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## A Routine, A Life

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A Routine, A Life

by

Miriam Vega

A narrative written as part of the First To Go Community

Academic Resource Center

Loyola Marymount University

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## **A Routine, A Life**

By Miriam Vega

The moonlight shines in through the kitchen window while the glimmering stars illuminate the night sky. It is now 10 pm and finally we are once again united as a family. The day labor has ended for my parents but now comes the role of being parents. After a day full of pain and sacrifice, they have arrived to their cozy two-bedroom home in search of the tranquility they have not yet encountered. As I observe their facial expressions from the kitchen, I notice their bodies weakening day by day. My father is no longer the toned young man who took his daily runs around the neighborhood park after dinner. Instead, he seems to be an aged individual who walks around in a slouched position due to his physical disability at thirty-seven years of age. The importance of work in my family has become more of a survival tool than an art of success, as many may think of it. My parents' experiences and sacrifices as minimum paid labor workers allow me to honor the definition of "work" and the impact it has had in my past and will have in my future.

Due to my family's economic status, my parents have been absent for the vast majority of my childhood, yet I do not blame them; the need to perform their task is essential to our survival and prosperity. As a child, I remember coming home from the daycare center every afternoon hoping to be embraced by my parents; sadly this was rarely the case. After long demanding hours of labor, my mother's main objective was preparing dinner and bathing my sister and me. My father, on the other hand, locked himself in the room for long hours thinking about our economic burden due to the poorly paying job he had. At only six years of age I had no idea of the financial situation my family faced, so I thought of myself as a burden, a child that was just in their way. When it came to my education, I walked around the apartment complex we lived in asking neighbors for help on my English homework since my parents were extremely exhausted

and were not familiar with the language. Twelve years later, I look back and realize that it was not a voluntary action to ignore me at such a young age but the result of the backbreaking labor that left them with no energy for their children. My parents' absence during one of the most important years of my life was, with no doubt, caused by their need to work and provide the so-called "better future" -- an immigrant's dream.

The hardships and sacrifices that members of the working class have to perform daily in order to provide their children with a decent lifestyle become great inspirations to young adults like me. Throughout my childhood, I spent most of my day at a childcare while my mother worked a double shift as a housekeeper and my father worked laborious hours as a construction worker under the heat. Every day at five or six in the morning, the bright yellow light entered the room with no permission, ending my sleeping and beginning a new day. As I rose, I cleared off my brunette curls that look like the curly fries you order at Jack in the Box and slowly headed to the bathroom. Every day consisted of an early morning, a lonely afternoon, and a dreadful night of awaiting my parents' attention but never receiving it: my father drags his muddy boots through the living room as he enters the house, leaving behind trails of his footsteps. As he heads over to the couch, his face never shows a sign of joy but rather, a silenced look that expresses his tiredness. My mother, on the other hand, leans on the refrigerator doors as support to help her stay on her feet while she prepares the dinner table for six. After a hard day at work, they were exhausted and the last thing on their minds was to play with a young five year old.

As the years went by, I had to take on my parents' role at home, becoming like a second mother to my siblings and finding the solution to their everyday struggles at school. Every morning my alarm clock would go off an hour before my siblings were up. During that hour, I would put together my sister's school uniform, which consisted of a blue jumper, a white polo,

and a beautiful white bow that would decorate her ponytail after I thoroughly brushed her hair for school. As for my younger brother, Francisco, I had to prepare his diaper bag and make his bottle while tripping over the multiple toys that lay on the living floor from a play date the night before. The hour was over right before I knew it leading me to the worst part of the day -- waking up my siblings or as I like to call them, my sleeping angels, from their profound sleep. With complaints and grouchy movements, Alondra, my young sister, made her way to her dresser to pick up the outfit for that day. Francisco, my 3-year-old brother, remained still while I changed his diaper; it almost seemed as if he had adapted to the routine himself. Once we were all dressed, my father would cover my siblings with a blanket and carry them over to our babysitter's house a few apartments down from ours. From there, I would wait an hour and later head to school. Once school ended, at home I dropped the books and immediately became the housewife, cooking, feeding, bathing the kids, ensuring that their schoolwork was complete, and lastly putting them to bed in order for me to begin my homework or study for exams. The responsibilities that belonged to the parents became my routine making this my "work" aside from education. At times, I felt as if I was working the morning shift of a baby sitter; however, unlike those diligent women, I wasn't getting paid.

It was a bright sunny Wednesday afternoon as I made my way home with a Powerpuff Popsicle melting in my hands when at a long distance I saw a woman with long brown hair walking my way with a delightful smile on her face. I was a bit confused and in order to prevent any awkwardness between both of us, I continued enjoying my Popsicle and planning out our dinner for the night. As I got closer, I heard my name yelled. This was the moment when I knew that it must be a family member because my nickname is not usually shouted out.

"Mimi," she yelled with great excitement.

“Mom?” I questioned reluctantly.

*“Si, esperame ahi, vamos ir a comer un helado.”*

Never before had my mother picked me up from school and invited me to the ice cream parlor around the corner. Well, actually, she had never even picked me up from school before because she would always work an extra shift at work. At first I thought, “Ice cream again, probably not,” but then I had a second thought and decided that the Popsicle that was in my hands was not enough, so I agreed to take the offer.

“Awww, mom. *Que lindo, claro que acepto un helado!!!!!!*” I shouted.

At the moment I felt like the luckiest girl in the world. For the first time since third grade, my mom had picked me up from school. My smile decorated my caramel color skin. I walked down the street hoping that everyone would acknowledge my mother’s presence. As we entered the ice cream parlor, I began to question the reason why we were there but then decided to ignore it. My emotions at the time were too many and I did not want to end such a beautiful moment with an obnoxious question. Once we ordered our ice cream, we sat down on the counter and began to chat.

“Mimi?” she said.

“Si, mom”, I replied.

*“Tengo algo que decirte,”* she said as she stared down to her strawberry waffle cone.

At this moment, I had a fear that the words that were going to be mentioned after that would be awful and indeed at the time, they were.

*“Vas a tener otro hermanito.”*

With such horrible news as a teen, I dropped the ice cream cone staining my beautiful purple cardigan. With tears in my eyes, I decided to leave. My mother walked out of the parlor

with a broken heart. The walk home was by far the most disturbing part of the entire afternoon. I could not believe that my parents had decided to have another child: another child I would have to look after, another reason to go to sleep late, another reason to wish I was not living the life I was currently living. As I made my way into the house, I stormed into my room dragging my backpack along the floor and later slamming the door as my mom tried to enter the room. The world seemed to come to an end at this point. I could not imagine having another sibling. I did not know if it was the child itself that I strongly disliked or the responsibilities that came along with him. This was too much to handle at the time, so I decided to throw myself in bed and cry myself to sleep. The salty teardrops reminded me of the bitter life I was living. I could not believe that at my young age I was living the life of a thirty-year-old. The only difference was that I had not decided to live this life. As I pondered for hours, I could hear Alondra's and Francisco's laughter and their jovial sense of humor. At the moment, I recognized that these were the most important individuals in my life and that without them in my life I would probably not be the mature young lady I was. Images of my daily routines began to pop into my thoughts. The smiles that Francisco gave me when I tickled his belly to cheer the grouchy man were undeniably the most precious moments of my day. Or even the beautiful moments when Alondra told me I was the best sister ever because I made her look like a Disney princess with amazing hairstyles and adorable outfits. These moments allowed me to recognize that maybe having a younger brother would not be as bad as I thought. So then I decided to give it a chance. I wiped my tears from my cheeks and placed my hands together for a small prayer. I prayed:

“God, please bless my family in this moment of change. I hope and pray that my new baby brother will not become a burden, but that he will be another motivation to become a better

person. May she or he be one healthy and cute looking-baby. Please, God, hear my prayer. Amen.”

On the wonderful morning of October 12, 2005, my mother went into labor. As I woke up to get ready for school, I remember her doing my hair and decorating it with beautiful purple and pink ribbons that perfectly matched my navy shorts and white blouse. As she brushed my hair she confessed:

*“Tengo mucho miedo. NO quiero dejarlos solo con tu abuelo.”*

*“No te preocupes, Mami. Yo ya soy una señorita y te prometo cuidar a mis hermanitos a todo momento.”*

My mother expressed a sense of fear. She did not want to leave us unattended, but I promised to look over my siblings as the young lady she had raised me to be. That same night, I remember my father walking in and whispering in my ear,

*“Ya tienes un nuevo hermanito, se llama Osvaldo.”*

I jumped out of bed and yelled at the top of my lungs. Francisco finally had a playing partner, another little gentleman that would complete our lovely family. At this moment I knew that God had heard my prayers and that I now had a healthy baby brother. A few years went by and everything seemed to be at the best point possible. My mother found a new job in the Adidas Warehouse, working full-time as a, well, honestly, she doesn't have an official title. I just like to mention the company she works for so people will avoid the question. I find it harder to explain her actual job position simply because I do not know myself. My father, on the other hand, has been a full-time construction worker pretty much his entire time here in the U.S. Now sixteen years later, he encounters one of the most difficult obstacles in his life, being disabled for nearly five years with no hope of recovery. As the years of labor build on his shoulders, he no

longer remains the young and courageous man he once was. The actions of the toned individual he was years ago have now shredded into aches and sleepless nights. Similar to my father, my mother, the thirty-five-year-old woman with sixteen years of work experience, can no longer perform certain hand movements after breaking both hands while performing challenging tasks at work. The pain my parents have endured throughout their years of labor has allowed me to value their health and presence in my life. Their pain signifies their dedication and hopes to see their children one day become great scholars and avoid the work force they have had to endure. Like many other immigrant workers in this country, not only do injured workers sacrifice their family's economic stability but they lack medical assistance due to a shortage of public funds. The experiences and hardships I encountered as a child have encouraged me to pursue a higher education and impress upon other first generation students the significance of a higher education.

In contrast to the backbreaking task my parents have to perform, the work that I perform as an educated student has measured to be somewhat of the same importance. Being a college student requires a great amount of effort and sacrifice that may similarly shape the future of my family. Aside from being a full-time student at a private institution, I am also the oldest daughter of four children, which sets a great amount of responsibility on my shoulders. Every day consists of class, homework, office hours, meetings, and on top of this, the obligation of being there for my family, who is currently undergoing a financial hardship. My priorities compared to those of my parents might be completely different, yet it is reasonable to say that we may undergo the same amount of stress. For example, my mom spends long hours in a warehouse while I spend a great amount of time in the library writing papers, reading, or studying for a test. Although my style of "work" does not require long hours of physical labor, the amount of stress and the amount of time devoted to my studies have allowed me to become a responsible young adult. As

a first generation student, I have also learned that the importance of work doesn't merely depend on level of difficulty you are facing, but the amount of time and sacrifice devoted to your performance. Agreeing with my ideas, my parents value my diligence as a student and admire my great devotion to my studies in order to complete my career. As a college freshman, I have carved their advice in my mind and will continue to strive for a better future that will not require the same amount of pain and physical labor as the one they perform.

The transitions my family faces now that I am away for college have caused great changes but we have slowly adapted to them. My sister has taken on the responsibilities I had as a girl. My parents have struggled in various ways, adapting to the idea that I am no longer there physically but sadly not to the idea that I'm not there mentally. During my freshman year, it was rare when my phone didn't ring every evening around 8 o'clock. There were mixed feelings, to be honest; I was happy to listen to my mother's voice but scared to find out the real purpose behind the phone call.

"Hola, Mom," I answered.

*"Hola, hi'ja. Como has estado? Ya comistes?"* she asked.

It is not rare for my mother to ask me how I am doing and later question whether I have had a meal at the time. At times, I do have to lie: with so much work it is quite impossible not to feel stressed or to even leave my room to eat.

"Bien Mom, y usted?" I answered.

It is a lie, but in many cases, it is a lie I have to say. If my mother finds out that I am not eating, it will be a long lecture that I want to avoid in order to get my work done.

*"Tambien, te extraños mucho y ya queremos verte!"* she said.

*"Yo tambien, espero verlos pronto."* I replied making the conversation short.

*“Que bueno. Te llamaba para decirte....”* and this when I know I have to drop the books and put on my motherly apron, those that housewives wear to depict their identity.

It is a usual thing for my mother to call me at least twice a day and assign me a task to complete. It varies among bills, taxes, my siblings’ school, or simply family problems that I prefer not to hear at the time. When I first thought of moving out for college, I thought all of this would be over, but sadly it isn’t. It almost seems as if I am the adult in the family, the one that they cannot live without, the one that holds everything together and will never let it collapse. With no other option, I have to find a solution.

On top of papers, exams, homework assignments, narrative adjustments and other items, I have to add “Family Emergencies” to my agenda. “Good Lord,” I think. “Will I ever escape this Cinderella life I’m living? If yes, please make it soon because I’M FED UP!!!!” Even after being a couple of miles away, I am constantly reminded of the life I had at home that was not hell, but something close to it. As I end the phone calls, I begin to reminisce through the years remembering every situation in which my parents have been there for me not because I want to live those memories again but because I need some kind of reason to complete the task they have assigned me. Being the oldest has led to this, a life of never-ending responsibilities that I hope my siblings don’t have to live, but by the looks of it, this wish seems to be crumbling down right in front of my eyes. Now that I have left, Alondra has had to step up, but with this one, I do wish my parents luck.

Alondra, is not the typical “Miriam” in the family who completes every task assigned to her with no complaints. If anything, she might be labeled as the “anti-Miriam.” Her tenacious personality leads her to speak her mind regardless of who she is talking to. A conversation between her and either of my parents almost always ends with her last words “It’s not my

responsibility. I'm just your daughter, not your slave." Within my eyes and the eyes of others this may seem like a disrespectful daughter, but after reading about the life I have lived she almost seems like the hero of the story. With only a four-year age difference, I must confess I do look up to her sometimes and wish I were a little more like her. I wish I had the carefree personality she has, but my soft heart comes through and only leads me to more responsibilities. With a daughter like me, my parents know it only takes a call to get their needs met, but with a daughter like Alondra, the story changes.

As sisters, we have our personal conversation every now and then, but it's rare when we ever get too personal. A few months ago I returned home for the weekend only to encounter one of the most memorable-- I say this in the most negative way possible--moments ever. After a long day of visits and family festivals, we arrived home extremely tired and ready for bed. In a matter of seconds everyone but me was asleep, or so I thought. Out of nowhere my parents began to argue. I lowered the TV volume and after noticing that their discussion was meaningless, I turned on my computer and placed my earphones onto my ears escaping into a different world, a world I would have loved to know of a little earlier. I knew that this wouldn't take long and that a few minutes into the argument my mother would burst into tears; this wasn't unusual, this was a routine. My only hope at the time was the same as always. I wished and hoped that my siblings would not hear them, but sadly again, this was not the case. Out stormed Alondra from our bedroom and made her way into our parent's bedroom slamming the doors behind her.

"Are you serious?" she yelled. "What goes through your minds? Do you ever consider anyone else's life but yourselves? Your children's perhaps? No, I don't think so. That's too much to ask for. This is exactly the reason why Miriam decides not to come home on the

weekends. This is why she left the house. This is why she wishes to escape the life she is living. She can blame you guys.”

I heard her yells from the living room but decided to ignore them. I am such a wimp and I knew I would burst into tears. I just knew it.

She continued, “I really hope that one day she never comes back so you two can learn your lesson. And I also hope to one day move away for college like she did, but instead I will go farther away -- somewhere where it would be impossible to see you so often. I’m not as nice as Miriam and sometimes I wish she wasn’t either.”

Her words were those of a mature woman, but I later realized that those were the words that she had held in for so long. Those were the words I have always wanted to say but never had the strength to release, especially not to my parents, not to their face. As she made her way back to the room, she left no time for my parents’ remarks but instead broke into tears and hid in her blankets. I wanted to run to her and thank her, but the last thing I wanted was to cry in front of her. It was too hard; I couldn’t just leave my sister on her own, not after she had yelled the truth.

I gave myself a couple of minutes and later made my way into the room. On the upper bunk she had attached herself to Mr. Beans, her stuffed teddy bear covered in her pink blanket. Her sobs were so strong that she shook a little after each breath she took. I made my way up the stairs and hugged her tightly. I knew that she was no longer the little girl I held in my arms years ago, the one I would console saying, “Don’t worry, sweetie. Everything will be okay. “ In this situation, nine years later, I had to speak the truth.

“I’m not going to lie and say that everything will be okay like I did when you were little. Instead, I want to thank you.” I said.

“Why? I just yelled at my parents while my mom was in tears. I’m an awful daughter,” she responded.

“No, no. Don’t be upset at yourself. Listen, what you just did is something I have been wanting to do all of my life, but I have been too afraid to do it!” I confessed.

“Miriam, I’m just so tired of this life. I always told myself that my parents would never make me do everything you did, and look, they try to make me do it but I refuse to. It’s too much for me to handle. I cannot be like you and I do not want to be like you either. I just want to be me, a normal fourteen year old.” Her words spoke to my heart.

“And that’s okay. You don’t have to be like me, be better. All I’m going to say is to stay strong and be you. Study hard in school, go to college, and move out, then it will PROBABLY end.” With those words I left the room. I couldn’t handle watching my sister shed her innocent tears; instead, I felt a wave of madness going through my body. I wanted my siblings to escape that life, this life, their life but it seemed impossible.