

BLEACHED MEXICAN

Emily Balentine

My great-grandfather is a first-generation Mexican-American citizen. However, he didn't finish school. He didn't even finish second grade. Instead, he dropped out to care for his mother and his older sisters. In contrast, I finished elementary school, conquered middle school, and survived high school—all without really putting in a true effort. As someone literate, I take things for granted. I can read street signs. I can read the label on the box at the grocery store. I can read my textbook. I can even proofread an academic essay. However, not everyone has it so easily.

My great-grandfather has a hard time reading words in a commercial on TV. He has a hard time with technology. He still has a hard time with lots of little things, but he worked and retired from the railroad after 30 years. He lied to get his position, saying he finished school. Everybody knew it was a lie; however, he survived on pure work ethic and grit. He developed a technique in which he memorized the shapes of letters in words (not individual letters in words) and used that. For instance, if he came across a “detour” sign, he would know it because he'd seen the pattern before.

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For my mother, education was a must for me. Dropping out was never an option and school was always taught to be a priority. So, I made the presidential honor roll every year up until 7th grade. I worked to keep my grades up until middle school when I started thinking that I could get away with anything. Schooling lost all importance in my eyes because I could do nothing in classes and still pass, so I did. Then when I got to high school, I floated by effortlessly. I never truly put in the effort.

In my senior year, I went to three high schools in three different school districts. I was close to not graduating just due to the stress alone, and I had a falling out where most of my family didn't talk to me during my final months of high school. My family blamed me. I blamed them. I was having crying spells daily thinking “I'm never gonna move past this.” I didn't live at home,

and I didn't feel like I could talk to my family about it, so I used his words to motivate me. I enrolled myself in the third high school of my senior year while living with a friend, and then I graduated with a 4.0 for that semester, making the principal's honor roll and receiving an academic letter.

If I am honest with myself, I still don't put very much effort into school, that's why this essay was turned in for class so late. However, during a long twist of downward-spiraling events, I realized I need to graduate. I need to be better, to do more, to use every opportunity my great-grandfather didn't have. My great-grandfather would give anything in this world for me to have an opportunity that he didn't have, and yet I never really thought about this until recently. I had a sit-down conversation with him, about how my mental health was at an all-time low, how I had just gotten out of an abusive relationship, how I had health issues, how I could barely even talk myself out of bed, and how school was the least of my worries. He looked disappointed and told me, "You must not be as smart as I thought. You have been given all of this brain in your head, and you don't use it. You waste it, worrying about everything else in your life, but you need to put your education first."

I wanted to fight him on this, tell him that my mental health was more important and that I can come back for my education later. Tell him that it's my life and not his and that I can do what I want. But he was right. I was wasting time, and I was considering dropping out even, but I didn't. Looking back, thank God I didn't. I needed to pour that emotion into school and fuel my studies with it instead of bottling it up and weighing myself down. The way I did this? I started telling myself "do it for him." Make grandpa proud. Every achievement that I got in school made him proud, yes, but when everyone was pretty sure I wouldn't graduate and I did so with an academic letter? That made him exceptionally proud. That's the face I strive for. That's why I stayed.

So, I started going back to classes slowly, one at a time, but English took a bit. I was scared: scared of how far behind I'd fallen, scared of not understanding the knowledge being taught. So this is me, putting in the effort, scared of trying to come back. This is my redemption arc—this is my story, and nobody can write it for me.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. The author's entire narrative focuses on her connection with her great-grandfather. How can one's family affect one's relationship with reading, writing, and learning? Compared to school, is family a greater or lesser influence on these factors—and why?
2. Think about the title of this piece: "Bleached Mexican." What comes to mind with a title like this? And how do you see that reflected in the essay itself?
3. The author discusses her hardships with mental health, abusive relationships, and poor physical health. How do these things affect writing? If you were in this situation, what would help motivate you in the face of these adversities?
4. Think about your own history with reading and writing. Is there any one person or group that features prominently like the author's great-grandfather? What about them and what they did makes them so important to your narrative?