

Ganas

~ By Alicia Jeanette Hernandez Coronel ©2021

I nervously pace my dimly lit room. It's past 11:00 PM, and this January night particularly feels heavy; like sore muscles in a marathon approaching the finish line, cramping with every stride. I grab my left hand and crack each finger; pinky then make my way to my thumb. I switch off to my right hand and do the same thing, one finger at a time. "Breathe," I say, "breathe." But the tears start rolling out, skiing past my face. My stomach does somersaults, and I feel that same nauseous sensation of being upside down on a seasonal fair roller coaster.

Uncertainty grasps my throat, and muffled sobs turn to bellowing cries. I walk over to my desk. My laptop's screen shines bright, making my eyes adjust to the blaring light. I wince. I reread the notice again out loud, "fees are due at the time of enrollment \$3,430.00" I keep reading, "last day to enroll in a payment plan is January 5, 2021." I glance at my calendar, Tuesday, January 5th. "Fuck." That dreadful feeling sinks deeper.

I feel worthless and small. Like a helpless dying animal about to be pounced on. "Shit." The space seems to be getting smaller and smaller by the minute. I feel that strange but familiar sensation building up again. Doubt, failure and defeat loom over me, mocking me, laughing at me as they so often had.

Still, I stand up once more taking back the space and read the card on my bookshelf. I read it and hear Veronica's voice, "I believe in you," I close my eyes and see the determined look on her face.

Two years ago, I almost gave up. Again. I've given up a hundred times in the past 12 years since high school. Veronica walks me through the application process one more time. Our coffees get cold.

"You only need 56 units to graduate," she says, "that's only two years if you go full time." Her eyebrows rise, "Two years!" she asserts.

"What!" I reproach. "You're kidding me, right?" "I can't take 5 classes per semester; you saw my transcripts. I only took one or two classes at a time, and I would only get a C." I look around at the people nearby chatting. I imagine they can see the fraud I am, looking at me disapprovingly.

I look down at my stale caffeinated concoction and whisper to my fearless friend, "I don't think I can take that many classes and pass."

"You need to stop doubting yourself, before you know it you'll be graduating," Veronica affirmed.

At that moment I wish I was like her. Fearless, confident and assertive. Adjectives I wish would describe me. Adjectives I would strive to someday achieve.

I close my eyes and I'm 17 again sitting in the kitchen with my mom. "What's the point of going to college if I'm illegal and can't get a job after or even financial aid," I rebuke my mom. "It'll just be a waste of time," I reassured her. I'm so bitter I can taste it.

"There will be opportunities in the future," she says warmly holding my hand. Her eyes are filled with hope. The hope and optimism only a mother knows. The warmth of her hand briefly soothes me.

I know she feels in part responsible for my citizenship status. "If only you would have stayed and had me here," for the millionth time I scolded. "I wouldn't be in this situation." I hate myself at that moment for reminding her again. The pain at hurting her pierces my heart even more than my predicament. Her look leaves my eyes. My frustration lashes out on the person I love most. I can't help but feel repugnant at my actions.

"I know, I'm sorry. I wish I could go back and do things differently," my mom sighs, "I would have stayed."

She looks small and I instantly regret the heaviness of my reproach.

Veronica's card reads, "What will you do with a chance?" I closed my eyes and thought back at the times I was too scared to keep going. Each time it got too difficult, I quit. Year after year, I quit. Frequently, I would make the academic probation list. Not this time, this time was different. This time I made the Dean's list.

I shut my eyes to detain the tears. The last time I quit it was the costliest. I quit my job and more importantly ended my long-term relationship with my then boyfriend. I gave everything up. I quit this time to be here, to get a degree. "I can't quit now. This tuition can't be the reason I quit one more time," I whisper, "not this time. Not after everything I gave up."

11:22 PM. I wait for her to come home. I hear the familiar turn of the key. She emerges through the door, a luminescence amplifying the darkness in the night. "Buenas noches Mami," I say softly.

"Buenas noches hija," my exhausted mom replies.

The bags under her eyes seem heavier and more defined, yet they don't take away from her natural beauty.

"Que pasa hija? What's going on," she asks. Looking at my distressed demeanor.

I approach her, pulling her quietly, in secret into my room. "Sit Mami," I start, "I'm sorry, I didn't want to ask you for help, but I wasn't able to save enough money for my tuition." I wince in discomfort. "Financial aid was denied again," I tried to be composed. I try to swallow the

tears, the pain and the shame. How can I ask my mother to loan me money she barely has? I hate myself once again.

She moves her body closer to me and holds my hand. That warm feeling fills me once again, ounce by ounce. The wrinkles and age spots, the softness of her hands compel me to hug her. To feel her close to me. I'm doing this for her. I repeat in my head, "I'm doing this for you Mami."

My mother, whose name means hope, looks at me and I feel a sense of serenity that only she can fill. "You will graduate this semester," my mom smiles as she squeezes my hand. "I have the money for your tuition, don't worry Mija," my tired mom says calmly.

I can no longer hold my tears. And I feel five again. My mom, always to the rescue, always my guardian angel. Fixer of scraped knees, and bloated tummy aches. And now saving me once again.

It's a nippy February. The "ding, ding" of my phone wakes me up early Tuesday morning before my alarm goes off. I have a weird sensation as I reach out for my phone. I don't usually pick up my phone, but I'm compelled to do so this time. I read the blurry words on the screen, "Financial Aid 2020/2021 award has been revised."

Please God, please Universe, let me not be dreaming this. I sit and rub my tired eyes. I can feel myself holding my breath. "You have been awarded the CSUN Dreamers Scholarship," I gasp. It's real. It's real and I can't help but tear up. I hold my phone closer to my chest so as not to let my scholarship get away.

To think that I seriously thought of putting my final Senior semester off because of insufficient funds. Because of being a poor undocumented Latina without financial aid. I almost quit. "I almost quit," I say it out loud, so the words take on a different meaning. But I didn't and I won't take anything for granted.

My old friends' doubt, failure and defeat seem to get smaller and smaller. I want to squash them completely, but they fuel me to keep going. I deserve this. To be here in a place where Dreamers have the opportunity to aspire to a future that encompasses all the possibilities our parents were denied.

I get up and make my way to my desk. I grab my left hand and crack each finger; pinky then make my way to my thumb. I switch hands and do the same on the right. I open my laptop to type. I glance at my phone. I read my screensaver, "When you want something, all the universe conspires to help you achieve it." Coelho, I think, you couldn't have said it better.

When it is only two months away from graduation, not even the pandemic can bring my spirit down. I think out loud and type. "To all of those who pushed and believed in me, thank you. To all of those who laughed at me for STILL being in school, thank you too. To Dr. Estrada for igniting the idea of pursuing graduate school, thank you. For all the kids and Dreamers out

there, don't be afraid, you have power. To Jesse, for always meeting up with me to read my work and listen to me vent, and for your unconditional love, thank you. For my family, for putting up with me through this whole tumultuous process and understanding my absence. For my Papi for being patient and supportive. And of course, for my best friend, my guardian angel, my Mama G for always being there when I needed you the most. For your home cooked meals that got me through my toughest days at work and school, my infinite gratitude, your prayers were heard."

"This is for you Mom, everything is for you Mami." I close my eyes and try to picture me and my mom hugging as I virtually graduate from the familiarity of our living room.

I know this now. Ganas, not talent, got me this far. Ganas para salir adelante. It's a Spanish word that has gotten me through so much.