

Gabriela De La Torre
California State University, Los Angeles

Bittersweet

Abstract

Gabriela De La Torre is a first-generation college student at Cal State University, Los Angeles. Her work is a tribute to her mother who was a first-generation high-school graduate and single, working mom. De La Torre reflects on what it means to be a first-generation student and seeks to better clarify the term through her own perspective. She shares how her new understanding of common challenges faced by first-generation students has helped her to recognize and voice underlying themes in her own life that detrimentally impacted her mental wellbeing. Through her mother's narrative, she lays a foundation of love and gratitude that gave her the strength to rise above guilt, terror, and anxiety and become the first in her family to attend university.

Recommended Citation

De La Torre, Gabriela. "Bittersweet." *Text & Type*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2024. CSU Open Journals.

Available at: <https://journals.calstate.edu/textandtype/issue/view/451>

Articles printed in *Text & Type* are published by CSU Open Journals under a Creative Commons (CC) copyright license. Authors retain ownership of all rights under copyright in all versions of the article. Specifically, the journal uses a CC BY-NC-SA license. This license allows reusers to distribute, remix, adapt, and build upon the material in any medium or format for noncommercial purposes only, and only so long as attribution is given to the creator. If you remix, adapt, or build upon the material, you must license the modified material under identical terms.

Bittersweet

“I’m so tired,” I cry to my mom repeatedly over the phone. I lay on the floor of my bedroom where I was mentally trying to talk myself out of a panic attack. Attempting to steady my breathing as she tells me it will all be alright, but of course, at the moment it never feels that way. I think of the anxieties that have piled onto my metaphorical plate, the numerous hardships I’ve had to push through to get to where I am now. Waiting for someone to pull me up to the surface before I let it swallow me whole. *“When is it my turn to rest?”*

Class is starting soon, and I need to leave, but the heavy breathing and tears start flooding in. Suddenly on the phone, she says, “I’m sorry Gabby,” and I mentally kick myself. I’m expecting to be consumed by the guilt that comes with allowing someone to know how I feel and what I struggle with, but it never comes. I don’t care anymore, because I know if I were to remain silent about this any longer, I wouldn’t survive what was yet to come.

I start trying to apply an exercise my therapist suggested to help with these kinds of situations. I try to focus on what things I can see, what I can feel, and what I can hear. I see the posters covering the baby blue paint on the walls of my room, the pictures of my friends on the counter, and the books on my shelves. I feel the blanket under my hand as I grip onto it, hoping it will ground me as I lay on the floor of my bedroom. As loud and overwhelming as my thoughts sound, I began to focus on my mom’s voice over the phone. And surprisingly, this technique begins to soothe me. My thoughts are not filled with their usual panic. They’re not filled with annoyance. This time, they’re full of certainty and patience, and it’s reassuring, settling the mess going on in my head.

My mom assures me, as she always has, that she will always be by my side. She tells me I don’t have to carry all this weight alone, that I don’t have to pretend I’m okay all the time for the sake of them or others. I want to scoff and tell her that she doesn’t understand, but the little girl inside me stops me from doing so. I didn’t push her away for my sake and hers. I just listened, focusing on her voice, a lullaby shared between a mother and her daughter, and for the first time in years, I believed everything would be okay if I just rested my head on her shoulder for a moment.

The last couple of days that I’ve been away from home has allowed me to reflect on just how powerful her presence is in my life. A life I would never have been able to experience if it wasn’t for her. She gave me the life and motivation to pursue bigger things than myself, especially now as I get older and pursue my own dreams. I commemorate her and our journey together.

* * *

Initially, the term “first-gen” was not a significant part of my vocabulary. It has now become a part of my speech and my identity. I now understand that it’s always been a part of me, but I’ve never really thought too much about my identity. Along with understanding what

it means to be first-gen, I've recently encountered other terms that have helped to put words to certain feelings I've had before but never knew what they were. Terms such as "imposter syndrome" and "survivor's guilt" now live in my vocabulary and are helping me grow and heal. As I started to find myself again, I realized that these terms don't only apply to me. My classmates alongside me have felt these things too, but it goes further than the classroom. I'm reminded of my mom again as I acknowledge her hardships that have identified her as first-gen too.

The tricky part of being first-gen is that there is no specific way to define it. There are many first-gens who identify as such because their parents didn't pursue a college education, or maybe they started college but didn't finish. I identify as first-gen through the latter definition and my mom through the first. My mom was the first in her family to graduate from high school, and she had planned to pursue a college education, but I changed all that.

When my mom turned nineteen, she found out she was pregnant with me. As scared as she was, here I am. She was scared to tell my grandparents, but as she was crying in her room one day, my grandpa came in to ask what was wrong and she confessed to him. My grandpa is not known for being the most positive kind of person/, so when he hugged her it came as a shock compared to his usual pessimistic attitude. He held onto her and promised that things would be okay, but now she had to go tell my grandma. Similar to my grandpa, my grandma was not a very positive person, and her response showed that. She told my mom her life was over, that she had messed up and there was no going back. This was the home my mom was raised in—pessimistic and toxic—no matter how much love and adoration she showed towards her parents. Being raised in a home like this can push someone to start believing the hurtful words that come out of the mouths of the people they love. Yet despite these hurtful words, my mom got up and tried harder to prove that the things my grandma said were wrong.

After finding out she was pregnant with me, my mom went to school to get certified as a medical assistant. She knew she needed to work hard to provide a better life for not only herself but for her child. This initially was not her dream, but it was her father's dream. I once asked my mom what her dream was. She answered: "I wanted to be an attorney for children or immigration. But my dad didn't approve. He wanted me to be a nurse or doctor, but I didn't know if I would like it. I also wanted to be a choreographer, but that was a complete no!" This is a familiar story among many first-gens who have to sacrifice their dreams for their parents. If they've sacrificed so much for you, then why can't you do the same for them? My mom would later come to realize that this was a form of survivor's guilt.

Her new dream was someone else's, but she still dedicated herself to it, trusting that it would be enough not only for her, but for her parents as well. Once she finished her program, however, my grandpa told her, "It wasn't like real college." This set her back, discouraging her from pursuing education for another eleven years. As I said before, when you're constantly around someone putting down every one of your accomplishments you start to wonder: *is it even worth it?*

Now it's 2012, and my mom is trying to go back to school. Just getting out of a nine-year relationship, no babysitter, no motivation (aside from her kids), and barely making enough money to support them and herself. From 2012 to 2015 she was able to do online part-time school to complete her prerequisites while working two full-time jobs and raising now four kids. The truth is, she didn't end up completing all the prerequisites until 2023. With life

consuming her, it's been hard for her to focus on school, but she still intends to finish in the near future.

In the process of growing up herself, giving birth to me at twenty, and my siblings at twenty-three and twenty-four, she had limited resources at a time when she needed help the most. Toxic relationships (familial and romantic) while dealing with physical health challenges and bearing the responsibility for raising three kids—the mental toll that she has had to deal with is unimaginable.

When my mom turned twenty-three, she not only had herself to take care of, but a little three-year old girl and another one on the way. I just turned twenty-three earlier this year, and I can't imagine bearing the responsibility for another person besides myself. No matter how much I love my younger siblings and my niece, the responsibility and love that a mother has is admirable beyond imagination. Despite everything she has had to face in life, she has never stopped surviving. She's fought harder for her kids and for her own life more than anyone I've ever known.

I've started to imagine what it would be like if I had met my mom back then. If only I could tell her it would be okay, be that friend for her that she needed. I often wish that because I know after everything she's been through she could've really used one. I think about what I would say to her at twenty-three, at nineteen, at thirteen...

Nancy (Thirteen)

The things that have happened to you—such a bright, passionate, and loving girl—are unfair. I wish I could've protected you from the worst parts of this world. You deserve patience. You deserve compassion. And you are more than worthy of love. I promise you don't need to prove that to anyone.

Nancy (Nineteen)

Things are changing. I can only imagine how scared you feel right now, but I promise the world isn't going to be as scary anymore. You won't be alone. You are more than strong enough to get through whatever you set your mind to. Follow your dreams. This is your life, and you don't owe it to anyone. Don't give up. I believe in you, and I promise I won't ever leave your side.

Nancy (Twenty-three)

It's okay to cry when things get hard. Don't beat yourself up for not knowing how to handle something. You're in the process of growing up too. Your parents taught you what they could, but look at how far you've come on your own. The process doesn't happen overnight. Be patient and understand that you trying is more than enough. Being responsible for not only yourself, but for another human who is now growing up alongside you, is a lot of work, but don't change who you are. I promise everything will work out for the best.

* * *

All this just to say thank you. If it wasn't for her, I wouldn't have been put in the position that I am in now where I'm in my last semester of my undergraduate degree and get to walk that big stage Spring 2025. My mom pushed me to chase my own dream. She guided me and led me to believe that could accomplish anything. Always knowing I could, she helped pave this path I walk on now. She broke that generational cycle of toxicity embedded in her and her parents, choosing instead to raise me and my siblings with love, the way she knew

how. Even though I can't begin to imagine how she's felt through it all, I can sit down, listen to her, comfort her, and do my best to understand.

I'm recognized as a first-gen student because she halted her pursuit of education to take care of everyone else. I recognize her as first-gen because she is still in pursuit of higher education, and I couldn't be prouder. This is for you, Ma.



(My mom at twenty-three, with three-year-old me at *Chuck-E-Cheese*)