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

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## First To Everything

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Although we weren't lucky enough to be born into an economically upper-class family, I speak for all three of us, my two younger sisters and I, when I say that we have been blessed to have the parents that we have, to come from a family rich in love and care. Being the eldest of the three, I've always been the first to everything. The first to go through the rebellious "I hate my parents, they're ruining my life" stage, the first to get privileges like a phone and a later curfew, and of course the first to go to college. My name is Sarah Michelle Poblano, and I am a first generation college student. In order to best tell my story, I must start in elementary school. I was born in Glendale, CA, the "Jewel City."

*Glendale is a unique city, popularly known for many things. Located just a few miles away from Downtown Los Angeles, back in the 1980s, there was a large Armenian immigration into the area leading to modern day Glendale being what is known today as the highest concentration of Armenians in the nation, and the highest outside of Armenia. Followed by Armenian, Latino, Philipino, and Black families blend together in the otherwise White community.*

*Glendale is home to many widely known, iconic establishments such as Griffith and Brand Park, Forest Lawn Cemetery (where my beloved Grandma Martha, Uncle Jimmy and Grandpa Grandpa rest in peace), the Americana, and Porto's Bakery just to name a few.*

Glendale can basically be divided in half. The North side, beginning on Kenneth Road, closest to the Brand Park Mountains you have the extremely beautiful, expensive homes that I envy, owned mainly by more than well off Armenians and Whites, where you'll find at least one white BMW parked in each driveway. And then there is the South side of Glendale, below Kenneth, closer to Griffith Park, next to the train tracks, where I grew up.

Populated mainly with low to middle working class Latinos, where the busy streets are usually free of people, problems with gang violence occur (which for the most part is nothing more than those "wanna bes" feuding over small money, girls and territory), and a sketchy apartment complex around the corner where the police regularly patrol at night.

In the heart of Southern California, the weather is almost always beautiful. Privilege doesn't recognize privilege so people mostly stay inside or get in their cars to avoid the warm-to-hot or breezy-to-chilly weather. Needless to say, we never got very close to our neighbors.

Doesn't really sound like it, but I love it here, this is my home. Sitting out on the front porch watching the sky go from bright baby blue to orange, pink, even purpled during the sunset. Despite the loud bustling and distracting sounds from the freeway, this view always brought me peace. As did going down to Griffith Park just down the corner, walking over to the L.A. River with all the friends I've ever had. *My sisters and I have pretty much made this tradition, sitting on the cement wall of the river, going down as low as we could (which is*

*really low because it can barely be considered a river anymore*) and just sitting and observing, enjoying the natural beauty of the city we live in. Besides the trash, the river is full of life. When we were younger my dad would take us down to the river and point out all the different birds, like the Great Blue Heron for example, wading in the shallow waters. Again, living in the city, it's easy to forget the beauty that surrounds us.

### **Franklin Family**

I lived on Sonora and Lake, three blocks down from Benjamin Franklin Elementary. Most, if not all, of the students who went there during my time also came from primarily Latino working families and lived within walking distance to the school. Living so close to each other and going to the same school, being in the same classes for so long, naturally I developed some really strong friendships, ones that I would have SWORN were going to last forever. I've never been very good at making friends, I guess I'm an introvert or whatever, but in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade nobody cares if you're shy, everyone is automatically friends. *Maybe this is why I clung on to my friends so much as I grew up, I used to think I just didn't want any other friends, but maybe I just couldn't make any other ones.* This isn't something I would've admitted to, not even to myself. My friends were my family, I would always invite people over to the house, welcome them in as if they were blood. I was pretty dedicated to these friendships, even when they weren't as dedicated to me, lucky them.

All is fun and games until you start getting older and are forced to grow up. Messing around and causing trouble is cute while you're little, harmless really. But as you get older your actions begin to define you as a whole person. Growing up in a small, low-class neighborhood with working immigrant parents and not much to do doesn't really help either. A lot of my guy friends by the time we got to middle school, were becoming those "wanna be" gangsters of the city and naturally came my need to be just like my friends, which led to my "wanna be chola" phase. *At this age I was 100% sure I already knew everything there was to know about life. LOL.* I always did well in school but during this phase my friends became a distraction. The problem was that I've always seen the good in people, quick to give the benefit of the doubt. I knew my friends weren't making the best decisions, but I also knew how smart they were. I mean, we were in the same reading level groups back in elementary, and I was always in the highest group, reading above grade level. Knowing this, I knew that they all had potential. But without a push in education coming from home, as I was blessed to have, it's easy to get caught up in what my dad calls "stupids." My friends didn't have much if any enthusiasm when it came to being "college bound." School was more like a place to kick it and chill with friends till the bell rang, if they even decided to

show up or stay on campus for the day. But this wasn't acceptable in my house. Since day one my parents have always expressed to us, my sisters and I, how important getting an education and doing well in school is. And remember, I'm the first-born so my parents spent a lot of time and energy when I was baby making sure they did everything right for me and my future. I was reading fluently by two years old. School was never difficult for me, I was always on top of the class. But at this stubborn age, the carefree attitude that my friends were living by was so attractive to me and my parents knew it. The road my friends were headed down was not the one my parents sacrificed and spent hours of love and care and "raising me right" for me to go down too. They anxiously wanted me out of this circle that I had so eagerly put myself in. They had to snap me out of it. Their solution? Private Catholic High School.

### **Blow Job HS**

This is where the "I hate my parents they're ruining my life" phase started. Away from my friends, mi familia? This is some kind of sick joke right? But no, it was reality. Before I knew it I was standing in the dressing room at Crown Uniforms trying on what was going to be my new school uniform. Baggy, unflattering khaki pants with a choice between a navy blue or white polo shirt that had to be tucked in at all times. The second I looked into the mirror and saw the school initials "BJ" on my chest, I started balling. I was being sent into a totally uncool foreign place, away from my comfort group, to Blow Job Private Catholic School.

At the time it felt like the biggest and worst punishment my parents could ever even *think* of doing to me. As if the ugly uniform wasn't enough, when I finally stepped foot onto the campus, I immediately felt out of place. My first day I found myself sitting alone in a school literally the size of a parking lot, without a single person had any interest in talking to. I was too cool for private school kids, too ghetto, they didn't understand me or who I was, who my real friends were. Everyone was dressed the same, how would I tell who is most like me? And as if making friends at this place wasn't going to be hard enough already, I suffer from what is known as "resting bitch face." Apparently when I'm minding my own business and doing nothing in particular with my facial muscles, I look like a mean, nasty, stuck up bitch. This wasn't confessed to me until my senior year when I finally found a group that let me in, and more importantly, whom I could tolerate. *Wait a second, senior year? What the hell were you doing for four years?* Well, as any young rebellious girl who was mad at her parents for sending her off to private catholic school and ruining her life forever, I found a boyfriend. I was a 14-year-old rising sophomore and he was a 17-year-old rising senior. Long, emotional, and ultimately pointless story short it didn't end up working out in my

favor. As always, I should've listened to my parents from the beginning. They're ALWAYS right. Always.

### **Bellarmino-Jefferson**

This hardheaded thinking lasted about a couple of years. By the time I got to my junior year at Bell-Jeff I realized the blessing my parents had given me. The sacrifice they had made for me. Private school isn't free and it isn't cheap, and we didn't have an overflowing amount of money to begin with. But they wanted me to be around people who truly cared about their education, about their futures. I was always top of the class in elementary and middle school but now I was more like top 15 out of a tiny class of only 59. The competition to get into a university was serious. I ditched the rebellious tween stage and moved on to be an aspiring first generation college student. I had realized why my parents ruined my life and decided to add an extra eight thousand dollars a year expense to their already tight budgets, they loved me. Not only that but they believed in me. I took all the Honors and AP courses available to me and graduated with a 4.2 GPA. Before I knew it I was a senior and was looking into which university I could see myself in. My mom always pushed me to stay on top of college stuff. She had me touring campuses my sophomore year. One of the first campuses I visited was Loyola Marymount University. One walk along The Bluff and I immediately fell in love. There was something about the atmosphere, the extremely friendly tour guides, the mission and values of the university to be "men and women for others," and the fact that it's only a 30 minute drive back to Glendale, I knew right away that this is where I needed to go. Easier said than done though, LMU isn't easy to get into. The college application process at my house was not an easy one. As much as my parents supported me and wanted to help me in every possible way, the entire process was new to them. My mom slaved hours and hours of her time researching everything there was to learn about college applications. Every day she came home with thick packets of information on so many different schools. Every day she would be on top of me making me put in time to finish applications and work on my personal statements. At the time it was overwhelming and we most definitely got into big arguments over how I wanted to spend my time but now there are no words to describe how much I appreciate her endless effort.

Finally the day came when I received a nice thick envelope for Miss Sarah M. Poblano from Loyola Marymount University. I had gotten into a few other schools by this time, and was even offered really good financial aid. But this was it, this was my dream school, and all the other schools were too far away from home. I just had to get in. I would imagine myself walking around campus, meeting countless friendly faces, finally creating those strong connections I used to have when I was younger.

## Loyola Marymount University

I got in. I actually did it. And I was the only one in my class who applied and got accepted. I was so shocked and so relieved. I was ecstatic that my dream was one step closer to coming true. The only down side was the financial aid. I hadn't gotten as much as I had hoped, nothing close to the offers the other schools gave me. I was scared this would keep me from being able to go. My parents told me that we really had to take the money into consideration. Sixty thousand dollars a year isn't realistic for us. Even though my mom stood next to my dad and agreed with everything he said, and so did I with a choice between paying a little over one thousand a year versus sixty thousand. But when my mom looked into my eyes she could see how bad I wanted it.

My mom wasn't able to finish getting her degree back when she was in college. There had been a bit of a family feud between my mom and my grandparents as a result they stopped paying for her tuition and she was forced to drop out. She wouldn't let finances get in the way of helping me achieve my dreams and reach my full potential. Her entire life my mother has sacrificed for her family.

My parents started pulling money out from everywhere they could. This wasn't easy; again we weren't born into a financially wealthy family. We were already struggling as it was, as my parents call it, living paycheck to pay check, a lifestyle they are determined not to let me get stuck in. While we were filing for FAFSA that year I learned that my parents' financial issues were a lot bigger than I realized. Due to the bailout of the banks and the foreclosures that followed, we were on the verge of losing the house. Later I found out my mom had taken out her retirement money. It was all for me. No pressure though.

That summer went by so quick. I was ready to grow up, move out, be independent and start the journey I had been imagining for years. Before I knew it, it was Freshman Orientation. At the end of the day the O Leaders put on a small play for all of us depicting life at LMU. Each scene sent me into a daydream, imagining my life at LMU, picturing all the laughs and smiles with my future lifelong best friends. Sitting in an auditorium full of what would be my peers for the next four years, I was so proud of myself. I am a Lion.

\* \* \*

This is not what I had imagined. I thought everyone was going to be super friendly and easy to talk to but instead clicks formed almost immediately. All of the rich girls clung to each other as if not to get contaminated by the rest of us. Not many people even so much as acknowledged my presence. I know I'm a 5'0" shorty, but invisible? I lived in Sullivan and had a rich Asian roommate who

clearly had no desire to want to become friends with me. In all of my classes I would do my best to sit next to the group of girls I thought I might get along with, hoping a conversation or a simple “can I borrow a pen?” would spark a lasting friendship. But that never happened.

Ninety percent of the girls here are white, wealthy, tall, toned, and absolutely beautiful. I physically didn't fit in. Every day was a shot at my already low self-esteem. I tried dressing extra nice in the beginning but since I wore school uniform for the past four years, I ran out of clothes to wear and I ended going back to my usual leggings, vans and a simple top. Walking out of my room dressed in the same clothes I've had for years, I felt intimidated by the surplus of designer shorts and dresses, cleavage and under booty everywhere. I was surrounded by beautiful Milani bracelets, designer book bags, beautiful accessories and shoes, everything I would absolutely own if I could afford it all, while all I had was my black hair tie on my wrist and a new pair of white Vans. While I had my old and broken iPhone 4, they had the newest iPhone 5s. It quickly became clear to me that I was never going to fit in with the regular or popular crowds. I may be loved and even admired by some back at home but here I was the lowest of the low on the social scale. I wanted nothing more than to go back home to Glendale, where I fit in. Here on campus I was far below average. Not to sound conceited, but back home everywhere I went a young boy would hit on me or at least give me a second glance. Here? Nothing. I'm about to start my junior year and I have yet to be hit on. I can't blame the guys; there simply are better options to choose from.

I began to rethink my acceptance into LMU. Did I get in just because I'm a Latina and they needed to reach a certain diversity count in their student population or something? Maybe it was because I was the only one at Bell-Jeff who applied to LMU who actually spent time on their personal essays and so I just got lucky. My first semester was tough. After a while I got sick of sitting in the Lair eating my meals alone. Eventually I just started taking my food back to my room where I would wait for the days to go by. I missed my boyfriend and all I wanted was just go kick it with him at the park by the house instead of being trapped here on the bluff. I'm such a chill person, the nicest girl you'll ever meet really, why doesn't anybody want to get to know me? I couldn't really put my feelings and experiences into words but I knew this was not at all what I had imagined my time first time living away from home to be. Growing up I never had any problem being away from my parents or home. In preschool I would have to ask my mom to leave. But now, as a freshman in college, I wanted nothing more but to be at home with my family. I couldn't tell my parents how I was feeling or what I was going through. They had poured every last penny that they had into this tuition and it was because I had asked them to. To go back and say

“nevermind I don’t like it here” was not an option. I just had to figure it out for myself.

### **FTG: Found My People**

Second semester of freshman year I found the First To Go community, a group of first generation college students. It was here where I learned that I wasn’t alone in the feelings I had and what I was going through. Every week we met and were given a safe space to talk about our experiences and relate to each other. I learned that there were actual terms for my experiences, like culture shock and imposter syndrome. I met some wonderful and intelligent people in this class. For the first time I was feeling more at ease with living on campus, I didn’t feel so isolated.

LMU is known for its students to being part of multiple clubs and organizations on campus and I figured it was about time I start looking into some of them. One of the first clubs I learned about was El Espejo, an organization that provides mentorship to middle school kids who live in underprivileged areas. I loved the idea. Helping underrepresented minority teenagers realize their self-worth and inspire them to pursue a higher education. If only there was a program like this back home, a lot of my friends would have ended up differently. I quickly signed up and began mentoring a young Latina girl who at the time was in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade. I met with her every Friday after school and became not only her mentor but her friend. She would tell me about her situation at home, how she’s the oldest and therefore is expected to take care of her baby sister at home. She would explain to me that sometimes she would have to skip dinner herself just so her baby sister could eat. Hearing this broke my heart and quickly humbled me. Being in El Espejo made me realize my purpose, to help underprivileged students like my mentee and like my friends back at home who don’t have the familial support I was blessed to have, to reach their full potential.

I stopped caring so much if people wanted to hang out with me or not, I was here on a mission. A mission to make the sacrifices that my parents made for me worth it, a mission to learn and grow into a successful young woman, a mission to make real difference in the world. I did pretty well my first year regarding my grades and first semester of sophomore year I made it to the Dean’s List. I’ve gotten a little more comfortable in my own skin, tried to stop comparing myself to the beauties on campus and focus on what is more important which is ultimately my success. Not only for myself but for my family. For my parents who gave me everything they had and my two little sisters who look up to me. I owe it to my middle sister Sami the most. LMU’s tuition put a big financial strain on the family. We lost our home of 12 years, the home my baby sister Lizzie was brought to when she was born. Where Sami and I had all of our big birthday



parties, the Poblano house, our home. Although I knew the political/legal reasons that led to us losing the house, I couldn't help but see how my privileges were stepping over my sisters. I had gotten the opportunity to attend a beautiful, prestige school for college but because of that my parents couldn't afford to have Sami in private school anymore, or to get Lizzie extra tutoring help that she needs.

As the oldest I've always been the first to everything. My parents gave me everything they could, and do the same for my sisters. However, now that I've decided to go to an expensive Private Jesuit University and while raising three kids, working full time, my parents have less money, less time, less energy. I still go back home to Glendale pretty frequently but not as often as I did my freshman year. Every time I come home Lizzie is getting taller and looks older. She's becoming a little tween right before my eyes and I can't believe it. I used to beg her to leave me alone and now when I come in the front door and try to hug and kiss her she pushes me off and says "gross, go away" and continues playing Minecraft on the PS3. My parents warned me this time would come but I never believed it would. They're always right. Since I moved onto campus the girls, Sami and Lizzie, share the bedroom with each other, I can tell they have gotten a lot closer and actually get along really well sometimes, which wasn't the case yet when I still lived at home. I start feeling like I'm really missing out on what's really important in life, my relationship with my little sisters and watching them grow up and being here physically for them when they need it. As much as I'd like to be home all the time it's impossible with my hectic schedule. Sami is a junior in high school already, I feel like I was there last week. They're both growing up so fast and I wish I was around more.

Trying to catch up on what I've missed, I sit on the couch in the living room with my mom. Our relationship is the best it has ever been. We've come a long way. I'm an adult now so she can tell me things and confide in me in ways she can't with the little ones. I tell her about how I've been at school, how I've just recently joined a club called Latinos Unidos Por la Educacion (L.U.P.E) a club that will work with high school juniors whose parents are unable to, for various reasons, help them with the college application process. I notice my mom is looking down with a blank face, not exactly the reaction I was expecting.

"What's wrong?"

"Sami isn't doing well in school. I don't know what to do with her."

"What do you mean? How bad is it?"

"Like D's and F's."

Because we've already been through this, we both know how competitive it is to get into a university, even a Cal State nowadays. D's and F's don't cut it.

"What's going on with her?"

I learn about the latest drama surrounding Sami's life. With Sami there is always drama. Not in a bad way but more like she just cares way too much about her friend's issues and not so much her own. She always puts other people before herself. She used to stress herself out so much over issues that didn't affect her at all. She's a really kind soul but unfortunately in this society nice people tend to get taken advantage of. And also unfortunately in this society, colleges don't care about whatever drama is going on in someone's life, it's all about grades and she wasn't making them. I took a step back and started thinking. What the hell kind of older sister am I? Taking all of the privileges of being the oldest and then leaving my little sister to fail? Here I am volunteering my time to work with other juniors in high school with their college applications when I have a little sister at home who is also a junior in high school yet I haven't put the time in to help my own blood, to keep her in check and make sure she stays focused on herself and gets into a university. I simply wasn't home enough and it was backfiring.

"She keeps making comments that school isn't for her."

"That's too bad, school is the only way to succeed in this world ... this is all my fault."

I'm her older sister; she's my responsibility. I should've been here for her and now it's almost too late. The academic hole she's dug for herself is too deep for me to fix. Junior year semester grades are no joke. I ask about Lizzie.

"She's doing okay."

I know Lizzie is having a hard time in school too. She just needs a little extra help and that help should be coming from me. It's just not possible to be home all the time with my jam-packed schedule during the week and since I'm not home she hasn't really been getting the push to get it done. My mom wakes up early to take my sisters to school and then goes to work. She doesn't get home until around 6pm. My dad gets home even later, around 8pm. Sami and Lizzie stay home alone after school. Sami glues herself to her phone and Lizzie to the computer or PS3 to play video games. Nobody is home to tell them to do their homework and make sure they do it. By the time my mom gets home from work she is exhausted, she takes nap and when she wakes up she has to start worrying about dinner for everyone. The two of them both get away easy. "Girls did you do your homework?" "Yes mom" or "I didn't have any today" are their two answers. I should be sitting them both down after school, making sure they get all of their homework done and helping them both along the way. I mean for goodness sakes I work as a fourth grade tutor at the elementary school near campus, I should be able to help my own baby sister succeed in her classroom. I'm a mentor for juniors in another high school, helping them apply to college and motivating them to pursue a higher education. I should be making sure my little sister gets there first.

## **My Mission**

At this point in my life I am not yet 100% sure what it is I want to do in my life. But I do know that I am on a mission. I'm on a mission to make my parents sacrifices worth it. I am on a mission to find myself and become a strong, independent, successful young woman. To inspire my sisters to realize their self-worth and their potential to reach higher education and thrive. They don't realize it but without their success, my own is meaningless. The work I enter in the future will not only reflect my accomplishments but my parents' endless support and encouragement. If it wasn't for their genuine love and dedication to me, I wouldn't be where I am today and for that I am forever grateful. After many hardships and low points, I am beginning to realize my potential and I intend to carry it out in the best way possible. I never thought I would get to share my story in a way that is uniquely my own but because my parents never gave up on me, I now have this opportunity. I understand how hard it can be to put aside all the pain that comes with being a young girl. I too have gone through dark times that have discouraged me and blinded me of the bigger picture; I still battle through them to this day. But in the end I have to remind myself of all the money, the time, the love, the sacrifices made that have gotten me here, in the position to share my story. We're each our own person, we each have different strengths and weaknesses, but in the end we owe it to Mom and to Daddy, Poblano, to become the women they know we can be. Put aside the daily drama and try to see yourself through their perspective because in the end Sami and Liz, they're always right. ALWAYS.