412.86.” The lady said as if we didn’t understand how to do basic math.
“Here is $420.” Tina said while handing her the bills.

“Oh, sorry. We don’t accept cash. You will have to write a check or card.”

My sister and I didn’t say a word. We just stared at her with our are-you-fucking-serious glare.

“Okay, fine. We will be right back.” My sister managed to wither out from under her anger.

We cursed under our breath as we walked back to the van. We got in and started driving, when Mom turned to us and asked, “What happened?”

“We have to go back to the bank redeposit the money into Tina’s checking account, because why would a business that supplies energy to the whole city of Norfolk accept cash? I snarked back.

“Oh, all right then.”

We took care of the bill finally, and my sister had her power back on by 6pm. My mom and I stayed for a few hours and helped clean up the place--as much as we could with no electricity. We drove back to Shelby and Mom slept the way back because today stressed her out to the point of exhaustion. I put in my “How to Save a Life” CD by The Fray and listened to it all the way home, trying to process all that had happened.
We got home and had supper “on our own,” which usually meant I made Mac and Cheese and my mom ate two hot dogs wrapped in white split top bread and ketchup. After we got done my mom watched one of the NBA playoff games because, “that’s all that is on tonight.”

I sat in the sunroom.

Thinking.

Thinking about what would have happened if I didn’t have that Hendricks Chapel check. Thinking about what my sister will do in August when the twins are due and she has five mouths to feed instead of three. Thinking how my sister will be able to make ends meet for next month and every month following. Thinking how my sister will be able to afford maternity leave and daycare once she returns back to work. Thinking about those three ripped mattresses and how there’s no room in the apartment for two cribs. Thinking about about how I will be in England in July studying through Fulbright, while my sister and mom are home trying to make do. How in three months again I will be back in Syracuse, 1200 miles away, watching my family suffer.

*I can’t go back to Syracuse. My sister needs help, and my nieces and nephew need me. I can’t go back to college, ignoring the issue at hand, pretending that everything is okay. What happens when there isn’t a Hendricks Chapel check to lean on? What happens when three becomes five? My sister can’t handle that alone. I’m not returning to Syracuse in the fall. I have to stay home.*

Tears poured down my face as I watched the sunset, illuminate the earth to a beautiful orange glow.
I’m dropping out of Syracuse.
Chapter 5:

Conclusion

The Bridge to Academia, Falling Between the Ivy, and Three Naked Mattresses were the three vignettes I was able to write to illuminate the silent narrative of a first-generation, low-income college student navigating the space of a private, elite institution. I struggled writing this; I think the date in which I am turning this in is a reflection of that. Mental health deeply affected my ability to write, often manifesting in a fear of writing—stemming from having too many scenes I wanted to write, writing through emotionally dense material, questioning the validity of my narrative, and feeling hopeless because of this large and complex issue. What also made this thesis difficult was the fact that I didn’t have distance from it: I was living it while writing it.

But I’m here.

And as you can see, I didn’t drop out of Syracuse, though I was very close. Why? I had a really great friend tell me that I wouldn’t be able to support my family in the way I intended and needed to without a college degree. She told me, “Danielle, I will let you take time off. But I cannot allow you to not go back.” And she was right, which is why I am completing this senior thesis, now a college graduate.

But I want you to know that, though I am finally at the end of this senior thesis, this is NOT a bootstrap narrative.
This is not a supposed to be story of triumph and perseverance. This is not a story of me being successful because I “worked hard” and “overcame the obstacles that were in my way.” No. Getting here was extremely difficult. My whole college career was a state of precarity and fragility. All it would have taken was my sister being evicted, or greater reduction of my mother’s disability check, or failing that exam my first semester, or not having those professors to support me. I was walking across a tightrope my entire four years, trying to keep my family and academic career from falling.

This thesis is what stands between me being a college graduate and a part of the 9 percent of students from low-income families that have earned a bachelor’s degree by age 24 or me belonging to a far more likely statistic. There have been many who have fallen in between the ivy that cover these academic buildings on campus. And many who never had the opportunity to step foot on the hill in which Syracuse rests.

Though this is a creative nonfiction piece articulating my experiences on and off campus during my tenure at Syracuse, this is an issue much larger than myself. It is beyond Syracuse University. It affects colleges across the United States. We have a problem. We have a problem when events like the college admissions scandal comes to fruition, and we fail to identify the systemic problems that are perpetuating the normalcy of money providing access within academia. The issue goes far beyond paying an obscene amount of money to better one's exam score; bribing test proctors, teachers, college coaches and administrators; and admitting a student because their parents' have made/can make a significant donation to the school. We have a problem when we have normalized, silenced, and accepted these actions as ways to achieve an education. The issue
is we aren't talking about how this ideology prevents many marginalized students from being admitted, and oppresses current marginalized students on campuses.

We have a problem when low-income students face food insecurity and lack adequate clothing for the winter season. We have a problem when low-income students are treated poorly by the financial aid office because they have “a lot of scholarships that they are not used to working with.” We have a problem when students feel ashamed that they are attending a university on scholarships, grants, and financial aid rather than having their family provide for the cost. We have a problem when an institution requires you to submit your FAFSA along with your application for admission. We have a problem when there are merely a couple full tuition scholarships at a $70,000 institution. We have a problem.

All of which is why I decided to write this thesis and share a part of my story. A story that is not and should not be shameful, but instead one gives light to larger issues on this campus that are often erased or unacknowledged. I hope that this piece articulates the difficulty of navigating the foreign terrain of a private, elite institution and the juxtaposition to an impoverished home and the tension found between that contrast. Further, I hope Stolen Toilet Paper is just the beginning of drawing the attention to class and the necessary conversations and actions that need to occur in order to make Syracuse, and academia as a whole, more accessible.
Works Cited

