A Stranger in Paradise

4th International Students Essay Contest

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It was 1:00 PM, Wednesday May 17th, 2006. I was reading an article about the research that I was supposed to conduct in the Computer Science Laboratory at Stanford Research Institute International (SRI). It was the third day since I had started a summer internship as a Ph.D. student research associate at SRI International. SRI is a highly prestigious non-governmental research institute in the Bay Area in California. It is a heaven for Ph.D. students in most basic sciences and engineering fields for a short or long visit. I learned about SRI when I started working on my Masters’ thesis at Michigan State University. In that research, I proved several math theorems using a sophisticated software tool, which was developed by the computer scientists at SRI. Since then, I had always dreamed of going to do an internship at SRI. Needless to say, it is extremely competitive to get in SRI as a student research associate.

While reading the article, I felt like I was poised on the peak of a mountain, which always seemed unconquerable to me. However, my dreams came to reality and I was finally in SRI! Nevertheless, it was not an easy decision to go there. My fiancée had to work for her advisor at Michigan State and she was not able to move with me to California in the summer. Fortunately, she was nice enough to encourage me to take the opportunity and join SRI. My advisor and other professors at my department were also thrilled, because one of the department’s students was among the summer interns in SRI.

In the middle of my endless joyful thoughts, I received a call from my boss, Dr. Hassen Saidi. I was surprised to hear he asked me to meet at 2 PM since the day before he had told me that he did not expect me to have formal meetings and we would simply chat every now and then about the progress of our project in the cafeteria or hallways. Half an hour later, he gave me a second call to remind me about the meeting: “Borzoo, please do not forget that we are meeting at 2 PM. I will be coming to your office with a colleague of mine from the export control department. Given your citizenship, I am sure it is not a big surprise for you,” said Hassen.

“Sure, I understand,” I replied. As a matter of fact, I certainly understood! Being an Iranian in the U.S. is always a challenge. Sometimes people get scared when I declare that I am from Iran. Nice people only say, “Oh, cool!” More arrogant ones do not hide their hostile looks and cut off conversations. At
airports, when I am on international flights, security staff and immigration officers usually take me to some place for a special treat with a long list of questions and physical inspections. I often make jokes by saying, “You know what? I am special!” In the meantime, I am always quite confident that everything is fine, as I know my records better than any United States government agency! By similar reasoning, I was extremely relaxed with Dr. Saidi’s call as well. I thought they merely wanted to ask a couple of questions to make sure that I was not an eminent threat! However, the term “export control” sounded very new to me. I knew that there were some restrictions for foreigners to work on sensitive projects, but my project was funded by the National Science Foundation and it was just basic research on mathematical techniques for automatic generation of computer programs.

Dr. Saidi and a woman walked in my office precisely at 2:00 PM. Hassen introduced the woman as Christine to me. She then explained her job is to control the assignment of projects to employees based on their status in the U.S. I thought to myself that I fell in the category of nonimmigrant visa holders, which was fine according to SRI employment regulations. “Borzoo, we have some issues with your citizenship,” said Christine.

“That is a not a big surprise to me and I’ll be happy to answer any questions,” I replied.

Then, she said, “We know that your project is not sensitive at all, but since we conduct several top-secret classified projects on the SRI campus, the security department has raised some issues about your presence on campus.” I was perplexed!

Following my humor in such cases I said, “Oh! I didn’t know I am such a threat!” Her statement seemed very ridiculous to me. I was aware of secure labs on the SRI campus, but no one could simply walk in there. Even American citizens required U.S. government clearance to be able to visit those areas. SRI has hundreds of non-American employees who are not naturalized and, for instance, even my own boss was not allowed to go to those areas. She also said SRI has some issues with paying my salary, because I am from an embargoed country by the U.S. government. When I asked her then how I am getting paid by Michigan State University, she replied “That’s a good question!”
At this point, I realized that the problem was probably a bit more serious than regular airport and immigration checks. She then said the board of trustees would have a meeting on my case and she asked me to take a couple of days off until they reached a decision. I was simply astounded. I almost became suspicious of myself. I thought to myself, are Iranians so dangerous such that even their presence in a primary research institute cannot be tolerated? For God’s sake, Iranians are among the most educated ethnic minority in the U.S. What is she talking about?

I asked them whether I should leave the building right away and Christine said, “Please.”

In Persian, we have a saying that describes such a situation beautifully, “In one blink of an eye, one may go from highs of heavens to downs of misery.” I returned my badge and left the building with a deep sense of humiliation and discrimination. I felt very much insulted. They literally kicked me out because I am an Iranian citizen. The frustrating part is that they knew my nationality well in advance when I applied for the position in March. More ridiculously, the security department issued me two badges, as my last name was misspelled on the first badge. It basically means there was absolutely no regulation that forbade the presence of citizens of Iran on the SRI campus. They made a monster out of me and they scared themselves by the monstrous Borzoo. I asked myself why they chose me when there were other Middle Eastern student research associates. The answer is indeed simple: The Iranian and U.S. governments do not like each other. But why should it affect their ordinary citizens? Now all of my bitter experiences were erupting out of me like a wild furious volcano. I never cared about dirty looks nor about humiliating inspections at airports, because I tried to be understanding of the wounds that this nation had after the tragic events of 9-11. But this case was absolute nonsense. I was in a primary research institute to do research. If research environments are so poisoned by political games, why am I doing a Ph.D. here? If this country does not recognize me as an ordinary human being who loves science and wants to dedicate his life to research, why was I accepted as a graduate student in the first place?

A week later I received a call from SRI’s human resources department and was informed that I was officially fired from SRI. According to Dr. Saidi, the board of trustees had two options. They could either keep me and later go through the hassle of convincing the U.S. government audits of my presence
in SRI or they could simply get rid of me. Obviously, they chose the easier option. The woman from human resources asked me to have a meeting at SRI so that we can talk face to face the following Wednesday. In that meeting, I asked them for a comprehensive legal explanation of why they fired me along with an official letter of apology from SRI’s CEO. I told them that I rejected another internship offer from the National Institute of Aerospace to accept SRI’s offer and they completely ruined my summer plans both academically and mentally. Two weeks later I received a letter from SRI. They refused both my requests. Instead, they paid me my summer salary. With the level of insult and humiliation that I faced in SRI, I could care less about the money. It actually made me more furious and showed me that they sadly evaluated my loss of academic and research opportunity plus their unacceptable way of handling the problem only based on money. A lot of my friends recommended that I sue the company for their act of discrimination and humiliation. I wish I were the kind of person who loves legal battles.

Dr. Saidi expressed his deep disappointment over the whole situation, but we both knew that it was out of his hands to do anything. He tried hard to find me another place and he was nice enough to introduce me to Professor Luca de Alfaro at UC Santa Cruz. I stayed in California and worked with Dr. de Alfaro for the rest of the summer, which was an absolutely wonderful experience.

Last summer, I actually had a collection of problems of this sort. My fiancée’s parents’ visa applications got rejected, so they could not attend our wedding. I was then advised not to leave the U.S. to present my paper in a highly prestigious conference due to a possible risk of not being able to return to the country.

Sometimes I think I am at the right place but at the wrong time. I believe the United States is a great country. I admire the history of this country. I find the U.S. constitution a precious document that respects all the living souls in the world regardless of their race and faith. I have made a lot of amazing friends here in MSU from all over the world. I think the U.S. is a heaven for scientists and researchers and I am so proud that I am privileged to attend a world-class school. I strongly believe that I live in a beautiful paradise. But I wish for a time when I am no longer a stranger in this paradise.