

Name: Vihaan Joshi

Age: 13 yrs

Grade: 8th

Word Count: 799

Journey under a California Sunset

The sunset stretched pink over the University of Southern California for the Science Olympiad competition, and I stood frozen on the walkway while hundreds of students streamed past me toward the Awards Ceremony. The birds chirped in the trees. The smell of coffee drifted from a shop around the corner. None of them registered. My hands were cold, my stomach was doing something complicated, and all I could think was: **what if we don't place?**

I didn't know yet that the trip was already over, in the way that mattered. The real thing – meals, the codes I'd cracked with my hands shaking, the panic moments had already happened. I just hadn't caught up to it.

It all started three days earlier, when I checked into our hotel room the size of a shoebox, realizing my mom wasn't going to be the one checking if I'd packed my pencils.

I stood in front of my suitcase and made a mental list - saying it made it real to me, materials, resources, pencils, and ID. At home, this was someone else's job. Here, it was mine. Thinking about it now, there was something almost funny about how seriously I took it, patting my pockets twice before we even left the room, like I was carrying gold instead of just being a kid who didn't want to lose his pencils.

That night, we went out for dinner. I stood in line with a menu in my hands and did the math myself for the first time, appetizer or no appetizer, tip or no tip, do I have enough left for tomorrow. The cashier asked what I wanted and I heard my own voice answer, steadier than I expected. It was a pizza. It was nothing. But walking out with my own receipt in my pocket, that I had obtained using not just money, but with words, I felt accomplished.

The most important morning dawned – the day of competition! First off was my strongest event, Codebusters – solving crypt algorithms.

I got this, I reassured myself as the nerves got better of me. Everything that followed as I entered the examination room now seems like a blur though I remember the exact second I got stuck staring at a string of letters that refused to turn into words, the clock on the wall ticking louder than it should have, my partners frantically tapping their pencil on the table. My hands weren't steady, and neither was my breathing. I took a deep breath, reminded myself to calm down, and soon, letter by letter, something changed. The panic went quiet and the code started talking back to me. When it finally broke, when the code turned into a sentence I could actually read, I wanted to cry tears of joy. I didn't. I just looked at the clock, its tick slowly getting quieter as I cleared my mind of stress.

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No time to rejoice – another major event was waiting for me - Experimental Design – this one gave me a different kind of problem. Something in our scientific procedure went wrong, and we had barely ten minutes to find it before time ran out. I remember crouching over our experiment with my two teammates, all three of us talking over each other hurriedly. Until, one of us spotted it. We fixed it with only a few seconds to spare. My hands were shaking again, but this time out of relief. At that moment, it all felt like chaos. Looking back at it now, it was exactly what an adventure is supposed to feel like.

Between events, I walked through campus and passed teams from states I'd never been to, some wearing shirts with school names I recognized really well, all of them carrying the same nervous, hopeful look. I stopped seeing them as competition and started seeing them as proof that everyone here had put in the same hours, the same worry, the same struggle, just to stand on this campus for a weekend.

Which brings me back to the sunset.....

Standing under the same pink California sunset, I never realized when something inside me shifted. I stopped thinking about the results and started replaying the pizza, the shaking hands over the cipher, the sprint across campus. Those were the moments I actually wanted to keep.

I flew home with a folder of competition papers I can barely remember now. What I do remember is checking my own pockets for pencils, paying for my own food, and the feeling of focusing my mind to solve a code. Nobody handed me those moments. I found them myself, one shaky, ordinary decision at a time. And that, it turns out, is what confidence actually feels like from the inside.