

Daley Inkspiration



Student Writing
from
Richard J. Daley College
Spring 2026

Preface

During the Fall 2024 semester, Ana Arredondo, Chair of the English and Speech Department, asked professors to submit outstanding writing by students in their classes. Thus emerged the first edition under the temporary name *Southside*. Our second edition, which was also open to direct student submissions, is the result of an ongoing effort to gather and showcase outstanding work by Daley writers and artists.

The guiding principles of *Daley Inkspiration* are as follows:

- Publication, an important part of the writing process, acts as an incentive for quality writing.
- The ability to express oneself with power and authority through the written word is not the sole province of professional writers.
- Writing has enduring value to students, not only as a practical job skill, but as a method of self-expression and self-development.
- Good writing should be shared so that it can brighten and enlighten the lives of others.

An old Chinese curse goes, “May you live in interesting times.” And here we are. Masked federal agents terrorize communities; protesters have been murdered, detainees subjected to humiliation and worse. In an internet post, the chief executive of the United States threatened to obliterate the civilization of a sovereign country. Universities, medical research, the arts, and environmental protections have all been targeted. These pages pose an inspiring counterpoint. Our student writers write of perseverance in the face of challenge, the enduring value of family, the promise of a better future.

If you are a Daley student who has writing, whether for class or on your own, that you think is suitable for publication, send an attachment—preferably a Word file—to the following address: lit.mag.daley@gmail.com. Artists—submit your work, including photographs.

A happy announcement: Our literary magazine naming contest winner is Angel Leon!

Ana Arredondo, Department Chair
Robert Lawrence, Editor

Contents

Sheyla Aguirre, New Beginnings	3
Rolando Alvarez, Crossing the Border	5
Denise Avalos, Becoming a Mother	8
Guadalupe Espinosa, Winnie the Pooh and the soft awakening	10
Ashaya Garrett, The Realization	12
Karina Gil Melchor, Miles Away from Home	15
Adrian Pelayo, Goodbye Friend	17
Janet Romo, Life Happens	19
Jackie Sullivan, Grandpa and the Grand Canyon	21
Nikki Trevino, My Best Friend	23
Crystal Valdes, Grandma's Corner Store	25
Edith Vargas, Paris in Spring	27
Kamila Burlakova, A home yearned for	29
Guadalupe Espinosa, I Am From	30
Jocelyn Hillesheim, I Am From	31
Demarion Logan, Poem	32
Lindsey Iniguez Valadez, What's left in the fridge	33
Nina Rosario, I Am From	34
Eric Sebastian, Touch and Go Vixen – Cassidy Sebastian	35
Samantha Solano, In between dos mundos	37
Charleen Splitter, I Miss	39
Lorenzo Troche, My Chicago: Ode to Italian Beef	41
Kimberly Yerina, Seven Ways of Looking at Makeup	42
Karina Gil Melchor, Exposing FIFA	43
Giselle Millan, Dental Disparities Among Low-Income Children	47
Janet Romo, Educator Career in Illinois	50
Edith Vargas, The College Diet	52
Sheyla Aguirre, Denise Avalos, Jackie Sullivan, Adrian Pelayo, Juan Santillin: Haiku.	54

New Beginnings

by
Sheyla Aguirre

All I'd known from the age of 16 was how to waitress. I'd never had any other job but being a waitress. School ended at 3:16 p.m. every day, and I remember rushing home to get ready to work the afternoon shift. I would work six days a week from 4-10 p.m., and on weekends sometimes I would do double shifts. The salary wasn't that great at first. Depending on the day, tips would range from 8 dollars up to 90 dollars. I would save up my tips to take trips to Mexico with my sister during the summer, and I bought my first car, which is still the car I have today. I remember looking at it on the Facebook market place and thinking, "This is too square!" I had never seen a Scion xB before in my life!

Sunday mornings at the restaurant got so packed that we never had a chance to rest. I loved it though. I loved being fast paced, darting back and forth all over the restaurant and meeting new people every day! The people I worked with at the restaurant made the day go by so quickly, too; there were new jokes daily and we all got along. But, slowly, things changed. The cooks and waitresses I had known for years started to leave one by one. Rules started to change as well as the people there. Soon enough, my boss opened a food truck and sent his brother and me to work there. We worked great together most of the time, but of course there were disagreements.

Because I was a waitress, I liked things a certain way and I never liked telling the customer we were out of something. "I'd like a chicken taco?" a customer would say, and I would say, "We're out of chicken, but we *do* have pork?" Another would ask, "Do you have tongue," and I'd say, "No, but we do have cabeza." I remember feeling embarrassed every time we ran out of any kind of meat because how can a taco truck run out of the meat for the tacos?!

Over time we gained a good number of customers, so every morning I would tell my coworker to stock up on everything we needed.

"I think I've jotted everything I need down," he'd say.

"Do you have cheese? Sour cream? Enough steak? Did you take the broth for the birria? Seasoning for the steak?" I would ask things like this on a daily basis.

On the weekends, I would still go work the late shift at the restaurant because of how busy it got. One Friday in December, my boss asked me at the last minute if I could work a double shift on Saturday. "Can you work at the food truck Saturday morning and go straight to the restaurant after?"

I replied, "I'm sorry but I can't!" I still needed to buy Christmas presents, and it was in just a few days! He got upset and removed me from the restaurant schedule group chat. I never asked why and he never spoke to me again. Luckily, his brother still kept me in the food truck. The days got slower during the winter, but by that time my salary had gone up. However, tips were really low; they would range from 1 dollar up to 50 dollars tops. I started picking up the supplies, but I stopped communicating with the waitresses at the restaurant. Every morning I would stock up in silence; I just got the things I needed and left. It was a toxic working environment at that point.

I started looking for jobs, started applying anywhere. I applied to a dental clinic to be a dental assistant. When I was going in for an interview, I found out it was at the same clinic my close friend worked in. I was so happy at the thought of us two working together. The interview went great and a few days later I received an email saying I was accepted! But, I just didn't feel

like that was my place to work in. Before my getting accepted, my friend told me that it would be a hard role to work as. She told me I would have to remember the medical name of every tooth, and be a step ahead of the doctor with every utensil ready for him before he asked for it. I knew I wasn't ready; I'd never studied for this type of job.

I sent the doctor an email saying, "Good evening doctor, I want to start off by saying how grateful I am for this new opportunity but I don't feel like I'm ready yet."

My friend texted me saying, "It's perfectly fine if you're not ready! He was grateful you took the time to email him and let him know!" That was a huge weight lifted off my shoulders.

A few days later, my aunt told me, "Why don't you look up on the CPS website any schools that are hiring?" I gave it a try and applied to Bret Harte, an elementary school in Hyde Park. I got a call a week later to go in for an interview. I remember getting ready and being so excited, hoping I get blessed with this new opportunity. I'd applied to be a Bilingual Teacher Assistant. Once I got to the school for the interview, the first thing the principal told me was, "I hope you get the job because the girl before you didn't." I was so nervous because this was all new to me. He explained to me that they were hiring a Bilingual Teachers Assistant because of the new incoming Venezuelan immigrants.

When the interview was coming to an end, I knew I had gotten the job because the principal asked me when I was able to start working! Before starting, I needed to get a few things done. I needed to get a background check, a TB test and a fingerprint scan. Unfortunately, I got sick during midwinter. I remember my bones hurting, having a fever and a really bad cough. I just wanted it to pass by in order to start working. Once my sickness had left, I finished the tasks I needed to get done and started my first day at Bret Harte Elementary on January 17, 2024. I started working only with eighth graders translating all their work and teaching in Spanish. I stuck with my four eighth graders until their last day at graduation. I was so proud of them and myself for getting through the rest of the school year. "*Profe*, we're going to miss you!" they said on their graduation day. I couldn't help but let a few tears out. I remember thinking how they were my first student I got to teach! I will never forget them.

During the next school year I was assigned to work with kindergarten through eighth grade, trying daily to find a way to help all my Spanish speakers learn. I would make myself available as much as I could to get to all my kids at least once a day. I would try to stick in some time to slowly start teaching them English. I would teach my students the alphabet, then letter sounds, then joining three letter words together and build up from there. There is one song I have them learn: "A is for apple a-a-apple, B is for ball b-b-ball..." Now, about half of my students can communicate and speak some English to get them through the day when I am not with them in class.

Working at Bret Harte has changed my life. I have met some really amazing people who have helped me and motivated me to become the amazing woman I am today. My coworkers motivated me to go back to school to study and become a teacher. I am grateful for the path I was given and this new beginning I am living in now.

Crossing the Border

by
Rolando Alvarez

When I was a child, I crossed the border and witnessed my parents giving up their lives in Mexico to provide me with a better life in the United States. It was back in April of 2008 in McAllen, Texas, when I was only seven years old and my family got into a car accident, which started a chain of events that would change everything. That day my family was taken to a detention center for immigrants; we kids were separated from my dad and only had our mom. Sharing the experience with my parents taught me the importance of being selfless for loved ones, of being resilient, and of struggling to be responsible for another life, not just physically but financially.

Our parents told us we were going on a road trip to start a new life in Chicago so we could have a fresh start and a better education without the discrimination we would find in McAllen and with the extended family support system we didn't have in Mexico. We couldn't have known what was going to happen, but it taught us the importance of sacrifice and being there for one another. It all started back in Reynosa, Mexico.

It was morning; the birds were waking up; their songs could be heard at dawn. There was a tall man dressed in all black, his face covered with a mask. He looked like a soldier going to war with a big backpack carrying his rations for the long journey. My mom explained that the man was the coyote, smuggling migrants across country lines, that we would have to listen to him, and that he was going to take us and the people around us with him across the U.S. border; we had to be quick or we'd be left behind.

We had all arrived at the safe house on different days waiting for the others. That morning we were finally leaving. We had to quickly eat our canned foods and drink the water we were carrying so that we could have the energy to make the trip. I remember waking up leaning against a backpack, tired and hungry but with no choice but to listen. It wasn't much but my parents, my brother, and I shared a can of black beans and drank our water for breakfast, which I didn't really like, but we had no choice but to be sneaky to make it across, which meant no noise, no fires, and no stopping, only simple and easy rations. Everyone had to get ready quickly as we were going to leave soon, so there was a bustling noise everywhere. We knew as soon as we finished our small meal we would begin our long journey. I quickly put on my backpack as the coyote walked around the groups and said it was time to start walking.

I remember feeling like an explorer, like I finally got to join a scout troop and was earning my badge. The sky was clear, an eagle was circling overhead, and the sounds of nature filled the air—mountains, trees, with the sun ever so bright. I remember asking the coyote what he had in his hands, and he told me it was a compass that would take us to our destination. As soon as he put it away, I began talking to him about how excited I was to see Chicago because my parents had always told me stories about it from my aunt. I mentioned that I wanted to try some hamburgers from Chicago; just by thinking about them I was getting hungrier and I asked how long we would be walking. To me, it was an adventure. I was so excited to see all the stories my parents told me come to life and experience them myself.

After walking for what seemed like an eternity, the coyote alerted us that several patrol cars were watching the area, forcing him to nervously shout, “Everyone down!” We crouched down quickly into the tall grass, hoping to be quiet, not knowing if we were too late. We could hear how fast the cars were going, but after about ten minutes, the situation calmed down, and we continued walking quickly without stopping. Along the way, I passed a very prickly cactus bush that covered my pants in thorns, making my mother worry and the walk much harder. My brother asked my mother if we were almost there, and I laughingly told him not yet and that as the night fell we would be almost there. I asked my mother if we had any water because I was very thirsty. The thing is, as the sky got darker, we didn't have any water left to ration. She told me to hold on a little longer until we arrived, but since I couldn't stand the thirst anymore, my lips started to dry out.

A little later, the coyote told us that a white pickup truck with a black cover would be waiting for us on the way. Shortly after, my mother saw a watering hole where cows were drinking and asked me if I was willing to drink from there. I was so thirsty that I hurried to drink, but it had a boiled egg taste that I will never forget as I was sick the very next day. Our journey was brutal but it would all be worth it when we finally made it, for the Chicago burgers were all I could think of to keep me going, especially the way my mom described them—I could almost taste one. We finally made it to the truck's location and began climbing into the back, which had an enclosed back tent of sorts meant to hide cargo. We were all crammed in like sardines; there was no other choice but to endure it.

After a while, we noticed something strange about the truck. We were going very fast, and it felt as though the driver was swerving. My mother became worried and discreetly informed my father that the driver was driving erratically; suddenly, we heard the sound of police sirens in the distance and the sound of a loudspeaker telling the driver to stop. The driver kept driving even faster, and we all started bumping into one another. Then the truck tipped over causing everyone to fall out onto the pavement. Quickly, everyone started getting up, ignoring their cuts and scrapes to start running from the border patrol. Some of them got lucky, and some got caught. My brother and I were caught and were quickly loaded into different vehicles, separate from my mom and my dad, who I thought I would never see again.

When we got to the detention center, they were scanning my mom's fingerprints and questioning her; she calmed down only when she saw us and they let her know Dad was going to another detention center. Our room was really cold and uncomfortable; people around us were rude, and only a few were nice to us. When we asked one of the officers if they could bring us some food since we were hungry and thirsty, they brought some but it wasn't enough for everyone. Although we were scheduled for deportation the next morning and our efforts were in vain, we still managed to catch some sleep for the long journey ahead and prayed for a better tomorrow.

The second time we tried to cross the border wasn't nearly as bad as we now knew what to expect. It took a handful of tries before we finally made it, and my parents were separated for quite a long time before they were finally reunited.

Young adults and kids can be so ungrateful for everything, as the youth fail to listen to the wisdom shared by those that have already walked and lived the path they chose to walk. Our shared story of migration was so that we could have a better life and more opportunities than our

ancestors did. My paternal grandmother did the same thing for my dad, my parents did the same thing for my brother and me—I hope to be able to continue staying here to end the multi-generational journey of having to move to find a better life and create generational wealth, ending the lives of struggle and sacrifice like it was for my parents and my grandmother. I want a better tomorrow for the sons and daughters I will one day have.



Becoming A Mother

by
Denise Ávalos

I've loved kids ever since I was a kid. I love the imagination their tiny brains hold, how transparent they are, and how much happiness they are made of. I was always the designated babysitter for my family because kids loved being around me too. I knew I wanted kids at an early age; this way I would have the energy to keep up with them. It was no surprise to my family when I told them I wanted six kids. Some would think I was crazy; I would consider it a blessing. Having the opportunity to raise a human being was something I looked forward to.

I met my now husband our sophomore year in high school. In 2016, a year after we met, he asked me to be his girlfriend. We often spoke about our plans for life; we both wanted to get married and have kids in our early 20's. We graduated high school in 2017, and neither of us was too sure of what our next step should be. The obvious choice was to go to college and start studying for my career. My boyfriend enrolled in a trade school and I decided to take a year off while I decided what I wanted to study as well as get a job to save money for my studies. After a year and a half, I began a 13 month program for medical assistants at the same trade school as my boyfriend. Once I successfully finished the program, I was hired for the Internal Medicine department by the clinic where I completed my internship hours. My boyfriend and I felt that we were right on track. He had gotten a job after completing his program and now I also had a good job. Two years into our jobs we booked our first trip together. We realized that now was the perfect time to travel if we wanted kids in our near future. We booked our trip to Cancun for one week and took advantage of every second of it. We had a different excursion every day. From zip lining to ATV rides to visiting the pyramids in Yucatán, snorkeling, visiting other small islands on a boat and exploring underwater caves, the adventures felt never ending. We made the most of our first trip together and were eager to chase the excitement of traveling and searching for our next destination.

Four months after we came back from our trip to Cancun, I found out I was pregnant with our first daughter. I couldn't believe it. At the age of 22, I was actually going to have a child to call my own. Although I had expected the wedding to come before the pregnancy I was beyond happy. My boyfriend and I agreed it was best to get married before our baby was born and fulfill our dreams of marrying young. We had a December wedding when I was three months pregnant. I still fit into my wedding dress, considering I was nauseous 24/7 and had little to no appetite. It's one thing to have the changes the female body goes through during pregnancy explained by scientific studies and a completely different thing to live them first hand every day for nine months. I would find myself crying over a lost sock because now that sock didn't have its soulmate. I went from having the same order from the same restaurant every Friday for over a month to not being able to drive on the street that restaurant was on or else I would immediately need a barf bag.

There are beautiful moments, like hearing the baby's heart beat for the first time, the first time you notice the baby bump on yourself and feeling your baby kick for the first time. You get to buy maternity clothes and satisfy any and every craving. There are painful moments like your favorite pair of shoes not fitting your swollen feet or the back pains that don't seem to go anywhere no matter how many times you stand up or sit down or lie down but most of all there is the pain of the contractions. All of those painful moments evaporate when you hear the baby's first cry into this world. All of a sudden you forget that the pains of birth were just tearing you

apart. The only thing you can feel is the immense love for this new life lying on your chest. It's very cliché, but at this moment nothing else matters and no one else exists, just you and your little love.

Raising a child is a wonder of its own. You get to learn new things about each other and about this new world that opens up around you. Adapting to the changes a child brings to your life physically, mentally and emotionally is by far one of the hardest things in life. Your brain flicks the built-in switch and you are automatically in parent mode at all times. You are constantly trying to baby proof the world because you see danger everywhere you turn. There is a lot of worrying once you have a child. I came to the conclusion that there never really is a perfect age to start a family because no one can prepare you for a child, they are all different.

After I gave birth, my husband and I planned for me to go back to work after my three months of maternity leave were through. I would pick the baby up from my mother's after work since I would usually end my workday before my husband. Once my three months were up I couldn't find it in my heart to leave my brand new child that I had spent every waking second with. Although this child was the reason I hadn't slept more than three hours every long night, she was the reason I hadn't been able to shower comfortably without the fear that my child might need me and I was the only one who could understand what she needed. I knew that I would suffer more spending any amount of time away from her. Soon came the day that I decided that I would not be returning to work and I would be dedicating my time to staying home and raising my sweet child.

In October of 2022, just four months after giving birth to our first child I got another positive pregnancy test. I was always told not to compare two children because they wouldn't be the same in any way, but this was inevitable for me, starting with the pregnancies. With my first pregnancy I was able to nap whenever I wanted to, sleep through the night and wake up right before noon only to take another nap four hours later. I was able to eat an entire box of chocolate covered strawberries. I was able to pamper myself at any given time and was often bored with nothing to do. My schedule was built around my own wants and needs. I was worked until I was 40 weeks along and had to get induced at 41 weeks due to not showing any signs of ever giving birth on my own.

My second pregnancy was completely different. I was never able to nap because I would use the time my daughter napped to catch up on the piles of dirty and clean clothes amongst other house chores. I was no longer able to eat my box of chocolate covered strawberries because now I had to share them with my strawberry loving baby. I compared the pregnancies even when they were the same. I did not go into labor with my second child either, so there I was lying on the bed comparing the medications, the induced labors, the contractions; I even tried to go longer without epidural this time around just to see how similar or different the pain would be.

Fast forward to now that my first daughter, Anahí, is three years old and my second daughter, Alexandria, is two years old. I can't help but compare how each one is amazing in their own way. How each one had me go through different struggles and each one had me shed happy tears when they completed another milestone at different moments in their lives. I compare how Anahí astonishes me with thoughts and conversations that are ahead of her time and Alexandria enchants me with her silly faces and how she can make up songs about any activity we're doing on the spot. How Anahí is a calm soul and Alexandria is a free spirit. No matter what I think I will always compare my two greatest accomplishments but never in a negative way. I will always compare my girls to the moon and the stars, to the beautiful sunrises and sunsets because they are opposites, each in their own amazing and unique way.

Winnie the Pooh and the soft awakening

by
Guadalupe Espinosa

Every now and then, I still find myself sleeping with the same Winnie the Pooh blanket I've had since I was a baby. It's soft and faded now, the once-bright yellows dulled from years of washing and wear. My mom told me she received it as a baby shower gift and it's stuck around since. It even has a little hole in it—to anyone else it might seem like a worn-out blanket. But to me, it means much more—it's protection, security. A reminder that no matter how much the world around me shifts or how much pressure I feel to be someone I'm not, I still carry along a piece of comfort that belongs only to me.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs says all humans are motivated by a desire to fulfill certain levels of need—starting with survival and safety, and eventually reaching for things like love, esteem, and self-actualization. In many ways, I've spent my whole life climbing that pyramid. I've often found myself slipping back when I let other people—especially my mom—define who I should be or what I should do with my life. Whether it's being “girly” enough, independent enough, or successful enough, I've always felt like I was trying to hit marks I didn't set for myself. Over time, I've slowly begun to realize: you can't build a life on someone else's expectations. Sooner or later, you have to live for yourself.

As I was growing up, my mom was the type of parent who always had some sort of opinion she just had to say. Not always in a mean or hateful way—I know she loves me. But oftentimes her love came with attached instructions. “Do this.” “Don't do that” “Why would you wear that?” There was always a set of invisible rules I was supposed to follow, but no matter how hard I tried, I never seemed to get it quite right. One day she'd tell me to get a job and be responsible, the next I'd find her saying, “You're never home. Do you not love your family? You never want to spend time with us.”

She also supported my love for dance. She would be at almost every one of my performances, recording on Facebook live for our family back in Mexico. But then I felt criticized for doing the things I loved: “You stay after school too late for that dance. What are you even getting out of it? Do you at least get a medal or some sort of recognition? You know, I heard Esteban got an award for orchestra, so what did you get?” Esteban is my neighbor; I always felt like my mom found a way to compare me to him.

The pressure really settled in when we got to high school—that's when I started feeling like I didn't fit the mold. I didn't always feel feminine enough, especially around other girls who made it look so easy. They looked so effortlessly and naturally pretty—long lashes, perfect nails, flawless skin—all the things I thought were signs of being a “real girl.” So I started to get my nails done every other week along with my eyebrows. I thought maybe if I looked the part, I would feel the part. My motto since then has been “Look good, feel good.” Maybe if I could control how I looked, people—especially my mom—would stop questioning everything else.

But even when dressed up, I didn't always feel beautiful. And when I was around certain crowds, that feeling deepened. I found myself trying to fit in with people who didn't really see me, who valued surface over substance. I laughed at jokes I didn't find funny. I said “yes” to things I didn't want to do. I watered myself down to stay liked. But inside, I felt hollow—like I was shrinking to fit into someone else's frame.

There was one night specifically after my majorette performance where I came home late, my heart still buzzing from the adrenaline of dancing in front of such a large crowd. I had a

bunch of glitter, heavy makeup, my leotard still on, sweat all along my back. I found my mom sitting on the couch, waiting for me, ready to lecture. “You really shouldn’t be out this late,” she said. “That type of dancing isn’t ladylike.” I stayed quiet though; I didn’t even bother to argue with her that night. I just went to my room, closed the door, and pulled my blanket tightly around me. Not really because of what she just said but because it hurt that being me never seemed like enough for others, especially her. I yearned so much for her approval, but slowly I understood I couldn’t keep living for approval that never came and left me unhappy. I stopped dancing for others’ applause and did it simply because I liked it. I wore nails and makeup because I liked how it looked, not because it made me feel more acceptable.

That’s when I started to understand belonging isn’t about being accepted for a version of you that isn’t who you really are. It’s about being seen—fully, honestly—and still being loved. Maslow was right: humans need love and acceptance. But we also need esteem, the kind that comes from being proud of who you are. I couldn’t be proud of myself if I was always performing for how I wanted others to see me.

Health is wealth they say, and that includes mental health. I started paying attention to the things that drained me: fake friendships, constant judgement, unrealistic expectations. I replaced them with the things I now love to do: long walks, music, working out. And always my blanket, it feels silly but it reminds me of how far I’ve come.

I’m still figuring things out, trying to say no a bit more. I still find myself feeling insecure at times. I still crave my mom’s approval, though I know I shouldn’t need it. But I’ve learned I don’t have to conform to earn love. I don’t need to change who I am at all to fit into someone else’s idea of what I should be. The only version of me I need to be is my own.

Like I said, I still have that Winnie the Pooh Blanket. It might be faded and worn out but it’s a symbol of comfort that’s stayed constant while I’ve learned to become my own version of independent. I don’t need to be anyone else but myself.



Joe Guzman, the Chicago Astronomer

The Realization

by
Ashaya Garrett

“Can somebody please help this dumb bitch! She forgot my sauce,” squeals the short, round, freckle-skinned customer as she tramples through the plastic bag with the order I neatly packed for her, similar to a little kid scraping for a pencil at the bottom of their unorganized paper-filled book bag.

“Ma’am are you able to check it again please? At Ferro’s, we put them inside the containers so they won’t spill,” I say politely with a smile, trying to reassure her.

“I’m about to look, because y’all move slow as fuck,” she says as she opens the containers and sees the sauce sitting neatly on the side of the bread. “Can I get some more sauce? What the fuck,” she screams. “These things are tiny.”

“Here you go,” I say as I hand her three more sauces so that maybe, just maybe, she won’t ask for more.

“Thank you so much,” she says as she slowly opens the lid of the drink I just handed her, then throws it at the window trying to splash it on me, but it only soaks the thick plexiglass that separates us. *Like what if the glass wasn’t there?*

The thought of the public embarrassment from that happening is eating me alive. “Can I have a breather?” I ask Paris, the head cashier, quietly, with a cracking voice, already feeling the tears starting to bead up in the corners of my eyes. “I need to go to the bathroom.”

“Yeah, sure,” says 4’11” Paris as she waddles away with her pale, long dark hair, red lipstick and crazy lashes.

In the small dirty bathroom that is my sacred smelly place, and the only privacy I can get at work, I say to myself, “I hate my life.” I’m nineteen years old, fresh out of a failed Navy boot camp attempt—wasn’t fit enough to handle basic training—no wonder given all the hours I spend working and the few hours I spend exercising. I feel so unaccomplished, beaten up mentally, physically, and emotionally. I weep silently in the bathroom for about 20 minutes. *I can’t let small things make me mad all day. I would be the maddest person alive if that were the case.*

I come back out with a smile on my face like nothing has happened.

* * *

At Ferro’s, I was on my fifth or sixth cashier job. I’d worked at Wendy’s, Taco Bell, McDonald’s, Nicky’s—you name it, I was there. At the beginning, I was younger, and I was a dumber and needier person. I didn’t know my worth. I only wanted money. Money that I’d never had all to myself. So I worked, and worked—night shift, second shift, first shift—it didn’t matter. “What time do you want me to come in? Now?” I would say to my manager asking me to come in on an off day. “Okay, I’m on my way.”

As time wore on, sometimes I thought to myself while working, “Like seriously, is this how things will go for the rest of my life?” My mind grew stronger; I realized that reality would start devouring me if I paid enough attention to the small things. I started wondering in ways that other people may never wonder, like why have I been working in this no more than 400 square foot restaurant filled with food warmers, empty cups on the floor, stray receipts and angry customers banging on the window glass to face shouting for their orders for so long? And that exact moment of the soda tossed on the glass showed me that I was meant for more than working a fast food job, at least in this life. I knew that for certain.

* * *

I developed bonds with my Ferro's coworkers; we became tightly connected. When we had no customers, we would talk about things like family, past relationships, our toilets being clogged this morning—everything you can think of that was going on in our lives. One particular worker was my favorite, Charles. He was a tall, orange skinned, grey haired coworker, who was I don't know many years old, but who was a literal whip if you asked me. He moved fast with anything you would ask him to do. He always smiled at costumers, went the extra mile to be helpful, cover your shift, and even give in to the costumers with far reaching requests such as "cut my sandwich into 8 rectangle pieces like you always do."

One rainy slow day I asked him a question I had been thinking about for a long time. "Charles, Why do people work jobs like these for so many years?" He told me something I may have never thought about before. "Ashaya, so many people don't have the right guidance, information, or knowledge to want a different job. Also many people are very comfortable in the place that their life and don't want more. That is why every day when you wake up, be thankful for the head on your shoulders, with the right ideas in it. Ashaya, you are young, 19, and you already think critically. But many people like me realized much later in life, not when it was too late, but after I had no time left to take risks. I needed stability, and that is why I am here."

I sat and thought to myself about the meaningful words he had said to me. What really makes me sad is the potential of these beautiful, spirited workers that may have been a great lawyer, doctor or teacher in another life. I don't know what's wrong with me, but I always imagine people as they could have been, the potential they had to use their skills/brains for other more important things. Not saying fast food isn't important but . . .

* * *

Fast forward to my almost 8th month at the job. It was nearing my birthday, my favorite time of the year—March 28th. I'd be turning 20, finally. At every job I worked at before, I was allowed to request the entire week of my birthday off. I would reward myself with time off work to handle certain practical things and just give myself a break. Imagine working almost 365 days straight and only getting a week off. Exactly, you would want at least a whole week off of work too, right? Why would things change now that I have a new job?

I grabbed a sheet of paper and wrote the same thing that I always write: "Ashaya Garrett requesting March 24th-March 31st for birthday week." I stuck it on the board right where my manager had us post everything important like reminders, things to get, customer wants and stuff like that. I think I might've put the note up as early as February 1st After posting the note I came across more dreadful orders and customers, more small checks and figuring out how to survive, etc, etc. Weeks and weeks went past and finally on March 1st I found the courage to ask my manager, "Hey, did you see my note?" I was leaning in his office doorway on one foot, my head peaking in just enough for him to see only one of my eyes.

"Yeah, I'll get back to you," he said with his thick Italian accent and bright yellow smile as he continued counting the cash stacks inside rubber bands with his stubby little fingers. "I saw it though."

Okayyyyyyy? I thought to myself. Get back to me? Like seriously? It's been a month. Like how much longer will you need? More weeks passed, more stupid arrogant people mad about getting extra sauce, the same exact small check every month. Hooray!

Fast forward to around March 20th and still no answer from my manager about my request. So I just kept working and working and working until finally he yelled out of his office

one day as I was leaving, “Hey, I gave you your birthday, the other days I couldn’t do it. I’m sorry about that, hope you have a good birthday.”

My jaw literally dropped. I grabbed my things and started walking to the bus stop, thinking to myself, like what? Are you fucking serious? All the things I have planned for tomorrow? For the rest of the week? I didn’t even start thinking about or adding up all the money I had already spent expecting to get the days on my paper request. Why can’t Paris or Shanya, the other cashiers, just split the days between them? We literally fight over hours anyway. I rode the bus home in despair.

I called and asked if the restaurants and the activities I had planned weeks before could possibly be rescheduled. Most of them said it was too last minute or they had no availability for that day even if I got off work later that night. I got madder with each phone call, and then I began canceling all my plans just to work the same job, with the same shift, in this same 400 sq.ft. sweat shop filled with food warmers, empty cups on the floor, stray receipts that were to be passed out and angry customers banging on the window glass.

* * *

My birthday happened. I had a good time, a great time actually, maybe too much fun because I was throwing up my brains the same night and woke up the next day still throwing up feeling horrible. I realized that I felt too sick, dizzy, nauseous, just too everything to be able to work. I called into my job shortly after.

“Ferro’s, how may I help you,” Paris said while the background was already sounding busy.

“Hey Paris, this is Ashaya. I was supposed to be there and work today around one pm, but I was letting you know I won’t be able to make it in today. I feel horrible, but I should be good tomorrow for sure.”

“Okay I’ll let the manager know,” she said. Then I heard the dial tone.

After that phone call I closed my eyes, put the cover over my head and went to sleep for hours and hours and hours. When I finally woke up, the sun was down, but I felt so much better. I rolled over to my phone and squinted trying to shade the bright light. I saw that I had gotten a message from Paris.

“Hey, I hope everything is okay,” she said. “Don’t come back for now and we’ll call you, until further notice.” My jaw dropped, but not in a bad way like a “How dare you fire me.” I was shocked and surprised at the same time, I honestly didn’t know how to feel. I reread the text message over and over again and reflected. Like I wasn’t happy anyway, I wasn’t getting paid enough for the amount of work. I’m smart and have more potential to have a job where I’m able to utilize my brain. Even though I lost my job, I hadn’t lost my pride. Those thoughts soothed me and, reassured, I rolled back over and fell fast asleep.

When I woke up, I sat and asked myself, did I make the right decision? Did I truthfully handle things the mature way? Not just being spiteful? Did I truthfully do the best thing for me? I relaxed mentally and recuperated again. I had worked months straight before then. I deserved a break. “You’ll be okay if that job will find somebody else, you’re too special to work for the fast food chain,” I told myself out loud. I vowed to myself, I’ll never apply or work for another fast food job AGAIN!

And I haven’t.

Miles Away from Home

by
Karina Gil Melchor

I can still recollect the longing in my mother's face to reconnect with her family back in her country. She finally got to go back to the place where her story began, a place she didn't quite remember, but the place she knew was home. You see, as an immigrant you say goodbye to your homeland without knowing if you'll ever go back. Fortunately, my mother was one of the lucky ones to be able to experience this.

It all came down to this moment, our life changing moment. Mother had been checking the mailbox nonstop for the past couple of weeks waiting for that one piece of mail. I still remember it was a sunny Friday afternoon on June 2nd, 2023, when we arrived home from the store and saw our mail carrier walking down the street. We decided to wait for her and sat on our front porch to receive our mail. We anxiously waited for our mail carrier who seemed so close, yet so far, considering today could be the day we have been waiting for. As the mail carrier approached us, we noticed she only had one piece of mail in her hand for us. Mother and I saw this as a good sign, and we couldn't seem to hide the joy that was growing in us. There it was—the plain white envelope mother was waiting for that read, “Department of Homeland Security.” The image of my mother's face when she saw those words on the letter remains in my head in my “favorite's” folder like an iPhone gallery. We had already received mail from them; what made it different this time was that she felt the physical card. There was no need to open the envelope, we knew what that envelope represented: we'd reached the finish line of our goal. There were no words to be said, just tears of happiness and an endless hug between each other spoke more than a thousand words.

“There it is mom, after many years of failed attempts, you are finally a resident,” I told mother as I held her tightly.

Mother was still in disbelief, but all she knew was that she wanted to be on a plane as soon as possible. Her hands were shaking nonstop. Ironic how a plastic card was able to bring her a rollercoaster of emotions. She felt relief, nostalgia, hope, freedom, everything that you could think of possibly bringing tears of joy. “When is the soonest we can go to Mexico?” asked mother as she seemed to not care about anything other than putting her residency card to use.

“We can leave as soon as next month; that gives me enough time to submit my vacation days at work. The prices for plane tickets around this time are awfully expensive though.”

“I don't care, put it on the credit card! I have waited years for this moment; there isn't anything that will stop me now.”

I immediately started searching for flights, as if I were a travel agent looking to fulfill my customer's dreams. I couldn't wait for mother to set foot in her hometown again. She'd been there for me in all my happy moments; I also wanted to be there for her.

It all started with my grandparents coming into the United States 36 years ago looking for the American Dream. My mother, who was 8 years old at the time, was brought along without a choice. My mother had to learn a new language, a new culture, and so much more. As she got older, she looked for many ways to become a resident to allow her to have some type of status in this country. Becoming a resident would allow her to have a sense of peace, along with the possibility of returning to where she was born.

I had experienced many times how my mother was denied this opportunity and as much as I wanted to stay positive for her, her residency card seemed to be unobtainable. She had been

denied her residency due to misplaced documents by USPS. We submitted a claim, but there wasn't much that could be done. She had no other choice but to gather all her paperwork again and reapply. It's very hard to see your mother with a look of defeat in her face, watching how she loses hope increasingly each time. Moments like this one made me realize how lucky we are to be free in this country and be able to go to any destination we desire.

The day finally arrived; we were expected to board a plane to Mexico for the night flight and time just didn't seem to move fast enough. Watching her pack her bags with an endless number of items for her family members made me think of everything we had to go through to get to this moment. Going through this journey with mother made me look up to her even more for not giving up and becoming successful in a country that wasn't even hers. I knew how much this meant for her and how this piece of plastic card made her feel "safer" in this country, especially with everything going on having to do with immigration. Even though the residency card had mother's name on it, it felt like my own. Her victory is my victory. After 36 years, mother was going to go back to the motherland, retracing the 2,339 miles she went through when she left from home.



Lynn West

Goodbye Friend

by

Adrian Pelayo

Nothing ever goes as planned. I was having fun in my front yard with some friends. We played basketball in the 90 degree weather. We were playing a highly competitive game of Horse and of course I was winning. The hoop I had in my front yard kept me outside, just shooting around to pass the time with any friends who were able to come over. “You’re not gonna make that shot!” we would yell at each other to get the other person to mess.

On this day, I was in front of my house getting ready to play with my good friends Oscar and Andrew. “Ya’ll ready to lose?” I said, as I always do.

“Yeah right,” Oscar responded. “I won’t even get the letter H playing with you.” All just to brick shots until someone finally makes one.

As we played in the heat, the sound of my dog aggressively barking could be heard from my backyard. At the time I had a cool looking dog named Clyde, who was a cross breed of a bulldog and a pit bull. Some might be super afraid of a dog like this. I definitely had my fears as he grew from a small puppy to a dog worth being wary of. This dog was super playful but did have a tendency to get aggressive with how he played. A lot of it was because of how me and my little brother would play with him; we were used to being bit. Getting the dog a little angry so we could run away and jump on tables and chairs in order to not get killed was somehow really fun. This kind of activity wasn’t seen as fun to anyone else, but me and my brother always had a blast playing with our dog. My friends loved the dog too, but they didn’t want to be around him.

As we played around shooting the ball, we could hear the barking of Clyde coming from the backyard. With a confused look on his face, which I found hilarious, Andrew asked, “Bro, how do you have a dog like that? It could just eat you in your sleep if it randomly wanted to.”

“Nah, he’s really good boy. He wouldn’t hurt no one that didn’t deserve it,” I said as I would every time they would say something negative about my puppy.

The game progressed and we needed to take a break due to how hot it was getting. We sat and relaxed as we talked about what kind of crazy shot we were going to make when we resumed the game. After laughing and joking around with each other, we decided we’d cooled off enough to start playing again.

The sudden sound of a crash made the three of us duck and look around. That crash was the sound of my dog Clyde slamming into the wooden gate with enough force to break the lock. The gate flew open. “Don’t run,” I screamed to friends, whose faces turned pale and their eyes shot wide open. As I stood there, I watched as my scared friends did not listen to me and immediately took off running. My dog then looked at them and began chasing. I ran up after Clyde after he quickly caught up to my friend Andrew and starting biting him at his ankle, causing him to fall. I yelled, “Get off of him,” while I tried my hardest to make the dog let go.

Hearing my screams, my mother came running outside and saw what was going on. Freaking out at how good a lock Clyde had on my friend’s ankle, all she could do was scream and punch Clyde in the face praying he would let go. Punch after punch and pulling at his mouth—those couple minutes felt like an eternity. My friend Andrew only laid on the ground kicking and screaming as Clyde jerked his head from side to side pulling on his leg. My mom

kept furiously punching Clyde in the face as she begged him to let go. With enough pain, Clyde finally let go. My friend Andrew was extremely shaken up by what had just happened even though his leg was only a bit scratched up. My mom took the dog inside as I checked to see if Andrew was feeling better.

“Yo, are you good? Why did you start running if that obviously makes him chase you?”

“Hell, that dog is crazy. I’m outta here,” he claimed as he started to call his grandma to come pick him up.

My mom called my dad and he immediately came home. We were all still in front of my house when my dad arrived. He asked if we were OK, then went straight to the house with a serious look on his face. I had a bad feeling as my dad came back outside carrying Clyde in his arms and walked him straight to the truck. I didn’t even have to ask. I already felt like I knew what was going on. My dad put Clyde in the truck and left without saying a word. My friend Andrew’s grandma arrived and my mom apologized for everything that happened. His grandma understood and didn’t hold anything against us. My friend Oscar left and the rest of the day went by slowly.

When my dad came home without Clyde, I figured what had happened and didn’t even have to say a word. My dad explained, “I’m sorry, but we just can’t risk having him around when he can get that aggressive, especially if he starts biting strangers.”

“Yeah, I get it,” I claimed to understand, still feeling down about losing my dog that way. I knew that those kind of dogs tend to not last long in a shelter, especially if they’re sent there for violent reasons.

I never expected that to happen, and I still have a hard time believing it. It is what it is at the end of the day, but I won’t ever forget him. I still joke with my friend Andrew about it. I say things like, “Remember when you killed my dog?” He feels bad but can laugh it off too. At the end of the day, things happen.



Lynn West

Life Happens

by

Janet Romo

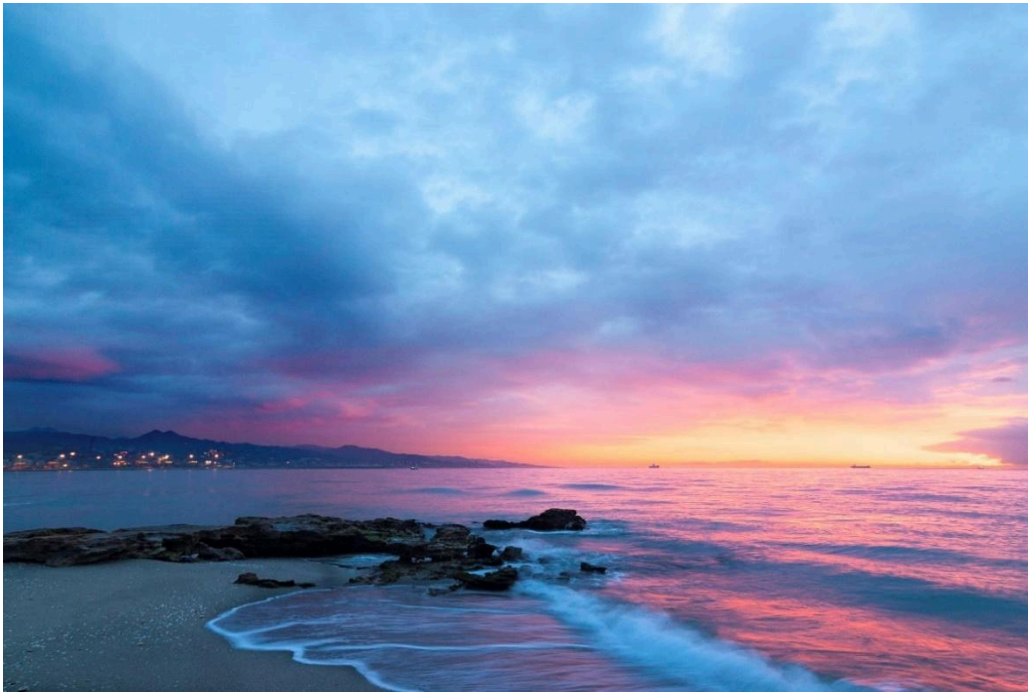
Have you ever heard of making a crucial career decision due to finding a sick estranged father? This is my story; sometimes life does not go as planned. I had always been told that I had a very good head on my shoulders, that I should be a lawyer, doctor, or something to do with the government. I have news: I did not become either of those because “Life happens.” I became what they call a jack of all trades. I noticed that it was easy for me to learn anything. I worked as a tax consultant, multi-unit leader, employee instructor, cosmetologist, nail technician, real estate broker, and paraprofessional. I’ve had a long journey to self-discovery in my career path, but all these experiences have helped me find my passion.

I had not seen my father since my parents got divorced. He left when I was thirteen years old, and we never heard from him again. About a year ago I received a notification on social media. My family on my father's side somehow found me. My dad had two massive strokes and was resuscitated, and they thought we should know that he was in his last moments. My dad ended up with permanent brain damage; he cannot talk or move. That is when I acknowledged that life was too short to be wasted. I finally was ready to take the step into fulfilling my longtime dream of becoming an educator. It was always in the back of my head. As a child, being the oldest sibling, I taught them how to read, add, subtract etc. I remember loving our school play time; I was always the teacher. Seeing my dad nonverbal and nonmobile with tears in his eyes changed me forever. Unfortunately, an experience like this ironically gave me the push to do what I really wanted to do and stop trying too many things that were not as fulfilling.

I had worked as a multi-unit leader at corporate level for a financial advising institution while taking care of clients simultaneously. I liked what I did because I was able to help people in need. I helped them with their IRS audits, taxes, retirement accounts, identity theft issues etc. Being bilingual was a plus for me; it allowed me to help my Spanish speaking community. In the meantime, I was going to beauty school to learn about the industry because I really liked the fact of making someone feel prettier and boosting their confidence. I achieved a dual license as a cosmetologist and nail technician and practiced for about a year and a half. One day one of my clients told me that I should go and get my broker's license and told me that I had lots of potential in the business. I took the license course and passed my test on the first try. I practiced for about a year, but the housing market was not the best. I managed to keep my full-time position as a multi-unit leader while pursuing my real estate endeavors; this is when my father's family contacted me.

I quickly realized that I needed to take that first step and had to go to school to reach my professional goal. I enrolled in this institution with a clear mindset of what my intended major was. I knew it was going to be challenging after not being in school for a while. My passion to become an educator was stronger than all my anxiety and fears. There were nights when I would think and think about my decision. That is when I met the nicest and most helpful person, Mrs. Ramirez, my advisor. She motivated me, signed me up as a full-time student and told me, “If I was able to do it, then it would be a piece of cake for you.” She walked me through the process and helped me pick my classes. I am glad I met her and that she did not let me back out. This is my

second semester in this institution and my GPA is 4.0 and I plan to keep it this way; this is a huge accomplishment for me. Over winter break I managed to get a position in CPS as support staff to get exposed to the educational field. I am not teaching yet, but I got my foot in the door and cannot wait to get my bachelor's and teaching license. Now, I visit my father as much as I can to tell him everything about my week. I know he can hear me and is proud of me. I hope he really understands that seeing him again played a huge role in my motivation to fulfill my long-term dream!



Grandpa and the Grand Canyon

by
Jackie Sullivan

The day had finally come! I'd waited eight long years for this day to come. Eighth grade graduation. The day when you leave childhood school days behind and looking ahead to drivers ed., getting a job, more freedom, and getting bullied by seniors. But before I headed into the doors of high school, I had this last summer to enjoy as just a kid.

My family went out for a celebration lunch that day—my mom, my grandpa, and me. I don't remember where we ate, but I know I had country fried steak, my favorite! "Mejita, before you start school, I thought it would be nice to go on a little vacation. What do you think?" my grandpa asked me.

"Of course!"

"Great! Wouldn't you like to know where we're going?"

"Oh yeah! But I really don't care where it is, I know it's going to be fun!"

"It sure is. We're going to Arizona."

"Arizona?"

"Yes. We're going to drive to see the Grand Canyon. And maybe keep driving through Colorado. We'll see."

We were going to take a road trip to the Grand Canyon! I couldn't wait! This was going to be the best trip ever. I was used to road trips. We used to drive up to Chicago every year to visit the family when we lived in Dallas. We'd just moved back to Chicago two years prior, when grandma got sick. We had been living in Dallas since I was in kindergarten. I loved it there. It was never cold. I was able to play outside every day, except for when the skies would turn grey and the wind was going like 100 mph and we would have to watch out for tornados. Other than that, it was perfect. I loved my school and all my friends. Moving back to Chicago was hard. Especially mid-sixth grade. I had to go from a friendly, multiracial, public school in Dallas to a majority Caucasian Catholic school in Chicago. The kids here in Chicago did not give me a warm welcome at all. I was excluded from things that the "cool kids" were a part of. I was never picked during gym class. They even tried to start fighting with me. But I had my tough cousin, who they were all afraid of, take care of that for me. Looking back, I now understand what "Southern hospitality" really means, 'cause those northern kids did not have it. But that's a whole different story. Let's stay focused on my trip.

I don't remember much of the drive there, just that it was long. I don't even remember where we stayed. But I can absolutely remember when we got to our destination. I can still see it like I was there yesterday. The breathtaking view of a beautiful, seemingly endless crack in our Earth's ground. There were so many colors to the perfectly broken layers of the Earth's walls. It was like looking into the Earth's history, every layer a time period. Each color meant something. The way the sun's rays shine on the cliffs determined what colors you would see. Sometimes there were hues of reds and burnt oranges, roses and peaches; when the sun sets, purples and dark blues. Looking into the depths of the Earth was like looking at a canvas that God took his paint brush to. The awe of this beauty cannot be felt or even understood without seeing it yourself. The Grand Canyon, even in silence, is alive, with an endless depth, and its story is still being written.

I'm not sure why this was the chosen vacation spot. But I'm glad it was. It was a place like no other. And my grandpa was like no other. He was so much fun and so smart. He

was like a walking calculator; he could figure out any math problem you gave him, in his head! He always had jokes, and loved to sing and dance. I would hear my grandpa singing all the time when he was cooking or with friends or family at parties, or at church where he was a lector. And let me tell you, everyone knew him and loved him. He was a part of the Wildcats and the Lions Club organizations. They volunteered a lot and had fundraisers for underprivileged families. And they always had parties celebrating someone or something. There was always lots of people, food, music, and dancing. My grandpa was my buddy. He would always take me out to eat and help me with my homework.

A part of this trip that I will never forget was when we were driving through the mountains, and of course Grandpa was driving. It was dark. There were no guard rails on the side of road. The road was narrow, with barely enough room for a car to go in each direction. But my grandpa, being the fearless man that he was, was speeding up the mountain! It felt like he was doing 100 mph, even though he was probably really only doing 40. But it was so scary! I saw my whole short life flash before my eyes when we were turning the winding roads along the Rocky Mountains!

The Grand Canyon is one of the majestic, unforgettable, mysterious Seven Wonders of the World. I'm grateful I was able to experience this with my grandpa and my mom. It was an experience unlike any other. This vacation is one I will never forget. And I guess, in a way, my Grandpa is like the Grand Canyon. Even in silence, he is still alive, through memories, like this vacation that I will never forget.



Jackie Sullivan

My Best Friend

by
Nikki Trevino

It was sunrise when I heard my dog crying every couple of minutes. Of course, I get nervous every time something happens to her because that's my baby. My mom came and picked her up and noticed a big damp spot where she was lying, meaning she didn't get up to use the bathroom on the pad like usual, so my mom showered her. When she came back into the room she said we need to make an appointment for her.

"We need to make it as soon as possible. She can't even get up to walk. She's getting old, so we need to be prepared for what they are going to say about what's wrong with her."

"I know, Mom."

Nine a.m. comes and I start calling my dog's vet. No answer like always. Wasting no time, I start calling other vets. Nothing. No answer, no available openings, or not accepting new clients. We finally decide to go to the hospital. Along the way Pebbles is still crying. I'm trying not to panic because I believe dogs feel your emotions, but then she starts shaking with this liquid dripping out of her mouth and onto my arm like she was seizing. I start panicking.

"Mom Mom, what do I do?"

"Just hold her Nikki, I can't do anything but drive"

"I know I know, but I feel bad. I'm scared"

"We're almost there," my mom says, sounding concerned but somehow reassuring as well.

As we arrive at the animal hospital I get this feeling in my stomach that feels disgusting yet familiar. We get in and start answering questions, well my mom's answering questions. I'm sitting down spaced out thinking about the 30 different scenarios this could lead to. We finally get called into room #2. Sitting there waiting brought up memories I did not want to think about. I know where that familiar feeling in my stomach was from. I got the same feeling when I walked into a waiting room filled with family members who were all waiting to say goodbye to my grandpa.

The vets come in and start to weigh her. I can't even look at her without feeling fear and guilt rushing through my body.

"Doc will be in soon."

Hearts beating again. I start to hyperventilate and lose my breath because I'm not ready for what he's about to tell me. They start the check-up and start listing things that are wrong with her. "Yeah her back legs are giving out, jaw . . ." He's talking, but he sounds faraway. I'm in my space, the one where no one can bother me, but, unfortunately, I can still hear bits and pieces. "Bad legs, jaw is deteriorating, stroke by the look of her head, possible seizure."

"Okay," I say, thinking I'm listening but it's just going in one ear and out of the other. He starts talking to us about our two options. 1. We try a shot that has less than a 30% chance of helping with pain or 2. We put her down.

"We'll leave you for a few minutes to decide"

My mom and I look at each other knowing which option we are choosing but don't want to say it out loud.

“It’s okay Mom, it’s okay, she’ll be okay, she’ll be with Princess and Zoey, okay it’s okay.” I repeat “It’s okay” over and over again, at first it to tell my mom it is okay but a bit after it’s me telling myself, trying to convince myself that she’s going to be okay and I’m not a bad dog mom for doing this. The vets come back and my mom tells them we don’t want her to suffer.

“Of course we’ll get everything set up”

They start talking about the process and how it happens. At this point I’m not listening. I heard what I needed to and now I just need to cry.

“We’ll be back with Pebbles. We’re gonna take her to insert the catheter.”

They come right back out and asked if we are ready. How can someone be ready or prepared for something like this? But we have no choice but to say yes. The first dose is to relax her and the second will put her to sleep. It happened so fast.

“I’m sorry for your loss. Whenever you’re done saying goodbye you can talk to the front desk about the cremation and paw print if you’d like.”

Memories of dressing her up in PJs and Christmas outfits come rushing back. She hated the clothes and would take them off within minutes. She followed me everywhere even when I would go to the bathroom. We were inseparable, so the thought that I’d be leaving that building without her was physically draining. She was my best friend and I will always carry those memories throughout my life.

I felt numb as soon as I walked out of that room, I seemed to have blacked out as I didn’t remember paying for the ride home. My boyfriend is always there when I need him; he woke up and was at my house within 20 minutes. I went to open the gate for him and he immediately hugged me. We stood there for 3 minutes which didn’t seem long enough while he held me. During that time it felt like the world stopped, the worries and issues going on around me did not exist and it felt so safe. He took me to eat because he knew if I waited too long I’d get into the bad habit of not eating like in the past. The entire day was spent grieving and watching TV to stop the continuous crying. The phone kept going off with “I’m sorry for your loss” messages. I wanted to reply and say how much I appreciate the fact that they thought to text me but I couldn’t read a message without breaking down. My sister, who was busy with her toddler and job, came to visit me the same day to get me out of bed. More siblings came over just to hang out and it felt great.

Eight hours earlier that day I was in a horrible headspace wondering how I was ever going to get through this, and the simple answer was a support system. Having people to lean on will not cure us and make us feel better overnight, but they will help us feel a little better day by day.

Grandma's Corner Store

by
Crystal Valdes

It was the winter of 2014 when my family and I took a vacation to Mexico. My family and I love visiting our family in Mexico yearly. We usually have a great time, but this year was different; it wasn't what we expected. Mexico feels like home to us and is something I look forward to all year. What happened during our 2014 trip changed the way I saw things and taught me the importance of forgiveness.

When I go to Mexico, I love the culture, wearing guarachas, which are traditional Mexican sandals. I enjoy eating Mexican plates such as enchiladas, which are spicy, and flautas, which are rolled hard tacos that can be filled with chicken or meat. The weather is hot all year round and rainy May-August, which is great for farming.

In Mexico I live in a small town also known as a "rancho" in Spanish. Its population is around 200 people who mainly all know each other. I love visiting my grandparents' house because they always treat us well. My grandparents raise cows and bulls to sell to make a living. They also have land to grow crops, such as avocados and agave, which generate a good profit.

My grandma owns a small store where she sells produce and products for the home. She has had her little corner store for about 30 years now and hopefully many more. Everyone in the town knows my grandma and always stops by, even if it's just to say hi. I spent a lot of my childhood in my grandma's store. She had coin-operated arcade machines for children and adults. My grandma was loved by many, and she always fed the poor. She always lent people money and gave the little she had.

Sometimes being nice makes people take advantage of you. Sometimes, the people who you least expect to hurt you are the problem. As a child I never had a negative and traumatic experience until the winter of 2014. This vacation in Mexico changed my whole perspective on life. It made me not trust everyone around me and be more cautious.

It was one sunny morning in December 2014 when we were eating breakfast at my grandparents' house. My grandma had made us tamales, which are my favorite. My sister, 9 years old, and I, 7 years old, were playing outside all day with my grandparents' dog and chickens. My dad went to feed the cows and bulls with my grandpa that day. My mom went to the city to buy groceries to stock the store up. My grandma stayed home with us that day and attended the store till late at night. We all ate dinner and talked about our plans for the next day then went to sleep.

My sister and I shared a room where we slept together. That night, we heard a loud bang coming from my grandma's store. I remember waking up and telling my sister, "Brenda, wake up ! I heard a loud noise and I'm scared!" We ran to my parents' room to alert them of what we had heard. My dad quickly got up with a bat and a flashlight and walked carefully to the store. My dad was surprised by what he saw when he opened the door. There was glass all over the floor and the tables knocked over. Mainly everything in merchandise was gone and all the money was taken. The fridges with alcohol were emptied; the tequila bottles were gone.

I remember my dad telling my mom, “Who could have done this to your poor old mother? She doesn't deserve this. Call the police immediately!” The police got there about two hours later. They did not come fast since they didn't think it was an emergency and usually never hurry anyway. While waiting for the police to arrive, my grandmother said to us, “The important thing is that we are all safe.” I was crying because this was the first time I had experienced something like this. I felt so bad that my grandma had all her money in her wallet, which was stolen. She didn't have a bank account, so she left all her savings at home.

The bad thing was that we didn't have cameras because we never thought somebody would steal from my grandma. We didn't have a clue who it could have possibly been. A few days later, my dad's friend told my dad that our neighbor was selling some tequila bottles and beer, which was suspicious because he didn't have a job and never had money. The neighbor was a poor man who didn't like to work and lived day to day, drinking all the time. Out of nowhere, he bought a new motorcycle and had new clothes on. One night, the neighbor was out drinking with his friends and confessed he had broken into my grandma's store. He didn't know one of the guys he was drinking with was an old friend of my dad's, and word would get back to my dad.

When my dad found out about this, he informed police, and the police took him into custody where the neighbor confessed what we had done. My grandma told the police she would not press charges because she didn't want him to ruin his own life. At that moment, I learned some people have big hearts that won't hurt those who hurt them. My grandma said to the neighbor, “I am very upset with you robbing me after I fed you, lent you money, and gave you medicine when you were sick, but I will not make your life worse than you have made it. I hope you learn your lesson to not bite from the hand that has fed you.” That was a lesson I learned to always be appreciative and help those who are in need without having to receive anything back.

I asked my grandmother why she didn't press charges, and she said everyone deserves a second chance. She wanted to help him. I was so young I didn't agree at first but then realized that my grandma was right not to have a bitter heart and learn to forgive in order to have peace. My grandma has taught me so many things throughout my life that made me who I am today. I learned to be respectful and responsible because of her.

At first, I was scared to go back to Mexico and get robbed, but then my grandma would tell me not to have fear in my heart because of what one person did; not everyone is the same. I practiced the advice my grandma would give me by giving people the benefit of the doubt when I wasn't sure about things, and I always gave back to the community.

Paris In Spring

by
Edith Vargas

When I was a young girl, I used to dream of the things I wished to do when I got older. When I did get older, I would crave those dreams even more. One of those dreams was to travel the world. However, never could I have imagined that I would go to Paris, France. It was the spring of 2025 where one email, and a little bit of faith, gifted me the opportunity of a lifetime.

I had a nice upbringing. I grew up in a nice little home with loving parents and an older brother who I looked up to. My school was only a few blocks from home, and I had friends who were always there for me. Everything I needed was always near; I am truly grateful for that, and I would never change that for the world. I was also a dreamer. I used to dream of what's beyond my little world, beyond the everyday routine. I think that living in the same place for so long makes you want to venture out for a while, just for a little bit. This is the reason why I always enjoyed the idea of traveling, especially to Europe. Paris always caught my attention, and I wondered what it was like over there, walking the Parisian streets filled with the French language. I wanted to feel that feeling just for a second.

I was checking my school email one day like any other day, when suddenly a message appeared in my inbox that read “**Malcolm X Study Abroad program**” and underneath it said, “**All Girls Trip to Paris, France.**” *This can't be real*, I thought to myself. All I could do was stare at my computer screen. The entire day the only thing I could think about was, *should I apply? Will my dream come true?* It was a 2-week trip but for me this was more than just traveling. It was something I had been dreaming of since I was little and wondered what I was to become when I got older. Paris had lived in my imagination since I was young. It sounded unreal and unreachable but there it was, sitting in my inbox.

I decided to apply and take the chance. I sat down and wrote an essay, pouring my heart into it. I even tried contacting my old high school advisor for a reference in my application. When I submitted my application all I needed to do was wait. The wait made me anxious. I constantly checked my email waiting for a response, wondering if I'd made it. When I told my parents about the trip, my mom smiled at me and said, “*Esta's Loca*” or “*You're crazy.*” I couldn't blame her. Opportunities like these don't come up often. I thought it could be too good to be true. I still held on to my hopes. About a week later a message finally came. I was in! I had gotten selected. A real trip to Paris was waiting for me that upcoming spring. I kept rereading the email; I got so emotional that I even cried. When I told my brother, who helped by giving me feedback on my essay, he couldn't believe it. I saw in his eyes that he was happy too, and my dad, who was also there with us, was too stunned to say anything—he couldn't wrap his head around the idea that his little girl was off to a new adventure. He couldn't believe it. I couldn't believe it.

Soon the spring was here, and I was saying goodbye to my family. I got to the airport for the first time. I had my suitcase packed and ready to go, but I was feeling a little anxious. I was about to board an airplane for the first time. We had taken long trips on the road with my parents, but this was something new. I will never forget when the plane started to take off, I turned my head to my left, and I saw the wing banking up to the sky. I thought to myself, “*There is no way of going back.*” I kept wondering what my family would be feeling if they were right here with me.

After seven long restless hours on the plane, we were finally there. I remember stepping off the plane and breathing the outside air for the first time. “Yup... I’m far from home,” I said to myself. I remember the air smelling the exact same as when I went to Mexico. I guess it’s that “travel air” as I like to call it. We were picked up by a coach and began our journey to the city. As we were leaving the airport, through the window I saw fields of bright green grass filled with trees and their blooming pink spring flowers. The scene of open roads and quiet suburbs quickly changed as we entered the heart of Paris. The old-century creamy white buildings with their balconies and historic structures towered over the city, each having a piece of history to talk about the city. I turned my head, and I was seeing the Eiffel tower. I would never forget the feeling. The massive tower filled my breath with awe. I couldn’t believe I was here. As we explored the city more with my group, you could see that almost all the cafés were filled with locals sitting outside enjoying their meals with little to no rush at all, just watching as the traffic moved. The city was filled with people from all over the world and there was something new to see every day.

I wandered the streets exploring all corners, seeing every site. We took many trips to many museums learning about art, history, and culture. We took trips to Africa museums learning about African cultures. I knew that this was important for my peers and my school, as African culture really isn’t taught in many schools. We also went to the Louvre, where I got to see the Mona Lisa along with other very famous and detailed paintings from all around the world, I also went the Jardin de Luxembourg, which was lovely with the spring tulips blooming. I listened to the French language without a clue to what people were saying, but I thought it sounded very elegant; I even got to pick up some broken French along the way. The music was joyful and beautiful. I remember when I tried duck for the first time and savored the lemony taste. As a matter of a fact, I enjoyed all the dishes I tried. The taste is different, so rich and so fresh from the first bite. We often took walking trips around the cities in small groups at nighttime; seeing the city lit up at night is very different from seeing it in daylight. At the top of the hour in the evening, the Tower turns gold and sparkles for five minutes.



Just like that two weeks were coming to an end. I felt sad about leaving, but I was ready to leave at the same time. I was ready to see my family again and tell them about everything. This time, the seven-hour long trip back was easy for me. I wasn’t as scared as I was the first time. I felt I was coming home with a new perspective in life. When I finally got back home, I was greeted with my family waiting to pick me up in the car. I hugged them so tight. I had missed them more than I realized. The car ride home featured me filling my family in of all the memories I had made. I also realized how much this trip meant to me and how thankful I am to have gone. I feel beyond grateful, and I was thinking about my own culture, how it made me want to learn about it even more. I also thought of what I want to do in life. As I made it home, I was greeted with flowers on my dresser and with balloons that said, “Welcome Home.”

A home yearned for
by
Kamila Burlakova

Bells ringing from Imam Abu Hanifa Mosque
calling all to start a prayer.
Morning has come
warmth from the sun stretching,
creeping through the Pamir peaks
The world is awake.

Little Golden Eagles call from the trees outside.
My window glazed with the morning dew
a reminder of a new start.
Beyond wars and corruption,
past the borders that enclose Dushanbe.
Nature is awake.

Outside, Mirzo Tursunzoda Street is blooming to life
warm smiles greeting one another.
Qurut vendors taking to their stands,
whistles drawing mothers for milk,
cars honking as children play on the road,
Rudaki District is awake.

Inside, my mother calls
coriander and cumin wafting through
my room, a mixing pot of spices.
Wooden bowls spread out on the table.
In my chair, I wait for my brother
pieces of carrots and lamb hot to touch,
My tummy is awake.

The table adorned with glasses of wine
grapes picked by Grandfather-
Belonging to a vineyard hidden in the Fann Mountains.
A family recipe passed down
laughter fills the room from the voices of my family
Happiness is awake.

Beyond these walls up to the borders
my childhood resides.
As I recall-
Pavel, Lola, Daler... I held so near,
start to fade with the past memories of home.
Am I awake?

I Am From
by
Guadalupe Espinosa

I am from the place that never sleeps.
You might know it as the Windy City.

I am from the crazy potholes
that'll never leave.
Soft white snow grazes me.
Black ice betrays me.

Tons of rats fill the streets.
Oh, how I yearn for a new setting.
I find myself feeling small below the
giant skyscrapers that fill the sky above.

I am from somewhere that always competes.
Who will reach the top?
Who will it be?

The orange man on TV reminds me
every visit to downtown a memory
that he wants to get rid of me.

I Am From
by Jocelyn Hillesheim

I am from Chicago, Illinois, the South Side,
From busy streets and the sound of the L train rushing by.
I am from tortas stuffed with care, asadas sizzling on the grill,
And tamales wrapped tight, warming my hands on cold days.

I am from laughter echoing at Montrose Beach,
Turning eight with cake, balloons, and sand between my toes.
I am from afternoons filled with crafts, glue on my fingers,
And late nights lost in video games, my world lit up on a screen.

I am from family gatherings, music in the air,
From “échale ganas” and “respeta a los demás”
I am from strong roots, where hard work shapes each day,
And joy is found in simple things and moments we share.

I am from the South Side spirit,
From dreams as big as the skyline,
I am from yesterday’s memories
And tomorrow’s hopes, stitched together with love.

Poem
by
Demarion Logan

I am from the 700.
Might send that wild life at you.
Ramen noodle, that ain't no soup!
Bottles and wood going Ku.
Switch it over, might catch you!
Hustle hard you the Glue!
See the lights every night.
They red and blue!
Hate the Jakes, they will get
wild with you.
How you serve and protect when
you actin like blues clues?!
Don't talk in the room or
any clues will go against you!
Have a family; how they go
survive without you?
Young guy, all he know is SHOOT!
No matter the season, the wild life
might come to you.

What's left in the fridge

by

Lindsey Iniguez-Valadez

We didn't plan to,
we just drifted to the kitchen
and opened her fridge

Old pizza left behind,
unwashed fruit,
bananas not yet yellow
signs of a life still ripening,
before it went still.

The counter filled with color
a mosaic of melons, grapes,
and tangerines.
Someone reached for a knife,
someone rinsed the fruits clean.

We hesitated
hands still clumsy, learning
the art she made look easy.

Cutting into the meat of the melon,
we passed pieces across the table
without keeping track of whose turn.

Sugar on our fingers
we laughed about old things
Her stubborn recipes,
her way of singing off-key.

No prayers, no speeches,
just the ritualistic sound of slicing,
the knife humming its small hymn.

The comfort of citrus and company
and the emptiness that left space
for our hands to find one another again.

I Am From
by
Nina Rosario

I am from a cold windy spooky night,
from a waning gibbous moon.
I am from a beautiful city where I hear jazz groove
through the busy streets.
I am from a city where people break the fire hydrant
for a nice summer cool off.
From the south side to house party music to Spanish music
blessing my ear with every tune.
I am from a community that leans on each other.
From sleepless nights to endless parties and eternal love
I cannot live without.
I am from a village of hard workers.
From sore feet walking many miles, from the unease
of tight spaces and crossing into new grasslands.
I am from a culture of everlasting Oaxacan roots,
from bright vibrant colors to the sweet taste of mezcal,
from my brothers and sisters—we share the land
of our ancestors.
I am from a place where the American dream is not given to us.
Instead, I am from a place where we make it our own
and we do not stop until we have achieved our goals.

Touch and Go Vixen - Cassidy Sebastian

by
Eric Sebastian

The unusual silence of the outside,
thick fog with a cloudy sky
like the blind fog broadcasts,

in a dream where you alternate.
The forest creeping into fog—
now dissolving to the up down,

turning a faint cabin.
The cabin, full of uncertainty,
gone to the fog of Nostalgia,

now into the nausea.
You look past blank-faced flowers,
and you see emerald grass
suddenly clouded by a wendigo,

antlers with piercing ends,
each showing a shade of red,
you, a vixen looking blindly,
still learning how to fall,
accepted 'cause you think that's what you deserve.

Hanging for six months and beyond,
taking a part of you that you refused;
half of what was lucid is now bruised.

Attacked, attached, and trapped-
and so there was blood and sweat-
couldn't bear to look and resisted,
screaming—
screaming—
screaming—
Your mind left your body behind,
realizing it was grieving intervention.
You switch to your big break—
It's more unfair than a civil war,



Wendigo Stephen King Wiki

and the war fabricated from the start.
Borderline's flower whispers:
"Couldn't be worse off than before"
for rancid flowers that you keep in a box,
for dead flowers you can't stop grieving.
Echoes into chronic dependency—
for it has always been you,
clinging onto people like life support.
Couldn't shake that separation,
like a child crying for their guardian,
Then you snap back onto the window—
the pain and emptiness stronger than before,
The wendigo has stopped clawing your insides;
now thick fog is infesting your mind,
closing in my black eye.

It's like you never grew up,
and every day is always a rollercoaster—
and you hate rollercoasters.



In between dos mundos

by
Samantha Solano

When they speak
the words flow like water
it is fast, alive,
and I observe
but soon I drown

I am choking on the current
of a language
that was supposed to be mine

I gasp

lo canela shows on me,
yet there is a barrier inside
that does not let it soak in
and become a part

of me

It becomes cold and lonely
not knowing where you belong or stand,

I wear the culture like a
borrowed jacket,
warm, but never quite mine

I carry my mother with me in pieces
where her voice is sharp with love,
and the smell of mole
clings to my memory

I carry my father with me
in the love of American sports,
and the smell of polishes

Maybe things would be different
if I stayed with my mother.

When I speak
some understand
while others
look at me with a face of disappointment

Still, they respond,
and the translation starts,
and I understand!
But a guilt grows
when I cannot reply

I live in two worlds.
Not enough for either.

Between the two languages
I build a bridge
out of effort and determination
to be a step closer
to belonging to both.

I am still a long way from home
but at night
when I am alone,
not having to fight
for my identity,
I whisper
in both languages
hoping one will finally answer back.

I miss
by
Charleen Spittler

I miss

Distant gunshots-target practice echoing through the Appalachian Mountains.
The sharp scent of pool chlorine and freshly cut grass.
Bonfire smoke clinging to my long blonde hair
and cool evening dew collecting on garden leaves.
The sound of crickets and coyotes combining into a symphony of the night.

I miss

Getting the sharp, tangy bite of blue cheese
that cling to crisp celery,
beside a warmed Meat Lovers pizza,
its crust blistered and crackling.
And the sweet, unusual texture of Sponge candy.
Light and airy, sealed beneath a dense coat of chocolate.

I miss

The freedom of ignorance,
the kind my father still lives in.
“They’re just snowflakes. *All* lives matter,”
he says, proud and certain.
Ignorance of why grown men would stare at me,
why it would leave a hard pit in my stomach.
Ignorant of why some people’s red, white, and blue looked different—
and what it truly stood for,
not only rebellion, but hatred and oppression.

What I miss most

is believing my dad was right and just,
brilliant, and understanding.
His hands, sturdy on half-finished projects,
thick with callus and scar,
dragging across dry, splintering planks,
powdery sawdust clinging to sweat,
turning his palms coarse and chalky.
Me close behind,
listening as he explained what he was doing,
and why it mattered.
Believing we were two peas in a pod,
that I was just like him in every way.

Growth left a dull ache,
still easier to carry than the ignorance I outgrew.
The ache reminds me I moved forward,
not away from him, but toward myself.



My Chicago: Ode to Italian Beef

by
Lorenzo Troche

I indulge in the delicacy known as Italian Beef.

Au jus soaks the bread, gravy runs down my wrist,
The flavor reminds me of my youth.

Party trays stacked in the kitchen,
I sneaked a sandwich from the grown-ups table,
Retreated to the kids' watering hole, grease everywhere.

That year I found my love,
My love for something savory, cultured and Chicago.

I still indulge in the delicacy known as Italian Beef.



Seven Ways of Looking at Makeup

by
Kimberly Yerena

- I. Colors paint the face,
Makeup canvas for the self,
Art in every stroke.
 - II. Liner defines eyes.
Makeup forms abound,
Enhancer with a line.
 - III. Sharp line, steady hand,
Makeup defined, striking look,
Practice makes it clean.
 - IV. Dark shadow, soft defense,
Makeup stare keeps eyes bright,
Lashes flutter free.
 - V. Beauty in a blink,
Lashes frame the eyes,
Makeup adds more life.
 - VI. Smoky eyes at night,
Makeup cleanse before slumber,
Eyes healthy, beauty blooms.
 - VII. Colors fade away,
Nightly cleanse, makeup gone,
Face breathes fresh and free.
-

Exposing FIFA by Karina Gil Melchor

What would you say is bigger, the love for the sport or the greed for money? You'd be surprised how much a few dollar signs move the world around and take away from something as beautiful as a sport. Many sport fanatics would say sport games are rigged, but what if I told you large worldwide sports tournaments were just as messy as well? That is exactly what has been happening for years with the beautiful sport of soccer. Its main worldwide organization is called FIFA (Federation Internationale de Football Association). According to its website, "FIFA's vision is to make football truly global, diverse and inclusive, for the benefit of the entire world." Let me explain to you why FIFA is a fraud and goes against its own beliefs with human rights violations, discrimination, and corruption.

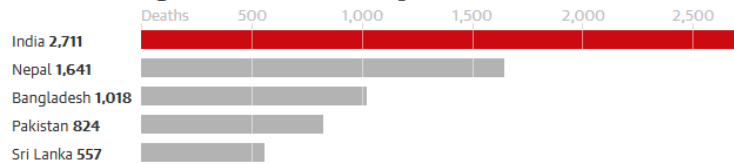
According to FIFA's website, their core beliefs are based on social responsibility, human rights, and anti-discrimination. FIFA has been shown to violate these principles in many

situations, with selecting Qatar as the World Cup hosts in 2022 as one of the most recent situations. Qatar was named the 2022 World Cup host in 2010. Even though there were still 12 years left to prepare, a lot had to be done, for example, building the necessary number of stadiums needed for this huge event. This brought to Qatar around 30,000 immigrants from India,

Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. The 2022 Qatar World Cup event was built on exploitation of immigrants, which cost many lives. There were at least 6,500 deaths due to the construction of the World Cup stadiums according to *The Guardian* (Pattison and McIntyre). Many of these causes of deaths were classified as "natural causes," but the ironic part of all this is that autopsies weren't done and there was never any legitimate medical explanation.

As seen in Figure 1, there was an outrageous number of deaths of South Asian migrants after the World Cup was awarded to Qatar in 2010. It is very sad to think that many lives were lost to make this event possible, and everyone, including FIFA, moved along from it like nothing of note. FIFA didn't stop any of this from happening, nor address it in the 12 years of preparation. Instead, they profited large amounts of money from this event, considering Qatar is one of the richest countries in the world. When asked about the deaths in Qatar due to the World Cup FIFA said, "We deeply regret all of these tragedies and investigated each incident to ensure lessons were learned. We have always maintained transparency around this issue and dispute inaccurate claims around the number of workers who have died on our projects" (Pattison and McIntyre). This, to me, is just saying, "We know it happened. We will tell you we regret all of this and that we will investigate it, because that is what you want to hear, but we made the money we were supposed to make already." If FIFA really cared about this matter, they would at least reimburse the families for funeral expenses, considering these people lost their lives to make their World Cup possible.

There have been 6,750 deaths of south Asian migrants since Qatar was awarded the right to host the World Cup in 2010



Guardian graphic | Source: Supreme Council of Health (Qatar), Embassy of India (Qatar), Embassy of Nepal (Qatar), Foreign Employment board (Nepal), Wage Earners' Welfare Board (Bangladesh), Embassy of Sri Lanka (Qatar). Figures 2011 to late 2020 for nationals from India, Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. Pakistan figures from 2010 to 2020

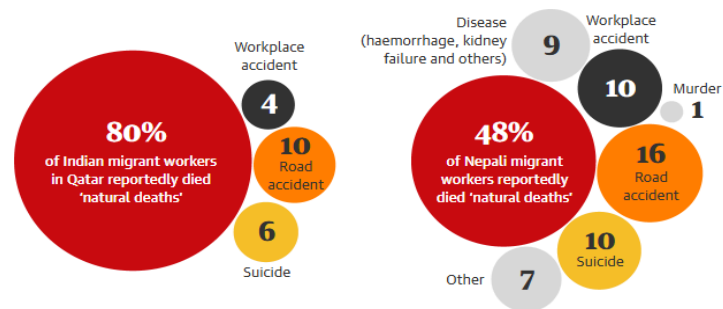
Figure

There have also been reports that FIFA recruited security personnel for the World Cup event games but did not honor the agreement they had placed. For example, the workers had to pay a recruitment fee to secure their positions and were promised to be reimbursed for it, but that never happened. This is not considering what also came out of pocket, which includes their living expenses in Qatar as well as the travel expenses to get to Qatar if they travelled. They were told they were going to get paid back for the costs incurred, but they were not. If anything, the terms and conditions for their new jobs were misleading and many lost more than they gained. Marcus, from Ghana, 33, who works to support his siblings and paid nearly US\$400 in recruitment costs, said: “I had to take out a loan to pay for the expenses to travel to work in Qatar during the World Cup. I am still paying it, what I earned was not enough” (Amnesty). Marcus is one of the many who were taken advantage of by FIFA with false promises, thinking he could trust such a big organization. It is known that not everyone who was recruited paid the same recruitment fee; it varied. Why would this not be a flat fee if it was legit? These workers left their current jobs behind with the hopes of contract extensions or even a bonus, as they were previously told.

Another difficulty the workers would have to face was working in extreme heat temperatures, extensive hours, with up to 38 days straight of work with no days off. The working conditions were very poor, considering they had to stand up for long periods of time and the pay wasn't even worth it. Figure 2 shows how these working conditions led to death and how they were classified. “Some told Amnesty International they reported their treatment on the World Cup Grievances Hotline in November, but that no action was taken. One worker said a manager threatened to fire him and others in retaliation for complaining and warned them not to report issues again” (Amnesty). This shows that the workers basically had no rights, and FIFA has yet to come up with anything to prevent this from happening again. You can't tell me an organization like FIFA can't stop this from happening, that's if they cared. Even though FIFA did not directly pay or hire the construction workers, FIFA knew that Qatar had an abusive labor system, even before they selected them as the hosting country for the event.

FIFA has also gone against human rights by threatening players and teams to sanction them if they wore the “One Love” armbands in support of LGBTQ (Olley). FIFA is not showing support for human rights and how we are all allowed to have our own preferences. I don't think FIFA realizes that not only does their fanbase come from a part of this group, but they also have players, both from the men's and the women's leagues who are part of these communities. FIFA did this because the country this event was taking in, Qatar. Qatar is known for criminalizing sexuality, which makes no sense why a country who doesn't correlate with FIFA's beliefs would get to host their largest event. Human Rights Watch says, “On November 8, Khalid Salman, a 2022 FIFA Qatar World Cup Ambassador, described homosexuality as ‘damage in the mind’ in an interview with ZDF, a TV channel in Germany. He also remarked that being gay is ‘haram,’ which is Arabic for “forbidden” (Bull and

Most deaths of Indian and Nepali migrant workers in Qatar were reported as ‘natural deaths’, often attributed to sudden and unexplained heart or respiratory failure



Guardian graphic. Source: Embassy of India (Qatar), Embassy of Nepal (Qatar), Wage Earners' Welfare Board (Bangladesh), Embassy of Sri Lanka (Qatar) Supreme Council of Health (Qatar). Figures 2011 to late 2020. Note: The use of the term 'natural death' is contentious. Deaths are often classified without an autopsy and may fail to provide a legitimate medical explanation for the underlying causes. South Asian embassies in Qatar do not use a common format to record the causes of death. Figures may not sum to 100 due to rounding

Younes). If FIFA doesn't identify with these viewpoints, why would they allow their followers to feel discriminated against? Electing Qatar as the host that years felt like a stab in the back to the LGBTQ soccer community. This makes me wonder, does FIFA only support the LGBTQ community when it benefits them? Did Qatar bring more money to FIFA's pockets than what LGBTQ could during the World Cup?

FIFA's leaders have been in scandals lately resulting in a ban for eight years from any soccer related activity. BBC news said, "Former Brazil football federation chief Ricardo Teixeira was among those accused of being 'involved in criminal schemes involving well over \$200m (£132m) in bribes and kickbacks,'" (BBC). FIFA has been accused before of taking these types of payments in exchange for votes to host the World Cup. Hosting the World Cup not only guarantees a country to automatically participate in the tournament, but also guarantees an increase in tourists during that time. It has been statistically proven that hosting the World Cup helps the economy where the event is taking place (Ferrito).

Now tell me, if FIFA's own leaders are found guilty of illegal moves, why shouldn't we suspect everything else they claim? FIFA has presented themselves as an organization for the people and for the sport but have proven otherwise as explained. Additional items show that FIFA is a sham. These include forcing host countries to change laws to benefit FIFA, claiming to be a nonprofit but not operating as one, and allowing corruption in clubs and federations. As you can see, there were many more topics to explore in proving that FIFA is a sham but the World Cup in Qatar was a great way to demonstrate it. FIFA's actual interest is money, not protecting human rights or equality as shown. Hopefully one day we can enjoy this beautiful sport without having to think it's just being promoted to make the rich richer.

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Workers in Qatar heat

www.dailystar.co.uk

Dental Disparities Among Low-Income Children

by
Giselle Millan

August marks the start of the warm school year for most children, many of whom beam with excitement as they wait to begin their classes. As I usually did in previous years, I stood next to the teacher welcoming all the five-year-olds. Their pearly white teeth accompanied the smiles on their faces. Grown accustomed to this sight, I was shocked to see their teeth turn into a “brown mess” (see Figure 1). Year after year, the more children I met, the more I realized that many of their teeth suffered from decay, highlighting the lack of dental treatment they received. This was starting to become a reoccurring issue. I was in disbelief because they were far too young for dental problems, much less cavities. These occurrences raised many questions. Among them, one stood out from the rest: what is causing dental disparities among low-income children?



Figure 1
Tooth decay on a child

Absolute Dental

It was not surprising to learn that the “brown mess” I was noticing on these children were untreated cavities. Cavities are damaged areas on a tooth that can develop into holes. Sometimes the harm is only on the smooth surface of the tooth, but it can spread to its root. If left untreated it can lead to tooth pain, infection, or tooth loss (Mayo). From what I could tell, the damage to the children's teeth was far from just a surface cavity. Their teeth had begun chipping away, bit by bit, and exasperated by their parents, who were either unwilling to keep this problem in check or did not have the necessary resources to combat these problems. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), poor oral health is partly due to health disparities, which can be described as a population of people being at a disadvantage to health services because of where they live or because of financial reasons.

One neighborhood suffering from these disparities is Little Village. Although this neighborhood is a diverse community, spanning across multiple ethnic and cultural backgrounds, and “the second highest tax-generating district in the city after the Magnificent Mile,” its residents, according to a report done by Enlace, earn an income of \$14,234, a third of the city's average. Others are less fortunate living below the poverty level.

I have encountered first-hand the disadvantages their children face on a day-to-day basis. For instance, I recall one school year taking a five-year-old girl to the main office due to a toothache. Her right cheek was completely swollen and in terrible pain. So much so that her parents needed to be called because she could not tolerate the pain any longer. Who could? Sadly, most parents in the Little Village neighborhood are part of the working class and are unable to respond to emergency calls in fear of risking the day's paycheck. Since no one answered, the little girl had to stay in school for the rest of the day. A few days after the incident, the school administration was finally able to meet with the mother of the child and verify if her daughter was receiving adequate treatment for her illness. She responded that she did take her, but because they did not have the money or dental insurance for her to be

seen. Therefore, the child's toothache was left untreated, proving various CDC claims that "Untreated cavities were almost three times more common in children aged 2 to

5 years living in low-income (18%) than in higher-income households (7%).” As mentioned previously, while many low-income families are unable to afford basic healthcare, there are more reasons that can be attributed to this issue such as dietary plans.

There is a noticeable imbalance between the diets of high/low-income households. Low-income children are highly affected by the consumption of sugar which can lead to many health problems. For starters, processed foods and cheap sugary drinks are more frequently found in the pantries of low-income households due to accessibility and low costs, replacing the fresh and nutritious foods that children need to grow healthy. The Harvard School of Public Health found that eating healthy costs \$1.50 more per day per person (Feldscher). Some of these families exceed in numbers, making it more difficult to accumulate fresh products to sustain them. To make matters worse, parents are not informed enough on the health effects of poor dietary habits.

Thankfully, many things are being done to decrease dental disparities among low-income families. For instance, the UIC College of Dentistry offers educational programs to families in Chicago to improve oral health, as seen in Figure 2. Additionally, a \$5 million grant has awarded them the opportunity to keep these developing programs to help prevent cavities in areas with more minority children (University). One of those programs the Coordinated Oral Health Promotion Chicago (CO-OP), whose research study found numerous ways to improve oral health in low-income children. However, due to shifting health goals within the country’s administration, funding for these programs is uncertain, risking the oral health of those who benefit from it and potentially their lives.



Figure 2
Dentists educating children on dental health. University of Illinois Chicago

Now more than ever it is clear that low-income families are at a disadvantage. Especially their children, who face years of toothache because of health disparities. The parents' lack of knowledge, poor dietary habits, and financial resources all contribute to this issue. Nonetheless, with the help of current, and forming programs, there is still hope for this issue to be resolved.

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Educator Career in Illinois

by
Janet Romo

According to the Illinois Board of Education, the teacher vacancy rate has almost tripled from 1.1 percent in 2018 to 3 percent in 2023 (Greene). This is due to teacher burnout, low wages, state funding, and many other factors. In 2022, the highest number of vacant positions on record was 5,300 to be exact. Elementary school teachers need a bachelor's degree and a teaching license to be considered. With everything going on, getting a dual degree in early childhood and elementary school is a clever choice if I want to be a teacher. My advisor recommended that it would be more valuable if I took this route once I graduated; she also encouraged me to add credentials and certifications. She mentioned that this would make me more appealing in the hiring process.

The median salary for a kindergarten/elementary school teacher is \$63,670 per year (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics). They are the first foundation of education for students, so they have a lot of pressure. These teachers deal with adjusting situations from the students, pushbacks from the parents, etc. Kindergarten and elementary school teachers typically create lesson plans to teach students subjects, such as reading, science, and math. They teach students how to interact with others and observe them to evaluate their abilities, strengths, and weaknesses. They instruct an entire class or smaller groups of students and grade student assignments. They must communicate with parents or guardians about their child's progress. They work with students individually and with the help of an aide to help them with specific learning challenges to prepare them for standardized tests required by the state. Teachers must be prepared with their lesson plans; this means a lot of their time is invested. Many times, all this workload provokes a burnout for them.

Teacher burnout is a huge reason why many educators leave the position prematurely. According to a Gallup poll in 2022, 44 percent of K-12 teachers reported often feeling burned out. Some of the burnout causes: heavy workloads, staff shortages, social media issues, safety issues, low salaries, mental health, deficit of education funds, and many other reasons (Peck). "Students under teachers with high anxiety tend to perform worse academically, particularly in subjects like math, and can develop negative feelings and behaviors" (Peck). The teachers' load is not getting any smaller and their compensation is not getting bigger either.

On a more positive note, there is a phenomenal residency program here in Chicago. This program, "Teach Chicago," is for aspiring future educators. Applicants can apply for this program and if they get accepted, they can start mentoring even if they're not finished with their degree. This program would give them a stipend of \$40,000 plus other aid each year, but they would have to be a full-time student at one of the program's partner schools. This program is a great career starter since this is my passion.

"The program's mission is to recruit, prepare, and retain a diverse base of culturally competent professionals who can successfully teach high-needs subjects—Bilingual Education, Special Education, STEM: MS Math and MS Science, Performing Arts: Theatre and Dance, Physical Education and Early Childhood Education—to students in underserved communities citywide" (Chicago). This is a great program that will expose me in depth to the position, they

partner with higher learning institutions like National Louis University, Roosevelt University just to name a few. Programs like this are aiding the shortage of educators in the field.

I have found out a lot of information on this career path which now more than ever I want to proceed and follow through. I have many skills that are needed for this position, like patience, time management, adaptability, organizational etc. I have always had a passion to lead and teach. In my previous employment I was an upper-level instructor for the company. I taught young adults all the way to 80-year-olds. Despite the burnout that teachers are having I know I have all it takes to make this a successful career for me.

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The College Diet

by
Edith Vargas

If you are reading this essay and you are a college student living in the U.S. between the ages of 18 and 24, then you might be familiar with what is known as “The College Diet.” What is the college diet you may be wondering? Well it is an unhealthy diet that consists mainly of fast food, instant noodles and sugary drinks consumed by many students. An unhealthy eating pattern like this can lead to weight gain, nutrition deficiency and high risks of chronic health issues such as obesity and diabetes, negatively impacting a student's academic performances.

Picture this: It's 8:00 am, and you have around 30 minutes to get up, get ready, and find something to eat before running out the door to make it on time for class. For the average college student who doesn't have the time to prepare meals for the week, it is easy to not lean towards the healthier food options and opt instead for a breakfast sandwich from McDonald's or a little snack typically sold in most campus dining halls. A student can easily lose count how many times a week they are consuming these meals; harming the health of a student and leading to poor eating habits in the future. Colleges and universities should eliminate fast food and ultra processed foods from their dining menu and promote healthier eating choices among students, as the shift is essential for improving students' health and enhancing their academic performances.

With new profound freedom, busy schedules, and balancing a social life, college students often forget about their overall health making them susceptible to eating out more and turning to ultra processed foods, and universities are often to blame for feeding into these dangerous eating habits. Across many U.S. campuses, cafeterias feature chain restaurants such as McDonald's, Chick-Fil-A, Starbucks, Panda Express and, Dunkin' Donuts to name a few. These are all quick and easily accessible. A statement from a student in the school newspaper of Mercy College, “The Impact,” called this matter not just a “stressful situation” but also “a daily reality” among most students. “ In a recent poll conducted among Mercy University students, a staggering 94 percent of respondents admitted to consuming fast food at least 1-2 times per week, highlighting a concerning trend” (Gradiz and Rivas) This was just from one single university, You could only imagine from the thousands across the nation. A student from the same university, Yessy Alvarez, says she finds comfort and satisfaction in fast food like Chick-Fil-A as it used to be a place where this kind of food wasn't even available and now saying it's “ a meal that truly hits the spots.”

College freshmen are especially vulnerable to these kinds of changes as they are adjusting to their new routines and independent lifestyles. Most freshmen since starting the semester go over the U.S dietary guidelines by consuming lots of added sugars, sodium, and saturated fats with all having health consequences if consumed regularly down the line “ The freshman 15 is common among students, when new profound independence and unrestricted access to dining halls makes them more susceptible to poor nutritional intake.” (Cunningham). The freshman 15 is basically where it is common for college freshmen to gain around 15 pounds in their first year of college due to high-calorie foods. Eating habits like these come with a cost. Foods like these are high in calories and added sugars. For many an unhealthy way of living can continue well even after graduating college.

In recent years, there has been an increase in college students and health problems due to fast food and ultra processed foods. It is now obvious that no matter your age or where you are in life, junk food and fast food carry risk factors to your health. “ Such unhealthy dietary habits in youth are thus associated with increased risk of obesity, cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, and cancer later in adulthood” (Unhealthy). For young adults in college, unhealthy eating can significantly impact brain functions, mood, and physical attributes. Many studies have already reported that many students have or had at one point in college struggled with some type of mental conditions such as depression and/or anxiety due to the stress they undergo in college. Poor mental nutrition on top of this can only make a person prone to developing some type of chronic consciousness affecting their mental health as well as their physical health and impacting their academic journey.

Eating out is becoming increasingly expensive. If you are a person who buys fast food multiple times a week then you can find yourself spending more on food than on groceries. The average student can spend around 400 dollars a month on food and most of this is spent on takeout and snacks. I know as I mentioned before, meal prep is not an option as students already have a lot on their plate but reducing the amount of times they are ordering junk food can significantly help with cost and their health. Getting rid entirely of these restaurants can take away the want of buying these foods and control their eating habits or even take small steps like adding more healthier menu options that still hit all of the main nutritional needs. The whole purpose of this essay is to remind students that to succeed in college they also need to fuel their bodies with the right foods that will help with learning. It’s okay to eat out occasionally but with the concern of obesity in young people and many struggling with eating disorders in our country today many fall into buying these foods more than needed.

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Haiku

cotton candy skies
beautiful butterflies
flutter above me
—Sheyla Aguirre



running late
my car stopped
in Thanksgiving traffic
—Denise Avalos

sunbeams stream
between the layers of
a blossoming rose bush
—Jackie Sullivan



screams echo above
the controller slams the wall
video game loss
—Adrian Pelayo

spring awakening
an insect crawling out
with a tear drop of rain
—Juan Santillan

