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Flench Toast: A Slice of Joy in a World of Chaos

Abstract

Rubi Lopez is a first-generation immigrant from Mexico who grew up navigating the challenges of undocumented life in the United States. Raised by a resilient mother, she found joy in small, shared moments like “Flench toast” Saturdays. Key moments in her journey include overcoming the stigma of being undocumented, embracing her unique identity, and taking her first international trip at 34, where she discovered a world beyond survival. Her story is a testament to the strength and resilience of first-generation immigrants, highlighting the importance of embracing one’s heritage and finding joy amidst adversity.

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RUBI LOPEZ

Flench Toast: A Slice of Joy in a World of Chaos

Growing up as a first-generation immigrant, joy often came in unexpected forms, such as small moments that carried more weight than they might have for others. For my siblings and me, joy was encapsulated in “Flench toast.” It was more than just a meal; it was a symbol of togetherness, of the brief moments when our mother, a woman who worked tirelessly at a motel to make ends meet, could sit with us and share something sweet in an otherwise bitter reality. Every Saturday, as we watched *caricaturas* (cartoons), the smell of cinnamon would fill our tiny one-bedroom apartment at the Highway Host Motel. Our world was small, a single room that held three kids, two beds, and one extraordinarily hard-working woman, but it felt like enough in those moments. The sizzle of the pan, the golden-brown toast, and the laughter accompanying each bite were our week’s highlights. In that tiny space, with Bimbo bread dipped in a perfectly mixed egg and cinnamon batter, we found joy.

But joy, much like the word “Flench toast,” can be fragile. I remember the first time I realized that the word I had known and loved was “wrong” in the eyes of others. It happened at school when I proudly mentioned my favorite breakfast dish, only to be met with laughter and mockery. They told me it was “French toast,” not “Flench toast,” and my joy was tarnished at that moment. I wasn’t just embarrassed; I was ashamed. I was ashamed that I didn’t know the “correct” word, ashamed that my little piece of happiness had been taken away. Yet, as I reflect on that experience, I realize that the word “Flench toast” carries a power that goes beyond mispronunciation. It represents my mother’s resilience, her love, and the sacrifices she made so that we could have a better life. It represents the innocence of a childhood lived in the shadows of undocumented life, where every small joy was cherished because it was rare.

As an undocumented person, I often felt invisible, hiding in the dark to avoid being kicked out of the place I called home. I lived in constant fear of discovery, a fear that colored every aspect of my life, making joy feel even more precious and fleeting. It wasn’t until I was 23 years old that I could start truly living, stepping out from the shadows that had defined my existence for so long. By the time I was 34, I had the chance to take my first international trip with my study abroad group from Cal State LA. Traveling to Durham, London, and Ireland allowed me to fully immerse myself in new cultures and embrace the idea that we live in a much bigger world than I had ever imagined. For the first time, I felt myself striving, not just surviving, but experiencing life in a way that felt fully alive.

Through these travels and connections, I’ve come to understand that joy is not just found in the big moments or the grand achievements, but also in the quiet, shared experiences that shape who we are. It’s in the laughter over a meal, the warmth of immediate and extended family, and the realization that despite the challenges, we are part of something larger than ourselves. Being a first-gen student is often painted as a struggle, and while that struggle is real, it’s not the whole story. There’s also joy—joy in the moments of connection, the traditions we create, and the resilience that defines our paths. “Flench toast” may have been laughed at,

but it's a word that brings me back to the warmth of my family, to the love of a mother who gave everything for her children, and to the joy that sustains me even now as I navigate the challenges of higher education.

My travels have only broadened that joy, reminding me that as first-gens, we can redefine what joy looks like for ourselves and those who come after us. I now reclaim it as I continue my journey as a first-gen student, wife, mother, ex-wife, sister, daughter, and woman.