

## FINANCIAL ASS-ISTANCE

The advisor in the Financial Aid office looked like he could have fed a family of five for a week. Perhaps that was unkind of me to say. I squinted a little at the man, at where the dull buttons of his shirt strained to contain his girth, at the neat part of his shiny blonde hair, the moist pout of his tightly drawn lips. No, family of five was inaccurate. Family of three was far more feasible.

Guilt at such an unkind thought stirred within me, but I was stressed out and irritable, and of the hundred items on my To-Do list, the last thing I wanted to spend my precious minutes on was fighting with the Financial Aid office. As I stood in line (waiting, waiting, waiting) I caught snippets of the conversations taking place around me:

To my immediate right, an English-as-a-Second-Language student struggled to make it understood that she wanted a class transferred to her new institution. The frustration felt by both her and the advisor was clear on the faces.

“This woman,” the student said, shoving her phone at the advisor. “She said for me she contact you.”

“I have not spoken to her,” replied the advisor, speaking louder than was necessary and enunciating carefully. She was mistaking a language barrier for idiocy on the part of the student; the moment the student had approached her she had been prepared for a difficult situation, and as such had helped to create one.

Farther away, a pretty young girl stood a pace from the counter, her head cocked slightly to the side while she spoke to her father on the phone. She had turned herself away from her

advisor, giving him a subtle cold shoulder, as if he wasn't there. She chewed absentmindedly on a thumbnail while she spoke.

"I told you how much," the girl said in a low voice, as if ashamed that she had to speak to her father in a public place. It was amazing how parents could embarrass their children even when not in the room. "Can I put it on the credit card?" She glanced at the waiting advisor, a hot flush creeping up her cheeks. "Why not? I thought you said..."

The Meal-for-a-Family-of-Three on whom I was waiting had his hands full with a small, bespectacled kid who spoke too fast and too aggressively. His aid had been denied, just as mine had, but for a very different reason. It was impolite to eavesdrop, but it was also hard not to.

"I don't understand why the email from Financial Aid didn't tell me more than a standard 'your aid has been denied'. You know what I mean? It didn't tell me any specifics."

"Do you know why it was denied?" asked Meal-for-a-Family-of-Three.

A brief hesitation. "I do *now*. But that doesn't help me. If I'd known earlier--"

"It says here you're on academic probation. You would have been notified of this before the semester began."

"I was, but I didn't know that meant my aid would be denied. If I had, I would have done more *earlier*, you know what I mean?"

"Well, there isn't anything I can do. Maybe you should focus on boosting your grades this semester, so you're taken off probation."

"I can't afford to pay for this semester," the kid said flatly. "That's why I applied for aid."

The Financial Aid advisor looked back at him without expression. What could he say? He couldn't give the student money, any more than he could make it rain by snapping his fingers.

The kid glanced at me, eyes huge behind his glasses; his face showed a medley of anger as well as embarrassment that I had obviously heard every word. He tugged at the straps of his backpack and stormed from the office.

I stepped up to Meal-for-a-Family-of-Three. "Hi," I said.

His frown told me that he was prepared for this to be difficult.

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When I left the office ten minutes later, my issue unresolved and with the promise of an email update I knew I would never receive, an overwhelming desire to have some sort of emotional outburst seized me. I wasn't sure if I wanted to cry or break something, possibly both.

I was so frustrated: by my classes, by how expensive this school was, by the lack of help. The problem was not that I knew the advisor was going to forget about my issue the moment I left the office; the problem was that I felt totally alone. College was supposed to be a big exciting adventure, and yet so far all it had taught me was that life was a bitch and no one was willing to help me when I had a problem. If I wanted something fixed, it would be on me to see it done.

*It isn't supposed to be this way*, I wailed internally, as I fled the flocculating crowds in the halls for the world outside. In the freedom of the campus grounds I walked until I felt calmer.

The weather was a perfect reflection of my mood: an explosion of magnificent fall colors—riots of gold, emerald, ruby, and citrine—being torn at by a bitter wind and oppressed by a

ceiling of iron gray clouds. I was in a sort of autumn myself, a period where the uniform green of my life was transitioning into fabulous shades, all different, all brimming with potential and ideas. And yet here was this wintry air blowing me ass over elbow; here was this dark sky promising to piss rain on my head and strip me of my leaves.

I wanted to shout. I wanted to scream to the campus: *It shouldn't be like this! You should be recognizing my potential and helping me to excel!*

A leaf fell from the mostly denuded branches of the nearest tree. I watched its course through the sky, coming steadily nearer to me, before an updraft caught it and sent it spinning crazily away.

A burble of laughter escaped my lips. I snatched a leaf from the nearest tree and threw it up into the air. It was, I told myself, better this way: to rip the leaves from my branches and throw them to the wind was preferable to clinging for dear life to the mother tree while some outside force tried cruelly to drag me away. There was more dignity in being the one who decided to let go, than the one who was forced too.