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My Road to Success

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My name is Ana Laura, and today, September 4th, on a really hot Monday morning, I am going to school for the first time.

"Mommy, now that I'm going to school, I'm not a little girl anymore, right?" I asked, standing up on the corner of the bed. I'm proud because this is the only way I can be as tall as my role model.

"You will always be my little girl, sweetie, even when you're 80," responds my mother, as she buttons up the last bottoms of my size 4 shirt. I'm ready for school.

I can see everything in the room moving up and down, up and down... I'm getting dizzy, but I don't want to stop. I feel so excited.

"Yes, so she officially starts on September 4th," said my mom, talking to the principal of the school. She thanked him and hung up the phone. As if it were an automatic process, I stood up, and started jumping on my bed. I couldn't contain my eagerness from coming out like this.

"I AM FINALLY GOING TO SCHOOL!" I would yell over and over, probably annoying the neighbors from downstairs. But who cares?

Six months later, today, now, right at this moment, I'm standing on the bed, looking at my mom's eyes while she buttons up the shirt of my uniform on my first day of school, and that's all that matters to me.

But where's my dad? I thought you might have wondered. Well, he is with his favorite family: Mrs. Business and their son Money, in their beautiful house called "the office." I don't know what was so interesting about that place. What was so important that he always had to run and spend hours and hours sitting there?

Meanwhile... I'M GOING TO SCHOOL!!!!!! I feel butterflies in my stomach. I have a bunch of mixed feelings: excitement, nervousness, and sadness for leaving my mom for the first time, and happiness because I'm doing what I love, finally.

I loved my teacher Miss Lucía, but I didn't love school as much as I thought I was going to. "A E I O U" they made us repeat over and over. I already knew all this. Mommy already taught me how to read and write at home. I feel like I don't belong. Miss Lucía noticed my lack of motivation to be in school, so she talked with my mom and the principal, and now they want me to take something called a Placement Test. I don't know what that means, but I grab my Teletubbies pencil, and I start writing what I'm asked, and answering all the questions.

Here I am, two years later, in second grade instead of first, and I am still feeling this imposter syndrome sensation, feeling like I don't belong, feeling out of place because my classmates are a little bit older than I am.

* * *

Now I'm in 5th grade and my friends don't want to play with me because they think I am a weirdo that likes different things. I'm known as the one who has a book in her hand while the others are playing with a ball, the one who has this little notebook called an agenda and writes her homework there, the one who asks questions in class and actually loves participating.

"You're boring and we don't want you," said the majority. Comments like this became persistent, so I isolated myself—or they forced me to. I had a few friends, Marco and Rachel. We loved playing word puzzles, and riddles. We were good friends until high school when they transferred to a different school, but for some unknown reason, in this grade level, I start to become accepted. My classmates actually want to hang out with me, but there is a new problem now: the age difference. My friends are all older than I am. They are 16 and want to hang out at the mall and go to the movies, but I am not allowed to go out without my parents yet. Will I ever feel like I belong?

It's finally my senior year of high school. The problem persists. Now my classmates are of age; they're 18 and going to the clubs, and I am 16 and have no one who wants to go to the movies with me. I cannot wait to go to college. Not like it's going to solve the problem, but I know I'm going to be exposed to new adventures, meet new people, have new encounters, experience challenges and get out of my comfort zone.

I have decided on my major, and I have my goals set. But there's always a bump in the road. My dad does not want me to go to college. He claims education is not important. "I never needed education, and look at me. I am very successful," he always says. But I disagree because we do not share the same concept of success. He sees it as owning businesses and having money. But what about life experiences? Getting out of your comfort zone? Trying to make a change in the world? That's why I am studying to be a teacher, to change the lives of those with the same passion for learning that I have.

That's how my mom and I see success. Even though she did not have the opportunity to go to college, she has always made unlimited sacrifices to make sure I achieve my goals. When I wanted to study French and my dad did not want to pay for the lessons because he thought they were useless, my mom did everything she could until she saw me with my diploma in my hand, a smile on my face, and a proud heart.

But now this is different. These are not French classes; this is college. This is a big step in the right direction towards my goal. Without the emotional and financial support from my dad, it's definitely a little bit harder, but not impossible. I have my mom, God, and determination, the vehicles that will take me to my final destination. And indeed, they took me to my next stop—and in the fast lane. I got a full scholarship to the best university in my country. This is God showing me that hard work does pay off.

I love campus. It's huge and I have to walk a lot. But every step I take gets me closer to where I want to be and who I want be. As I walk through campus and feel the sun burning on my skin, sweat dripping down my forehead, I can hear the birds make melodies together, and I can also feel the air touching my skin and playing with my hair. I stop and close my eyes, letting myself be as present as possible in the moment. I take a step back and think about my family. I cannot remember the last time we had some quality time together. School and work are taking almost every minute of my life. I feel bad because I cannot be that little girl who used to sit with mom every afternoon to watch TV, or who used to watch their favorite Sunday shows together. I know she understands what my life has become, or at least she tries her best because she hasn't experienced it herself. Although every once in a while, I can see it in her eyes; I can see she misses me. She misses me getting home from school and sharing time with her instead locking myself in my room to do homework. She misses me getting home on a Friday afternoon and making plans for the weekend, instead of having to say goodbye to me on Saturday morning, because I have to work until Sunday evening.

But I have to keep going. I can only hope that one day this will all pay off. And I will be able to give her back all she has given to me. Not only in monetary terms, but in the sense that one day she can be proud of me. And I can never let her forget that I am who I am, and will get where I get, thanks to her. There is no other way it would have been possible.

* * *

I find her face in the crowd amid the thousands of people all looking in the same direction. Standing on stage, I whisper thank you while I look straight into her eyes and grab my graduation paper. It's unbelievable. This small piece of paper represents four years of sacrifice, hard work, and dedication. But it's much more than that. It represents a life changing experience, four years of learning. A key that opens the door to the following step. I grab the paper tight in my hand, and I read the big sign that says: "Felicidades Graduandos" as I cross the exit gates of my school. Leaving behind so many memories and experiences, but coming out into the world so big. This is not the end. This is a new beginning. Where will life take me this time?