

By Jeffrey Mervis

An education that closed doors

Imagine a penniless immigrant who comes to the United States in pursuit of a world-class education. He works hard and earns a Ph.D. in computational mechanical engineering from one of America's top universities, the California Institute of Technology (Caltech). Then he becomes a founding faculty member at King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST) in Saudi Arabia, with a generous salary, a hefty startup package for his research, and lots of other perks. ¶ That may sound like an uplifting tale of perseverance and triumph against the odds, but the reality is different: Tamer Elsayed's story also includes prison time and a permanent ban from the United States.

At the age of 39, Elsayed has written a memoir—*Inadmissible*—telling the story of his scientific rise and fall. The memoir's title refers to the fact that Elsayed, an Egyptian citizen, can never again set foot legally in the United States. That's a personal tragedy, because his young daughter lives with his ex-wife in Los Angeles. Also, his academic career is probably over.

The reason he is inadmissible lies at the core of the story. After earning the fifth highest score in the nation on Egypt's annual college admissions test, Elsayed comes to California and overstays his 6-month tourist visa. Needing money to support himself and finance his education, he continues to break a series of federal laws. First, he obtains a fake Social Security card that allows him to work. Later, he obtains a second fake Social Security card that lets him walk away from a poor credit rating based on large, unpaid debts. Much more serious is his decision to lie on his student loan application, telling the government that he is a U.S. citizen.

He qualifies for the loan and uses the money to come within five credits of completing his bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering from California State Polytechnic University, Pomona. But then, acting on a tip from his former girlfriend, federal agents storm his bedroom and arrest him. He winds up serving 15 months in a federal correctional facility in Lompoc, California, for a crime the U.S. government classifies as "involving moral turpitude."

Once released, Elsayed finishes his undergraduate degree and wins a fellowship to Caltech. Michael Ortiz, his adviser there and a member of the U.S. National Academy of Engineering, tells *Science* that Elsayed was "a very hard worker ... one of my best students." Unaware of Elsayed's criminal record, Ortiz found his attitude refreshing: "He



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Although chastened by all that has happened, Elsayed doesn't apologize. "I was well aware of my fraudulent actions," he writes in his book. "Looking back, there was really no excuse for my deeds. But at that time, I had felt that to play only the cards I'd been dealt—being an Egyptian citizen without the financial means to achieve what I knew I was academically qualified to achieve—would leave me with nothing.

"I could summarize all my shortcomings in one sentence: I was born in the wrong place."

Now living in Budapest with his new wife and their baby girl, Elsayed considers his book a form of confession and self-therapy. "I want to get this load off my chest, to be free of having to live in secrecy and shame. ... [A]nd if you still want to judge me, then there is nothing more I can do." ■

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