

People You Meet During the College Years¹ Or How to Stop Hating Yourself and Enjoy the Ride

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Abstract: Lilian Salas is a first-gen student and child of diaspora. Overwhelmed and exhausted, Salas considers the people who have influenced her throughout her college journey in a series of vignettes. From friendships to unrequited love, queer awakening, and arch enemies, each person has in some way helped her to grow and learn to love the person she is becoming.

1. The professor

You've always felt dumb. You didn't graduate top 10%. Hell, you didn't even graduate top 20%. You couldn't afford to go to that one college. Even if you secretly don't want to go there. Starting community college late doesn't help. You have no clue how to navigate financial aid or how they expect you to buy \$300 worth of books. You don't have anyone to turn to besides your sister, who also is navigating this bizarre system alone. You begin to think you might be in over your head. As you start college, you begin to see the same trend again. You're not excelling in school. Maybe that little voice in the back of your head is right. Maybe you are dumb. You remember being in 4th grade. Your teacher made you reread the lines over and over again. They make you take a strange test. They brought your mom in one weekend. She came out with a paper. Soon they begin to pull you out of class for one hour every other day. In middle school, you had to give up one of your electives. Dyslexia, you remember. Something changes. When you finally begin to take classes within your major, it's different. For once in your life, you don't feel dumb. You meet professors who speak to you like a person. Who see you and your potential. They encourage you and even push you to go further. They make you see how you aren't dumb. You exchange emails, and they tell you to keep in touch. They affirm to you that they think you'll do great things. All those years of self-depreciation, and it turns out you were wrong.

2. The hot girl from yoga

Her hair is amazing, you think. That's why you like to look at her. That's why you purposely moved your yoga mat near her. When she talks to you, you begin to smile. You feel gushy. Strange. You know how to make friends. Yet she makes you nervous. You feel sad when she isn't in class. And soon, you begin to put one and two together. You begin to think back at all your past friendships. You make a list of which friendships felt different. You think about the girls you saw as sisters and the ones you just wanted to kiss. The next thing you know, you are sitting across the table at Pho Dung 3, trying to muster up the courage to tell your mom. You want to tell her how you feel, but you're not sure how. In simple and eloquent words, you say,

¹ In pop culture, you see this trend in shows or movies where our protagonist enjoys the "college years," yet for many of us first-gen students, the experience is different. We don't finish school in 4 years, or perhaps we start off a little late. Some of us are returning after taking a couple of years off. Many of us have to work full-time and pay bills. The college experience isn't monolithic. So with this narrative, I'd like to consider alternate kinds of "college years."

“well, I think I just like everyone, you know?” You smile to break the tension. She laughs and says, “that’s nice.” It is nice, isn’t it?

3. Work Bestie

“Bestie, I don’t want to come in today.” Although y’all didn’t meet in school, this one still counts. Many of us must work and go to school at the same time. We must suffer the perils of a minimum wage job that exploits our labor because they know we have no choice other than to work. But you still end up meeting people who understand you and the uncomfortable jumpsuits. She makes the weekly 23 hours go by. Y’all share lunch and trauma on the clock. You feel lucky to have met someone who gets you. You tell each other drama about people you’ve never met. You text while being in the same room, so the others don’t hear. You say, “if they fire, I swear I’ll quit!” You’re grateful to have met someone cool. Someone to have dumb inside jokes with. Someone who helps you forget the amount of stress you’re under. Someone you can call a friend.

4. The quiet girl you forced friendship upon

Listen, it isn’t stalking. It’s just an aggressive force-friendship. You spot her in class. You like her pins. Hmm, you think perhaps she can be my first college friend. You introduce yourself since y’all sit nearby. You coincidentally tie your shoes at the door, so you run into each other. Going that way, you say. Guess you should walk together. Soon y’all begin to hit it off organically. You exchange IGs. The first step in a friendship. This is where it becomes tricky. How do you transition from class to real life? You’re surprised when it’s her who initiates the outside hang. She meets your other friends. You all hit it off on an almost perfect day. You’re all still between the ages of 18 to 20. There is still a hit of teenage joyhood that is to be had. Years later, you tell her how you purposely took steps to become her friend. She laughs and thanks you. She tells you how at the time, she felt the same loneliness you felt in school and how your friendship means a lot. Now even if you don’t talk every day, you still remember each other and appreciate your first college friend.

5. Someone’s mom

College is for everyone. You meet all kinds of people. Some younger, some older. That’s one thing you’ve always found beautiful. Recently you’ve befriended an older woman. You sit next to each other. You study for tests before class together. You don’t have much in common besides school. Yet it’s a nice dynamic. One day before the class, you greet her like usual. She waves, you notice she is on the phone. She’s on the phone with her son. You then remember she is someone’s mom. You think of your mom. You remember, as a teen, y’all didn’t always get along. You always felt like she didn’t understand you. It’s not like you thought she hated you. It’s just you never felt like the favorite. Maybe top 3 out of 5 but not 1. After you graduated, it was different. You spent more time at home. You started helping with chores. You started picking up the slack. You had to attend PTA meetings, drive people to school, go to the grocery store, and bring everyone lunch. You begin to see why she is always so tired. How everyone depends on her, yet who does she depend on? She tells you more about her life, her childhood.

Y'all bond with your similar taste in horror films and comics. You finally understand. For the first time, you understand the amazing person you call mom.

6. The unrequited love

There is always that one person. One day you don't know they exist. Next, you begin to see them everywhere. You notice them from the corner of your eyes. You use any excuse to turn your head over. You listen to their voice carefully. You even set your tinder radius to 1 mile, hoping they pop up. They never do. Perhaps your eyes finally meet, and your stomach sinks. You quickly turn around and hope they don't notice you blushing. Perhaps when you finally speak to them in class, you feel butterflies. Perhaps you bump into them in the campus parking lot, and you finally learn their name. Perhaps y'all hit it off and become friends. Perhaps you realize they are awful. Perhaps you never speak. Once the class ends, you never see them again. You spend a semester daydreaming about some perfect meet-cute. Where you both run into each other in the library. They ask if they know you and you pretend not to recognize them. California by La Gusana Ciega plays in the background. Soon you forget their name. Soon you forget the crush altogether. Until one day, you see them again. Waiting in line for a free t-shirt. You begin to think. I wonder if they know my name? I doubt it.

7. The worst person in the world

F!@# you Jesse Lopez. You know what you did.

8. Amigis

You remember being super nervous about transferring. The night before, you had a little panic attack. You thought it was dumb to be nervous, yet there you were. Nervous. You meet some people and form a little study group. As the semester goes on, the group begins to study less and small talk more. You spend the little break you have before class with them. Y'all talk about life. You joke about how you all would have never hung out if you met in high school. You tell them about your enemies, your family issues, and your hate for employment. You discuss trauma. You argue over the best joker. You give dating advice. You quote drag race. You begin to create new memories. It's easy to talk to them. You're an unlikely group, but that's what makes it all so charming. Adult friendships are hard and weird but worth it.

9. The new you

It's not like you wake up one morning, look in the mirror and see a totally different person. It's a process. Each day you look a little different. When you look into the mirror, you begin to notice things. The way you've always had the darkest eyes in your family. They remind you of your grandpa. The one you've never met. Or how you are miles away from your pueblo. The one your great-great-great-grandfather helped to found. The town none of your ancestors had ever left until now. You've always felt so disconnected from this place. Next, you notice the bags under your eyes. They remind you of the long nights you stayed up doing homework on the kitchen table. There was no room for a desk anywhere in your house. Hell, you didn't even have a room to yourself. 7 people in a 2 bedroom. It always felt crowded. Now you miss the noise.

You notice your septum piercing. You remember getting it done on your 18th birthday. Now you've had it for over 5 years. How bizarre, you think. You remember always feeling ugly because of looking so different. Non-eurocentric. You remember learning about this term at your campus library. You'd spend your time here between classes. Trying to read any and everything you could get your hands on. Community college could be so lonely at times. You smile at the mirror and realize you look like your mother, your father, your ancestors who resisted decades of colonization. But most importantly, you look like you. Every joyful moment, heartbreak, awkward date, meeting that someone who makes it all easy, late night crying over FAFSA, bills you couldn't pay, moments you missed your family because they were miles away, long bus rides after an eight-hour shift at a job you hate, feeling like an outsider, feeling lost and confused on campus, wishing you could have been born with the privilege of not having to navigate the world so alone. Yet you're still here. You remember all the people who've had your back since the beginning. All the new ones you've met. You look at yourself and smile.