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Vision: The Blind Steps of a First-Generation College Student

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Adrian lay awake, staring up at the ceiling of his darkened bedroom listening to his parents discussing something in hushed undertones in the kitchen. His eyes were wide open, yet it would not have made any difference, for Adrian had gone blind the year before in an accident where he had fallen from a truck. His parents often tested him, asking if the light was on or off in the room in the hopes that he would someday recover some vision, yet so far there had been no change. Adrian knew that his parents were deeply concerned and he often overheard them discussing this doctor or that, or some sacred chapel that was said to heal. As parents are wont to do, they would sometimes discuss these matters over Adrian's 6 year-old head, believing him not old enough to follow the conversation. Though they were correct to a certain extent, Adrian was able to follow enough to understand that great decisions were being made around him.

Now, as he strained his ears in bed to listen he caught the words, El Norte, and something about his aunt Rachel. Adrian's father murmured a question, and Adrian's heart suddenly gave a lurch as he heard the unmistakable sound of his mom beginning to cry. His dad spoke again comfortingly and seemed to be laying out an argument. The sound of his mother's tears eventually began to taper off, and Adrian heard her ask a question and then his father's reluctant affirmation. As they talked deep in to the night, the quiet rise and fall of their familiar tones soothed Adrian's mind into a dreamless sleep. Children's minds are constantly active, jumping from one thing to another, and Adrian was no different. By the next day he had forgotten the midnight-hour conversation. Yet, there remained a certain uneasiness that he unconsciously noticed and that colored the rest of that year. Once in a while he would hear mention, in passing, the United States. However, it was to be yet another year before Adrian would truly know the full scope of his parents' plan and, much, much later, their sacrifice.

Adrian came awake in stages as his mother shook and hustled him along as he, half asleep, attempted to get dressed. Soon, in a flurry of activity and confusion, Adrian found himself outside in the cool predawn air, and his mom was saying her tearful goodbye as her son was vanished into the dark interior of the car. Confusion combined with his half-awake state lent the atmosphere a strange dream-like quality that would stay with Adrian for a long time to come. The trip to the airport went by in a blur of sounds and hushed tension. It was only as they boarded the plane that Adrian began to reach out from his withdrawn state.

"Where are we going Madrina," he asked his mom's sister, who was also Adrian's godmother.

"You're coming to live with us for a while."

As a voice spoke over the intercom welcoming them and wishing them an enjoyable trip, he asked tentatively, "Where do you live Madrina?"

His aunt replied kindly, "It's in a city called Garden Grove in California. That's in the United States," she added, seeing Adrian's questioning expression. "We'll be there in a couple of hours. You should try going to sleep."

Yet Adrian could not sleep. This was a whole new world. The mere mention of the United States had a near mystical air to it, and he kept trying to imagine what it would be like living there. The fear of being separated from his parents was palpable. He feared that they had sent him off to live alone, and he had to keep pushing down the thought that he might never see them again.

Of course he was not alone. On landing and finally reaching his aunt's home, he found himself in the company of his two cousins. It was not an easy transition; for the most part, Adrian had kept himself company. He had no real friends to speak of until this point, for children are adventurous and are often on the run and Adrian could not keep up. His cousins spoke mainly English, and Adrian found himself lost in a web of nonsense words and expressions that at times left him longing for home. Little did he know that his life was about to take yet another unexpected turn.

Adrian was unaware that his aunt had enrolled him in a school for the blind called the Braille Institute. It was the summer of 2001 when eight year-old Adrian went for the first time to Braille, where he was to take his first hesitant and unknown steps toward a higher education. It began innocuously enough with a sandwich and a small boy named Hector.

Up until this point, Adrian had always had his parents or his aunt to help him with everything; he had never made himself food. It was the purpose of the Braille Institute to teach its students to be independent self-motivated individuals. That morning, Adrian found himself surrounded, for the first time, by other children his age who were also blind. This was one of the critical catalysts that began to pull Adrian out of his deep, dark shell.

"Can you please pass me the grape jelly?"

"Que?" asked Adrian.

"Oh, you don't speak English," asked the small boy in Spanish.

"No, I'm new here. I'm from Mexico."

"My name is Hector. What's your name?"

"Adrian."

Although Adrian did not know it, this would be the beginning of a long friendship that would span the years leading up to college. Over the remaining summer days, Adrian, with the help of Hector and others at Braille Institute, began to learn English bit by bit. His aunt enrolled him in a nearby elementary school where they also offered services for the blind. This was the start of his official American education.

Spelling tests, reading comprehension, homework—these were introduced to Adrian during the first year of school. As he struggled to learn both English and the code system of dots called Braille, his first mentor stepped in to Adrian's life.

"Well done! You only missed one on the test Adrian!" Carol Lewis, Adrian's Braille teacher, sat across from him going over his vocabulary test. She used a mix of English and broken Spanish to communicate with her charge, though she found herself having to use the latter less and less.

"Thank you Miss Lewis," Adrian replied, the traces of his Mexican accent, still somewhat noticeable, yet very much in decline. Sunlight from the warm April afternoon streamed through the classroom windows and Adrian squinted his eyes, smiling across the table at the blurred form of his favorite teacher. Over the last year he had steadily gained small amounts of vision, until now he could, by straining his eyes, see the red of his mentor's blouse and the blurred face above it.

"So what book are you listening to tonight," asked Miss Lewis.

"I'm reading another Hardy Boys book, this one is about smugglers!"

Much of Adrian's advances in the learning of the English language were due to his new great love of audiobooks. Encouraged by Miss Lewis, he read increasingly harder and harder books, expanding his vocabulary and, at the same time, learning about the culture of America. Through the many books he read, he caught glimpses of the American lifestyle and the way Americans interacted. As the year drew to a close, Adrian was a changed person. He now knew English, Braille, and had several friends with whom he could easily converse. He was now delving into the world of social interactions on an equal footing. In this field, his avid reading habits served him well, as he was able to contribute opinions and thoughts of his own to the conversations around him.

Another happy change that happened to Adrian was the reuniting of his family. He, his mother, father, and 3 year-old brother lived in a small apartment near his aunt. He knew that it was at times a struggle to make ends meet, yet despite this he was happy, for they were together. As the years went by and Adrian excelled in school, he became more and more independent. He also became more aware of the realities of life. While before he had had a vague feeling of unease when something was wrong, he was now privy to more of the problems that his family faced.

Being undocumented was not something that Adrian had any idea about. However, the constant fear of being deported that his parents lived under soon became part of what it meant to Adrian to be in America. His first taste of bitterness came at the end of sixth grade.

"Mom! Can you fill this permission slip out and let me go to sixth grade science camp," Adrian asked eagerly as soon as he walked through the front-door of their one bedroom apartment. His mom laughed and said, "At least come all the way through the door before you start asking me for things! Let me see that slip. I

don't see why not," she murmured looking through the paperwork, "we just have to ask your dad." Then she stopped suddenly staring at the paper, "I'm so sorry *mijo*, but you can't go."

She explained that as they had no documents he could not provide all of the required paperwork they asked for. For the first time, the fact of his family's undocumented state became instantly real to Adrian. He was unable to partake in one of the highlights of sixth grade, which he had been looking forward to for a long time. Sadly, this was only the first of many such disappointments.

The shrill ringing of the phone at three in the morning jerked Adrian awake and out of bed. It was quite unusual for anyone to be calling at this time of night. He stumbled his way out to the kitchen where the groggy voice of his father could be heard answering the phone.

"What's the matter! What happened," his father demanded, a note of concern in his voice. There was a resounding silence in which the looming presence of bad news peeked and then crashed down upon them!

"What?" Adrian's hands tightened in to fists and he hunched his shoulders as though waiting for a blow. He had never before heard his dad's voice crumple or be filled with so much pain. It was his grandfather, he had suffered a heart-attack and was dying in the hospital. Being undocumented, Adrian's father was unable to be with his dying father. The death of his grandfather drove home the vicious reality of the huge sacrifice both his parents had made in order for Adrian to have a life. As Adrian entered in to high school, he took this truth to heart and strove to make sure his parents' sacrifice was not wasted.

Yet despite his striving, there was much that Adrian could not control. His immigration status remained an insurmountable mountain behind which college hid tantalizingly just out of his reach. This was the case for much of his high school career. It was not until the last year of school that the passage of the Dream Act finally granted Adrian the opportunity to prove himself college-worthy. Yet, if it had not been for Adrian's second mentor it is likely that he would not have been able to attend a university.

Even as far back as Adrian's freshman year she would insist, "Adrian, I don't care that you don't have papers—we're going to get you into some college somewhere." Though Adrian doubted this, and said as much to his teacher, she made sure that the classes he took were rigorous and followed the A through G requirements needed to apply to a university. As a result, when the Dream Act passed Adrian was well prepared.

"Mrs. Rush! The Dream Act came through! I can apply for a worker's permit and go to college!" Mrs. Rush, who had been filing papers, dropped her stack of folders. "That is great Adrian! We need to get started on those applications as soon as possible!"

"Applications?"

“Yes, college apps! The sooner we get started the better! We need to get on financial aid as well!”

Lacking much of the knowledge concerning college (as he was the first in his family to even attempt it), it was a great relief to Adrian to have Mrs. Rush as a mentor who could guide him through the many hoops needed to successfully apply to and attend a university. She was a constant source of support, and Adrian knew, without a doubt, that it was because of her that he had the opportunity to take the next step toward his educational goals.

Adrian clutched tightly the edge of the desk as he scrolled through the email from Dartmouth University, then released his pent up breath as he read, “Unfortunately, due to the high number of competitive...” He had known it was a long shot, but still he had hoped. He moved on.

Out of the eleven schools he had applied to, four had rejected him and now he had to decide. May loomed a few days away and the moment of truth lay before him. As much as he might have wished, no one at home could advise him on what decision to make. As a matter of fact, Adrian’s parents seemed more and more distant, not because of a failing relationship, but because they did not understand this new world that their once solitary, dependent child was entering. The decision was up to him, and, in the end, Loyola Marymount was his choice.

Leaving the world he had built behind was heart-wrenching; however, Adrian felt strangely light and free. “He was,” he thought to himself, “truly independent and living on his own for the first time. “LMU is not bad at all,” he told himself. True, it was a bit of a culture shock, especially with the wide variety of people from across the country and around the world, but living on his own definitely agreed with him.

Truly realizing that being first generation could be an identity only came with the introduction of his fellow students in the First to Go Program, many of whom shared similar backgrounds as his own. Despite this shared link, college was turning out to be vastly different in structure and social setting than anything Adrian had experienced before. His old home became distant, and he began to think of LMU as his real home. He would sometimes call his old home and find little to talk about. It was, he realized, a mark of his growth. He was at last achieving what his parents had set out to give him—an independent life. The pain was bitter sweet. He was glad to be validating his parents’ struggle and was eager to give back to them. Yet, over time, he found himself existing more and more out of their lives.

Adrian leaned against the sill of the upstairs window of his dormitory. chin resting on his propped fist, peering out into the falling rain and reflecting on how he had come to be there. It was, at times, almost dream-like, he mused. And things had moved so incredibly fast and he had, he knew, been extremely fortunate. He could still recall the small illiterate blind boy struggling to keep his

head up, but it was as if that had been another person, another life. Here he was now, more than half way through his first year at a nationally ranked university with new friends and the beginning of a new life. It was, he thought, a twisting winding road that had lead him here. He also knew that it was hard to see all the hills and valleys he had traversed from afar, and that there were many more to come, hidden unseen around the next bend. However, he felt eager and willing to take them on. Adrian smiled to himself. Turning, he strode out of his room, down the stairs, and out to continue his long journey.