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# First-Gen Voices: Creative and Critical Narratives on the First- Generation College Experience

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## Te Doy Gracias

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## Prologue

I always wondered why it was that I took forever to come out of my mom. I was supposed to be born on Christmas day, yet I waited a week and I popped out on New Year's Day. Everyone always gives me the "how cool" comment, but honestly no. Everyone is hung over; everyone is practically asleep so I get no mariachi or *serenata*; rent is due by the end of the week; every store is closed. Why did God want me born on such a horrible day? Maybe because Christmas day is his Son's day or maybe that is just how it was supposed to be.

Sometimes I wonder if I was scared to come out of my mom, perhaps because this world can be pretty crazy. First of all, I was born a week late and second, I was not born at midnight, I was born at 8:15 p.m. Maybe the day was cold and my body was too warm inside my mom's womb, but just maybe there was a chance that I was scared. I know it sounds crazy because babies do not really have a complete brain with understanding; they poop, cry, and sleep. But maybe, just maybe I was scared. What if I disappointed my mom, the kind, caring lady, who carried me in her uterus? What about my dad, the man who would constantly tickle my mom and make me kick? What about those strangers and other people out there—how would I interact, how would I fit in?

The thing is, baby Citlaly did not really think that; baby Citlaly just cried, pooped, and slept. The only difference between baby Citlaly and most babies is that she was quiet—would you believe me if I told you that baby Citlaly bored her own mother. When I grew up and would ask my mom how I was as a baby, she would tell me that she would always push me to move or do something, anything. *Quería entretenimiento*—she wanted me to entertain her. Well isn't that beautiful—I was boring. The thing is, I was also obedient; I did what teachers would tell me to do; I listened to my mom and knew that boys had cooties until I graduated high school. But boys did not really have cooties. They were cute sometimes, weird, nice, sometimes mean, sweet, oh and cute! But Citlaly has always been quiet. I made sure it stayed that way because that was the way to get things done without being questioned.

I always made sure that since I was the oldest and first to go to college I had to focus. I was taught to have ambition to never give up. Boys were not a thing mommy and I talked about. Even when I began knowing what butterflies felt like, I knew that topic was off limits. Boys were the last thing my mom wanted to talk about—but they were so cute.

My querida mami, yes she has always been my best friend. She is the woman who carried me in her womb for an extra week, the one who would hold me when boys and girls would make fun of my teeth, the one who still holds me. She was the one who made me laugh and taught me *que en la vida le das azúcar o la amargas*. The one who taught me that in this world the only thing she could

give to me was her support to help me achieve my educational goals. *Mi querida mami*, she is the one who day after day would tell me that boys do not matter—you strive and make your future, make yourself rich so you can be part of a different world than what you now have. Ambition, goals, future *mi querida mami* that is what we talked about, that is what was expected.

But Citlaly, but *I* wanted someone to love me. To tell me the sweetest things and make me feel butterflies. First, there was an 18 year old (I was 16) but he was a fail. Then there was this other guy, but there were things that always made me doubt he was the one. Then there was this boy—quirky, tall, funny, sweet, smart, ambitious—he helped me do things I never thought possible. *Pero mami dijo que la escuela primero, mami dijo que los hombres nomas embarazan*. But this boy, this boy is the reason Citlaly is no longer silent. He is the reason Citlaly, I, have been able to feel such joy.

My mom taught me to fight for what I want, and even when things did not go our way, this boy and I have not let it go away. He is the boy with whom I have made *mami* unhappy, disappointed—but he is the boy who has given me hope. I am not in the womb anymore, I am scared though, even to put these simple words to paper—but he has given me the opportunity to find myself, my voice. To not be embarrassed about what the Church might have to say about us. God, have I failed you, my parents, my family, the people who have guided me? It is my daily question, but I laugh and tell my dear God, I have not failed. I am a Latina, first-generation college student. I am graduating after just three years, and I want to serve my community before anything else. I have given my love to others before myself. Is it so wrong to want something different, something that mothers and fathers everywhere will turn away? *Mami*, you taught me to want a better future but you forgot to teach me how to keep someone by my side and love him dearly. You told me I disappointed you as a woman, but have I not shown you what I am capable of. I know I have no right to say that I am in love, that I have no right to say that everything will be okay, but this is something I choose, that I choose to fight for. Yes I have made mistakes, yes I know I am not perfect, but why continue the judgment, the criticism?

Maybe just maybe, I have finally come to realize that I am not afraid to leave your womb, and maybe just maybe now you are afraid.

\* \* \*

*Letters para ti*

Dear *Mami*,

Remember that one time I cried because *papi* didn't show up at my game, and all I wanted to do was prove to him that I could play soccer just like boys.

You told me papi was busy and working to provide for the family. Remember when I cried because he didn't show to pick me up from that retreat, and all around me were kids hugging both parents? Remember when I just couldn't help but burst into tears when I learned he took the wrong day off, not realizing that my graduation was actually the following week? Each time you justified him; each time you told me that's just the way he was raised. Remember when you told me the story of how you hated my dad because he smoked, and I laughed because at the end of the story you did end up falling for him? But you left out details mami. You left out details of why you continue to justify my daddy; you forgot to tell me that it was love. It was love that made you come to the United States. You said you were dumb and decided you had no other choice because of the lack of support in Mexico. Were you really dumb mami? Tell me, just tell me that you followed my dad because you loved him. Why do you always look down at the beauty of love? Why can't you admit that it can happen even before we are ready to understand it? I know you are scared that I will become pregnant, but do you really not know me, do you really think that because I am so in love I won't think ahead. Mami what is so wrong with love?

Remember the trips to colleges, my active participation in the community to get to college. Remember my anger for getting a B in Geometry or for getting "satisfactory" for participation instead of "excellent"? Mami, all I have built inside me is anger. I have torn myself to make sure I make you and papi happy. When will you ask me what makes me happy? You know I have a passion for learning, but at the end of the day, mami, I dream of a family and being able to achieve my goals next to someone. You tell me to enjoy my *juventud*, but what if I want to enjoy it next to him? I didn't take him to prom because Citlaly was a strong lady; she did not care about a boy—she didn't care—she was strong. But no mami, I was weak. I probably still am, but at least I am able to say that I have someone to share my weakness with. Mami, I love you and it hurts me when you say I've disappointed you, that I have become too weak. But mami, I feel strong, I feel empowered and ready to conquer the world— do you not see that?

\* \* \*

*You have taught me...*

Mi querido Gordito,

Oh how I envy you. The way you speak to our parents—you have such a mouth. I remember when you were born, how excited I was to finally have a little sibling. You were my ducky, my everything. You still are. Remember our adventures, playing pirates, pretending to be Power Rangers. Where did it go? You probably get mad at me for being such a "goody two shoes," but God I'd

rather have bad grades than constantly hear my mom's remarks of disappointment. Remember that one time papi got mad at you for not doing well in class? Remember how I held you? Did you feel anything? I know I did. You are so strong. You speak your mind even though sometimes you get a little out of hand—but you speak up. Why couldn't Citlaly do that, why can't I do that. Or maybe I have already, but it's not normal, it's not something Citlaly would do—speak up.

\* \* \*

### *Las cosas que callamos*

Papi,

If you were to know, if you were to know why mami is so disappointed, would you turn your head around as well? I know you always tell me that I would never disappoint you, that I will never let you down. But mami says I have. I know you both are proud of my accomplishments, but did you know that mami yelled at me and screamed and made me feel as though none of it mattered. I know she loves me, but why are we distant, why did it have to be that way? If you knew our secrets, would you have done the same? You have become stricter on me, you tell me I have limited time to spend with my boy. Are you scared of something that has already happened? The thing is papi you just will never know.

Why is it though that even with your silence, your lack of communication with us, that I have an urge to always make you proud? Perhaps because even though I have gotten older you still treat me like your princess. I am sorry I do not thank you enough. I am sorry for the fear that I have caused my mami. But I thank you, I thank you for everything you have given us, for showing me humility and reminding me that a man is one who puts his family before himself.

\* \* \*

### *You are the strength I have needed...*

“Hatali!!” O how I laugh when I hear you call my name, how I laugh and get filled with such joy when you come running to me after a long day of not seeing me. I remember when you were first introduced to me, mami had tears. She was afraid to tell us that you were in her belly because of the previous baby that was sent back to heaven. But I knew something was going on. Mami never shows that she is tired—she is strong. Now here you are three years later. You drive us crazy, but yet you are the innocence and hope that we have been blessed to receive.

Before you were born, did you know that there were constant arguments at home? That daddy would cry, daddy would cry because he was afraid he would not be able to afford to pay the rent. That Gordito would take so much anger out on me until one day I yelled, I yelled and felt as though I would hurt him—that was not me. I was scared, so I would stay quiet and cry. Before you were born, Citlaly was obedient. Citlaly had relationships that only made her question what kind of guys she attracted. Citlaly was quiet; she did not say much. Hatali wasn't the same before you were born.

Did you know you were one stinky baby and farted like an adult? Did you know that you walked before Gordito or I? Do you know that I admire you—your imagination, your love, your anger, your innocence? You are so young but you have done everything Hatali is barely doing. My dear Yaretzi, just know that you will never be a disappointment because I will be there, and I will hold you and show you that you are the world to us. My dear Yaretzi I will show you that you have given some kind of peace to our family—you have given us faith. You will never be a disappointment, my Yaretzi, this I promise you. *Ni tu ni mi Gordito*. You guys are my life, you guys are what have shown me that I should not be afraid. Parents make mistakes, parents say mistakes. I just definitely know that you two will never be mistakes, will never be disappointments. The thing is, Gordito is a boy; he may face some of the strict judgement of our parents, but if he were to fall in love all he would hear is, “just be careful.” You are a lady, you are a girl, and just like me you too will become a disappointment if you are to fall in love. But Yaretzi you are not alone, and I will make sure you never feel like a disappointment—because Hatali is no longer afraid.

\* \* \*

*Mami,*

*I know you love me, I most definitely know that I do too. You have given me hope when I thought I was alone. All those memories we have built and shared, I treasure in my heart. When I came from Puerto Rico and you told me you were at the hospital...I did not know what to say. Every time you joke around about growing old and perhaps one day not being alive hurts me because as much as I have challenged you these past three years I do not know what I would do without you. You said that the doctor got mad at you for waiting so long for that pain to fully develop until you went to the hospital—necia, strong, do you not see that same character you have is in me. You are scared, yet you are strong, and that is who I am, that is who I truly am. I see fear in your eyes every time I go out, fear that I will become pregnant and lose all that I have worked for. I see fear in your eyes at the weakness that I have because you know you have the same. But mami, you have taught me so well, that I know. I know I am ready for the world*

*that is to come, what I am not ready for is the possibility of losing you. I guess I may want to leave the womb, but I can now see that it is that womb that has helped me shape myself.*

*Te doy gracias por lo que me has dado, por lo que me has enseñado, te doy gracias...*

\* \* \*

Citlaly, it is an Aztec name for Star. What is a star? A star is bright. It shines among the crowd and brings light to the world. But what happens when a star is filled with other stars, what happens when it becomes unnoticed? Citlaly, this story may be for the world to read, but this story is for you to remember who you are. Are you quiet, shy, obedient? What are you, who are you, what will you do? You might never know, but as of now listen to your heart, what can you hear? You hear memories, you hear laughter, and tears. Perfection is not who you are. But listen to your heart—for once listen to it—your brain tells you to be strong to be ambitious, but your heart, your heart lets you be ambitious, lets you love, lets you remember, and makes you weak. Weakness is what mami and papi are afraid of—but open your heart and truly see that your weakness is your strength. It always has been. Citlaly perhaps right now you have made mami unhappy with this boy, but listen to your heart...what do you want? What do you want?!

I want my education. I want to be one badass woman who is able to become weak, who is able to love. I want to make mistakes and not feel this guilt that kills me each time. I want to love this boy, even if perhaps God decides to change that path, but I want to love him and look at him and not think of the disappointment I have caused mami. Because at the end of the day mami, you made me a strong woman; you told me to fight for what I want, to aim far and never let go of my dreams. Well mami, perhaps I do dream of marrying this boy, this boy who I have shared my ambition with, this boy I have given my vulnerability to and to whom I have expressed just how much I want to graduate and have that badass job. This boy to whom I have told I want a house, a house that will provide our children with a roof. This boy who has shed tears because he is afraid just like I am. This boy who has cried next to me not knowing what the hell our future will look like. This boy who shares with me his dreams of being someone his kids could look up to. You may not see that. The thing is though, I have gotten to know this boy more than he knows himself. But mami, what I want is for you to hear my story, to listen to me without jumping to judgment. For you to see that I am not scared, I am not ashamed, and most of all I am proud of all those things you call mistakes. What do I want? I want to accept who I have become, I want to accept that Citlaly, that I am all the weaknesses, all the love and all the ambition you have planted in my heart.

Thank you, mami.

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To my reader,

Remember you are not alone. It takes time to build courage, to find a way to talk to your parents about the decisions you want to make...but know that in the end it is not about changing yourself, but rather becoming who you are. Show them your strength and your weaknesses; show them that because of them you have become one amazing individual. Don't forget *que sin ellos no haigas podido estar aqui luchando por tu futuro.*