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## Amongst the Roses

### Abstract

As Karina Mora, a first-gen Chicana, wraps up her first year in college, she reflects on her experiences through the lens of her ethnic intersectionality and first-gen struggles in and out of the academic setting. She acknowledges the challenges many first-generation students have to overcome while honoring the sacrifices made on all parts to get her to where she is today. Celebrating the silver linings of her first-gen study abroad experience, Karina hopes this is just the first of many adventures she will voyage on.

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KARINA MORA

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## Amongst the Roses

“Make a wish!” a phrase spread across our childhood every time we crossed paths with a dandelion. Under other circumstances, I might have gotten myself to wish for the newest toy or for my family to miraculously afford a Disneyland Resort weekend trip. However, as the daughter of immigrant parents, I recognized from a tender age the lack of privilege I had compared to my peers. Not born with a silver spoon in my mouth, I took matters into my own hands, and for every birthday candle, every penny thrown into a fountain, every wishing star, and every dandelion, I made a wish with my family in mind. I always believed my wishful thinking would give my family more financial and social security, allowing us to grow old with survival mode turned off. Enduring so many adversities as an immigrant household, we were constantly living in a state of fight or flight.

Putting family first may come as second nature to a first-gen Latina. The importance of family is a value instilled in many Hispanic households generation after generation. No matter how many silly childhood aspirations we chase, we must do it near home and our *familia*. Like myself, many first-gen students are met with demands and responsibilities to fulfill for their families, sometimes even leaving some sons and daughters torn between family obligations and pursuing an education. Choosing the latter didn't guarantee me a break from the former. As part of a minority community, we have the short end of the stick, and I am still left living on the edge, constantly walking on eggshells. I have taken every step with my family in mind and never fathomed the idea of what it would be like to not be by their side. With this in mind, something like traveling abroad was never on my radar.

Family isn't the only fundamental value in my life; friendship has always been equally important. The most memorable friendship I've had involves one of my favorite people: Kaylee Zhen. Kaylee was the best I could ever ask out of a friend, and I fear that nobody came close after her. We met in elementary school, two timid girls, each struggling to learn English. When we met, I knew her as Ying and always called her *my Ying Ying*. I never spoke her native language, but I always did my best to help translate big teacher talk into something she would understand. Over time, we grew closer, and my Ying Ying kept getting placed in my classes. We spent endless hours drawing, coloring, and making origami during recess. We were inseparable. One day, she broke the news that she would be leaving for New York. We were both devastated to part ways but determined to send her off as best we could. I had one task on her final day: to bring tape. Kaylee's last day came along, and she showed up with paper. We taped the sheets together and made the most enormous origami basket we had ever laid eyes on, filled with origami roses.

It took me years to recover from losing my best friend, and in that time, I would keep replicating every fold she taught me, afraid to lose the craft that brought us together. Amidst grieving our lost friendship, I couldn't imagine building my life and, from one day to another, adjusting to a new environment. Seeing the state her absence left me in, I realized I could never do that to my own family and friends. I thought back to my family's expectation always

to stick together, and maybe it wasn't so bad after all. The idea of being away from them now seemed too daunting to imagine. It was supposed to be Karina and Kaylee forever, until she hopped on a plane and I never heard from her again. Unbeknownst to me, a decade later, it would be my turn to hop on a plane, once again part of a Karina and Kaylee duo, on a trip I would hold close to my heart forever.

Who knew replying to an email would set me on board a flight to England six months later? Despite my hyper-independence as the oldest daughter, I never imagined leaving my family's side during college, especially not in my first year here. But after receiving that flyer advertising a study abroad program in Durham, England, I took the leap and enrolled in the class. Soon I had made a new friend (a new Kaylee!), and we were about to embark on an unforgettable trip. Contrary to the college life you see in the media, it wasn't all sunshine and rainbows. There seemed to be a common denominator between my journey in college and my experience studying abroad: imposter syndrome. I soon came to recognize that it sprawled all over my school journey, overseas and at home. Even standing in front of a castle or overlooking city from the the Eiffel Tower, I kept asking myself if my hard work got me here or just *suerte*. What exactly made me qualified in a room full of English majors who seemed to know what they were doing? Was it the right moment, right time kind of situation?

After the most enriching two weeks of studying abroad, it was time for Kaylee and I to hit the road to London and Paris—even typing that out just now was astonishing to me. What seemed inconceivable was now just a train ride away. Next stop: culture shock. It was now Kaylee and I against the world, together challenging the cultural stigma of leaving behind our families. Even though I knew the U.K. and Europe would be different than the U.S., I was not prepared for the lack of representation I experienced while traveling. As we looked around the packed airport and busy streets, we seemed to be the only brown Latinas around. Although my language was nothing new to London, I didn't feel the same connection to hearing Spaniards speak Spanish on the streets as I would hearing others at home. As a matter of fact, speaking Spanish around *the* Spanish was intimidating. What if my accent sounded funny to them? Overall, there were a lot of “shocks” to get used to in England: the abundant greenery, sheep, and roundabouts, for example. However, my culture shock also involved both the absence and presence of my own culture.

Amidst the overwhelming change of scenery, I was surprised to find traces of home at times: for instance, getting a sense of family as I played UNO with my new friends, surrounded by the nostalgic sounds of bachata in the background. Listening to a bachata playlist from one of my Durham friends, who is not a native Spanish speaker, was not on my bingo card when I left home, but it was comforting. Then there was stepping foot into the Parisian *boulangeries* and getting a taste of my *panaderías* back home. Somehow, the most refreshing moment was hearing someone speak in Spanish. As Kaylee explored the markets around London, I was on my own mission, determined to see the changing of the guards. I managed to navigate the tube alone and marveled at the surreal moment I found myself in: walking alone around London, staring up at Buckingham Palace, the epitome of my newly gained independence. I was scouting around the flower beds for a good picture spot when I heard giggling next to me. It was a little girl laughing as she was taking pictures of her mom from all sorts of angles. I smiled, and her mother turned to me, asking, "Nos tomas una foto?" It was subtle but I had recognized it, *español latinoamericano, mi raza*. We made small talk and

hearing them speak in my accent made me feel like my mom had scooped me up after being lost at a shopping center.

Seeing that mother with her daughter was a bittersweet moment. I had traversed through many obstacles, but how wonderful it would have been to share the sight of Buckingham Palace with my own family. I saw my brother and mother reflected in them, and I couldn't help but grapple with guilt. Enjoying this trip without my family suddenly felt like I was abandoning them. I thought of how I could have helped out my family a little more. Not only had I left my dad a day before Father's Day, but my mother contracted COVID after leaving me at the airport. I was absent at times when they may have needed me present. With my siblings not in school for the summer, I could only think about how much help my mom would need to take care of my younger siblings and the two kittens I cared for back home.

In the weeks following my trip, I felt like a chasm had opened between me and my friends and family back at home. When I shared my experience, I was no longer relatable to my friends, and my extended family made me feel like a *presumida*, a show-off. While I thought I was changing for the better, perhaps I had changed *too much*. There was now an uncomfortable disparity between me and my social circle. They didn't see this opportunity as an enriching and transformative study-abroad experience but rather a vacation for me to escape from my responsibilities at home. When I returned, I was expected to pick up right where I left off.

For me, studying abroad has been one of the most transformative experiences of my life. I met new people, gained insight into new cultures, and, most importantly, gained a new understanding of myself and reflected on my life experiences. It's an opportunity that has broadened my horizons and will only continue to do so. Going forth, I know embracing the new knowledge and experiences I gained while abroad is not betraying my persona or the expectations my culture has for me, but rather intertwined with my experience as a first-generation college student, and I should celebrate it for the milestone that it is.

When it comes to Chicanos, the education system is not the first time we may not feel competent enough in a setting. Between the patriotism of both our cultures, we are in a constant battle to fit both standards. In the search for a better future, we have tolerated injustices, microaggressions, and being ostracized, all in the name of "the hustle." As a Chicana, it's hard to keep up with white standards and be accepted when I don't fit Eurocentric beauty standards or make an effort to erase my accent along with other aspects of who I am. While this kind of assimilation may feel like the minimum for Americans, for my family in Mexico, I was being white-washed and letting the States get to my head. There's no winning; every time you try to please one side, you must disappoint the other. I wrote a poem that speaks to the struggle intertwined in our history as immigrants, having to endure so much while doing our best to assimilate to American standards. I seek to not just speak to our first-gen college experience but to all my *gente* who have been trampled over and forced to remain complacent and silent, succumbing to the power the roses hold over them.

### **Mayan Dandelion**

On a journey my parents embarked  
As they followed the great monarch  
*¡vuela, mariposa, vuela!*

Their frail wings beating against all odds  
While praying to the gods  
For strength and peace of mind  
They left everything behind,  
Photos, a home and familia,  
All to migrate with the butterflies  
For their dream truly never dies  
A future for their children,  
To them would suffice

And now, here I lie  
Amidst a bed, a strange bed; a flower bed  
I'm a dandelion in a sea of red  
Roses with a richness hard to achieve  
A rich red and vibrant green down to their leaves  
Adored by the people, for the people  
Alas, I cannot have what she has  
I, too, bloom  
I, too, grow in the same green as her  
Yet, when people come near, they trample all over me  
And for her, they flow right around her, as if she were a rock in a stream  
The only green is no longer the grass surrounding me but rather the green in my eyes  
All I can do is wither in the sun's blazing beam  
As dandelions are pulled, wishing upon the American dream

Nonetheless, I sleep in a different bed  
I am dirty and impure  
I am invasive and foreign  
I am a weed  
And that's everything I seem to be  
Sprayed and drowned in herbicide and pesticides  
Ashamed, my brothers and sisters let it slide  
Surely, this will be our demise  
All this just to keep the roses clean and pristine  
Even to the colibrís I am unseen  
My *gente*, my coibrí, fly right past me  
As they search for the bright colors  
The colors that keep them alive  
The nectar that gives them a drive

I don't wear the red that the colibrí sees  
Nobody hesitates, not even the bees  
Ni de aquí, ni de allá  
I am merely but a dandelion  
But to be amongst the roses/

This is the price  
I'm no rose garden, filling mansions and white houses  
But nothing compares to my people's flowers and palaces  
Today, they try to pull me out and have their wishes granted  
But my roots?  
My roots are planted