CULTURE

Embracing joy while living with precarious immigration status at Yale

// BY VICTORIA CUELLAR



JANE CALLANAN / STAFF ILLUSTRATOR

"Have you seen ICE on campus?"

That was the first question I had asked when I came to visit Yale for the first time. Standing before Harkness Tower, I could not shake the image of my grandpa's pale face two weeks earlier. He had white cement under his fingernails, smelling sharply of chemicals, when he said that his friend had just been detained. When I left home from Florida to New Haven, I left with the pursed-lip advice my grandmother would give after watching Telemundo: do not get your gas early in the morning; I saw in the news they got someone last week. Do not go get groceries; your aunt's best friend was detained there. Do not speak when walking in the streets; they might hear you have an accent.

Living in Miami felt like choking in the blood-stained maw of a whale. Compared to the anti-immigration system I have witnessed in Florida schools, banning undocumented students from getting an education, and entering agreements that allow Immigration and Customs Enforcement to work in college campuses, Yale feels like reaching the surface for a temporary breath of air. The Yale Police Department does not ask me for my immigration status. Students even protest for Yale to divest in companies that support ICE. While Yale has not saved me, it gave me three months to remember how to use my lungs. I am not the first or the last student to feel this anxiety.

"I would not feel safe sharing my immigration status with everyone," Daniela Fonseca '27 said. Fonseca is an undergraduate student working with Yale Law School as a Spanish interpreter, interacting closely with the immigrant community. "There have been people put in prison without committing a violent crime. They were just there at the wrong place and wrong time," Fonseca added.

According to the Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse's immigration report, people with no criminal convictions make up the majority of those in ICE detention. It is easy to resort to euphemisms to soften the blow, like when my grandpa said "lo agarraron" — "they grabbed him" — to describe his friend's detention. However, "grabbed" does not encompass grief. "Grabbed" does not encompass the sharp inhale of breath every time a black SUV drives nearby. It does not portray the fact that the fear is rational. The fear is similar to coming to terms with death. It could occur any minute, any second, and it is a tangible force that, on an individual level, feels like it cannot be reckoned with.

This has left me grappling with the question on how to combat nihilism when living in a burning house: Should I still buy decorations for my dorm? Should I save money in the event of deportation or for a lawyer? How can I make plans for a distant future I know I must also be prepared to lose?

I still struggle with these questions today, and I will not pretend to know their answer. However, living with a precarious immigration status reminds me that there is nothing to take for granted. There is an art to noticing your friend's dimple when they laugh, because a camera won't quite capture that if you end up hundreds of miles away. There is a beauty in closing your eyes in the Branford courtyard, listening to the candor of the bells, hearing the ruffling of the orange leaves. I won't be at Yale forever. I might not even be at Yale next year, and yet, while the end of life as I know it breathes at the nape of my neck, I realize it is its own form of rebellion to fight for joy.

A sophomore in Silliman College with a pending asylum claim, who requested anonymity due to fear about his immigration status, told me how he copes with the conundrum of immigration proceedings. "Maybe it's a little delusional, but sometimes, I hold on to happiness by allowing myself to fully embrace my life as a Yale student, finding joy in the experiences I've worked so hard for, even while carrying the uncertainty of everything else," he said. "Because my circumstances are something I'm going through — not who I am, and certainly not who I'm destined to be."

Attending the Yale Symphony Orchestra Halloween show with my friends in matching costumes and eating tequeños in La Casa Cultural asserts that I am more than the dehumanizing rhetoric spat from podiums of those supposed to protect me. Sharing a meal with a friend at Trumbull while ignoring an intimidating black SUV parked nearby asserts that I am more than the terror etched in my grandmother's furrowed eyebrows and hanging eyebags in front of a television screen.

I'd like to emphasize that holding onto happiness is not a calling to hold onto distractions. A smile will not stop an ICE agent from knocking on someone's door. It takes courage to still love life, especially when that love might mean there is more to lose. I am calling for something fundamentally difficult — for the unapologetic audacity to keep firm on the things that this political reality threatens to steal and, simultaneously, never has the authority to take entirely away.

There might not ever be a cure, and yet, when anger dwells and sinks in my chest and legs, when tears threaten me with their burn, and I feel my teeth chattering even when it is not cold, it reminds me that I am recklessly, violently alive. I will go limping towards my dreams with questions, with fear and with hope. There are still bells in Branford and dinner table jokes left to hear.

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