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It's Not Just a Leave

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Part I: It's Not Just a Leave

April 4, 2014

A few days ago, I spoke on a panel for incoming Latino students. Not my first panel, and as a sophomore, I know it will not be my last. Though I was speaking primarily to the parents of these students, in the back part of my mind, I expected certain questions to be asked of me: what life was like on campus, how easy it would be to make friends, how long would it take to get over homesickness? Of course, I cannot forget the one question that haunted my own mind as I was off trying to make friends at this potential school during my Latino Overnight: finances. As I sat down the table from my dad, I could feel his empathetic sigh when a parent asked him about how we pay for college. Memories of my freshman year—countless tears, staring at a screen displaying the 20k I had no way of paying off, and the constant praying that the number would just go away by some miracle of God—instantly replayed in my mind, not a fresh wound but more like an ever present fog in my life. I can always see the light and its end but it never fails to hover and remind me that I'm here but only through struggle.

It's not a topic I'm uncomfortable with. I've constantly written about it—a small collection of my poems are dedicated to being forced to leave LMU, dollar billed shackles pulling down on my wrists as I walked off campus, guilt and shame burning into my eyes. But there is something about feeling the words come out of my mouth that leaves a foul taste. Like an after-coffee taste, or how when you're sick with enflamed tonsils, or the post-hangover dry taste that lingers in the back of your throat that you just can't wash out no matter how many times you brush your teeth or gargle mouth wash. It's a taste that I can never get used to and just want out. Even if I want to stay quiet about it, however, I know I can't be. There are too many asking me to tell it. Too many people asking me how I did it.

I don't know.

How do you explain the truth? That you have no idea as to how you managed to make everything happen. That it was by some miracle of God that I managed to find the money. That it was luck that an old settlement finally came in and that helped pay a good majority of my debt.

Yet, when those parents came up to me after the panel, asking me the familiar question, *How did you do it?* I had to be honest.

It was a combination of luck and faith. Constant contact with Financial Aid. Here's the number of my counselor. But don't be disappointed if it's not meant to be. It almost wasn't for me.

Money.

Money has always been the problem. I thought my financial aid package from LMU was one of the biggest. It covered three-fourths of my tuition; if I would have looked closer at my other packages, I might have chosen either Cal State Long Beach or UC Irvine. The numbers were smaller, but then again so was the tuition.

The concept of a private university won me over, though. Being able to say that I went to this small, private university right after high school—it was a luxury, a privilege that I felt I deserved having pulled all the all-nighters in high school. Especially after Overnight. How could I say no to a community that made me feel like I was at home? To friends that were already imagining our first year together?

You can't register for classes until you have paid off the semester.

I first asked my dad about payments in August. His response was simple: “I am not paying for your school. I can't afford it.”

When I was younger I used to think that the ocean rumbled because it was screaming out of heartache. The ocean's cry could not have overshadowed the way my heart started crying, the literal breaking I felt as I sat in the back of the car as I was getting dropped off at my dorm. I didn't say anything else, stayed quiet as I took down my weekend bag filled with freshly done laundry.

It wasn't until my parents left and my newest closest friend came in that I felt the waves over take me; drown me as I choked out the situation.

It's not uncommon for first-gen students to face financial issues.

It was with two checkboxes that I started realizing that maybe things were going to be different for me in college. I remember in high school already starting to use the term “first-gen” as a part of my identity. It was going to be my gateway to scholarships and college in general. I embraced this. I embraced the “benefits” that I thought would come with accepting this identity.

I never thought of what it truly meant to be first-gen. I never thought of how other students might have knowledge that I didn't. I never thought that maybe I was missing pieces to the puzzle. In my mind, I had figured it all out.

All on my own.

My own well-earned bragging right.

It's why I held my head in shame. Why I hated that I let the situation get so out of control. Why it was hard for me to go to bed at night because of this constant migraine that I couldn't shake off no matter what I tried. Why I ended up hospitalized for a few hours. "Stress-related heart condition," the doctor had said.

I know, you really didn't need to tell me twice.

No te preocupes, papi. Me salgo por el semestre. Regreso cuando la hora llegue.

It was right before my debt went to collections. I finished the online application. The words "Leave of Absence" blaring brighter than the lights of New York City. I could see the sympathy in my parents' eyes. Later, I would learn how my dad felt like he had *failed me* because he couldn't afford the school of my dreams.

"Hi Genesis, my name is Linda Rojas*. My parents met you at Latino Overnight and said that you can help me. I love LMU and I want to go there with all my heart, but it's the issue of financial aid. How did you do it?"

Everyone assured me that I was making the right decision. That I wasn't failing because I decided to take the leave. But that didn't mean I felt content with my decision. I felt the detachment from my friends. I still kept in contact with them but that didn't mean I didn't feel left out on some level.

By the end of winter break, I could feel myself questioning my identity. I couldn't help but think, "If I wasn't first-gen then this wouldn't have happened." How can I say that for sure? I have met students that are not first-gen yet they have also been faced with the same issue as me. It wasn't just a "me" or "first-gen" issue; I just didn't see it that way. The world was a vortex of me and my issues. The only ones that rang through to me were the ones tied to people from the same background or similar issues to mine. It was my honest belief at the time.

Hi Linda. I'm going to be honest: luck was my captain; faith was my anchor. I'm going to tell you how to do this, at least how it worked for me. But please, if at the end of the day, you realize you can't despite all the resources you have used, don't feel like a failure. You'll find yourself at the school you are meant to be at.

Part II: Some Bridges are Never Finished

March 15, 2014

It was never something new to me.

I noticed it the first day I entered one of my major classes and saw a sea of golden hair and skin that was lighter than mine. Not that my skin is dark (I am often mistaken for being a mix of white and Asian), but entering the classroom immediately made me feel as though I might as well be wearing a stereotypical *sombrero y botas*. I shouldn't have felt such gap between my classmates and myself. After all, in high school I was often the only Latina in all of my AP and Honors classes.

I didn't experience culture shock when I first stepped onto campus during Latino Overnight. Everyone talks about it, but I didn't see it. On the contrary, I saw the opposite: a saw more Latinos on one campus than I had ever seen. My middle school was primarily white; whereas my elementary and high schools were both primarily Korean. So to go to a school and find out—not to mention *see*—that the Latino population is almost 25%, I wasn't struck by differences but rather similarities.

At least, that was my first impression.

My major is one that I have come to call a "Privilege Major." It is one that does not have a clear cut path like Engineering or Pre-Med. Whenever I tell someone that I'm majoring in English the first question I get is, "Oh. Are you going to teach?"

No.

I may eventually want to be a professor but that does not mean that is the only thing I can do with my major. I could have decided to go into Law, Government,

Advertising, Public Relations, etc; the only reason I didn't was for the simple fact that they did not attract me. It may sound naïve to some, but I truly believe in doing something that I love as my career. I don't want to suffer and dread each passing day as I go to work. If I only have one life, why am I going to waste it and make memories of moments that I dreaded rather than enjoyed?

Back to the main point: because English is a major that not many know exactly what to do with it aside from teaching, I noticed that there are very few minority and first-gen students in my classes.

As if I needed another rift from my peers.

They would talk. They'd talk of how their parents encouraged them to pursue this degree as opposed to a Law one, or of how they were advised to minor in Biology because it would look much more appealing to medical schools as opposed to majoring in the sciences and taking the "traditional" route. The most my mom advised me on choosing my major was always along the lines of choosing something that I liked.

My dad was a different story.

The very first thing that my dad told me in terms of choosing a major was "make sure it will leave you money." Evidently the notion of me following my "dreams" was not much of an option. Although, looking back I know it wasn't with the mal-intention of discouraging me but rather trying to avoid a repeat of events. Financial security for their children is every parent's worry after all.

It's just too bad that in his eyes, the only majors and career paths that are guaranteed to leave me money are Business, Finance, Real Estate (he especially pushed for this one), and anything in the sciences so I could become a doctor or nurse. I did consider all these fields at some point in my life but... how could I pursue them when I had my life epiphany when I was in fifth grade? (Earlier if you read my first grade and kindergarten journals that claim my lifetime goal.) It's not as though I didn't try. I got my Real Estate license to appease him; I did look into Business programs. But no matter how hard I tried, I just couldn't feel a spark with these fields

My passion was, is, with words. It always has been.

Not that my dad was too happy about it. When I finally told him that I was officially going into every university I apply to as an English major the first question out of his mouth was: “what are you going to do with that?” Even after telling him my plan, he wasn’t convinced. Especially when I wanted to go to LMU. “Why are you going to pay 50k to study something that might not even leave you half that?”

We rarely talk about it.

So when I hear my classmates talk about their own parents’ knowledge on the importance of English I can’t help but feel the tinge of jealousy tugging at my heartstrings. To have been told just exactly what I can do with literature would have definitely made my decision a lot easier without the side of guilt.

I think the fact that so many of my classmates have had this luxury made one of my professors feel like it was appropriate to say: “I’m sure most of you have had servants so you understand—the lower, working classes are the ones that know the secrets of the upper class.”

We were discussing *Julius Caesar*, I think, and the power of the lower class and the secrets they can find because of their access to the “hidden files” of the wealthy. While I understand that my professor said “most” I could still feel myself get on the defensive. Especially when, as I looked around my class, a lot were nodding and even laughing.

I understand; it is LMU, after all, a school that is primarily made up of those who are well-off economically, but this surge of annoyance at the ignorance this comment expressed was literally pounding through my veins like a can of Monster. As I walked throughout the school, I couldn’t help but suddenly pick up on this topics discussed amongst my peers. Topics surrounding crucial decisions as to whether to spend Spring Break in Cabo or Aspen; or how parents don’t understand that not going home for the holidays is essential for the growing student. Never have I seen the tide so wide. I always felt that I connected with everyone in at least one way, but when I would hear everyone talk it was like a new foreign language that I had to learn quickly lest my own “white cover” be blown.

But some languages just never get tied to your tongue no matter how long you practice.

Part III: Filling in Spaces

December 24, 2012

I signed it.

I hate that I had to sign it. I keep staring at the screen—blank, as if just a few seconds ago it didn't read: *Your leave of absence notice has been submitted. Thank you for your time.* Followed by some other logistics as to what will happen after it has been processed and recorded.

It's the logical choice. It's done to buy more time: more time to save, more time to prepare. So then why can't I stop the hands twisting at my heart?

I failed. My goal was to make it into school, which I succeeded at, but what was the point if I could not stay in? All that work was for nothing I guess. My parents say it's not my fault. Alex says I just aimed too high. Allan is the only one that just looks at me and then gives me a pat on the back.

I think it's supposed to be comfort.

February 5, 2013

Never thought I'd say this, but I hate school. No, not school because LMU was the best place I could have been. I hate the JC that I'm at. Maybe it's because I have already experienced the fast-paced, never gonna' stop, always stressing but we're loving it pace of the four-year university, that this mellow, we'll leave when we leave, I already have "too much" on my plate atmosphere suffocates me. It literally penetrates me with this knife of anxiety, as if I can't stop fidgeting because all I want to do is move—be involved, be pulled in twenty different directions, be overly stressed.

That's what I want. What I need. In one semester it became a heroin that I now apparently have to have injected in me every semester unless I want to go insane.

But there's nothing to do here. I went to the club fair, and there were so few clubs available. It's not what I'm used to.

I just really want this semester to end.

I want to be back at the school on a bluff. The school with a chapel that you can see as you walk down Alumni Mall. The school that's small but does not fail to take you on an adventure with the right people. The school that is so expensive that I cry and wish for the price to go down so that it can be made easier for me to attend.

The school that I want to desperately call mine.

April 18, 2013

It still looks the same.

I don't know what I was expecting. Maybe for some sort of drastic change? But I think that's my egotistical mind counting my absence as the central part of this university, when really it's a small change.

I all but run to Student Accounts. I really don't want to be seen by anybody. I didn't tell anyone that I would be coming back for a few hours before I have to (forcibly) return to the real world. It shouldn't have to be that way. I should be excited to see my friends—the friends that I already have so many memories with despite being gone for almost the entire semester. But every time I think about it, it's unfathomable.

If they are going to see me, it's going to be as a student, not as a former classmate on a leave of absence.

May 2, 2013, 10:00 AM

I wonder if I would have been thrown into the fountain this morning. I was actually looking forward to it. It seemed so much fun when we did it to Lexie and Sarina. Sure, it sucked that they were being thrown into a shallow fountain filled with ice water but they got cake! And presents, sometimes a crown, and a sash. Because it was their days.

I didn't want the crown or the sash. I wanted the chase. Pretending to run slow so they could catch me and force me over to the edge before letting me plunge into the freezing depths. Those would've been loud laughs and screams echoing throughout the quiet, finals-stressed campus.

May 2, 2013, 11:00 PM

They did it! They decided to join SLG! I'm so happy for them! Even if I can feel my smile twitching, cheeks hurting trying to stay completely genuine. I wonder what it would have been like if I was with them.

To wear those letters...that would have been a great birthday present.

March 5, 2013

¿Por qué no me oyes?

Don't you hear the words I say? Don't

you see my fingers itching for something more to grasp other than a pencil and pen?

¿No oyes la lagrima—desesperación en mi voz? The way I just want to run and run

far and come back when I want. When *I want*. Not have to, *want*. *Óyeme, por favor*.

I thought you would always listen, always support me. So why not now? When

I need it most. *Usa este tiempo. Es tiempo de relajo. Tiempo de paz. Entiéndeme, Mija. No te quieres ir tan lejos. No repites un error de familia.* Family mistakes

are not mine. I want to fall over cliffs, only to grab onto branches as I fall, pull myself up and learn the hard way how to scale the side. Yes, I will crave

for your steady hand—smooth but with hidden calluses from the rocks that have scratched and marked you, but I can't have it forever. You won't

be here forever. *Aproveche este tiempo, Mija. No quiero que te quedes con este dolor de no ver una madre.* But it's a pain I have to learn eventually,

right? I already know the heartache. The few remaining bodies of fresh water will become salty. Phone calls and letters will not be enough to substitute

for you. I know how hard it is to build bodies out of words. As do you. But don't you see your image etched into my heart? Carried everywhere,

I could never forget. *¿Cómo puedo? ¿Cómo puedo olvidar los abrazos que espantaron los fantasmas y las niñas que trataban de matar mi alma?*

Los brazos más fuertes que yo he visto en una mujer. Hombros llenos de paciencia aunque todos te están gritando, tu nunca usas tu voz fuerte.

My heart is not an etch n' sketch. You cannot be erased. I can feel you in every pulse, every breath, every step. I have more of Dad,

but I am always trying to be you.