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A Cow's Tale

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On what I like to picture as a sunny day, twenty-one years ago, a calf was born in my grandparent's farm, in a valley hidden away in the Colombian Andes. But this calf was no ordinary calf: a heart-shaped spot in the middle of her forehead marked her as special from the moment of her birth. Like a bovine Harry Potter, this mark would forever shape her destiny.

Precisely because she was so special, she was given as a present to two-year-old me, and I named her Claramanta. Claramanta grew, and so did I, and soon it was time for me to go to school. My parents wanted to send me to a private school, the best in town that required a large upfront fee. They didn't have enough money at the time, and in a last minute rush they made a drastic decision. Claramanta took a trip to the butcher's shop that day, and made the biggest sacrifice anyone has made for my education.

You may be asking yourselves why I'm standing here today, on the eve of your Harvard graduation, telling you a story about a dead cow. The truth is, I have no idea. I spent several weeks churning that story in my mind, trying to come up with a deep and moving lesson about sacrifices, and gratitude, and the challenges ahead, and... nothing. Yet, I could not, for the life of me, pass up an opportunity to tell this many people the story of Claramanta. What if, I dared ask myself, what if I tell that story just because I love it? What if I share it just because it is my absolute favorite? There was a subversive idea.

If there is one thing that we Harvard types have a tendency to forget is the immense pleasure that is to be derived from doing things for their own sake. We are all here today, ready to get our hands on that coveted diploma, because we are compulsive planners, serial achievers. There is nothing I can tell you about the rewards of hard work and excellence that you haven't learned after countless all-nighters and rehearsals and practices and interviews, always working towards a goal.

Work hard, we have been told since we were kids, and you will achieve your wildest dreams. And so we have worked the nights away, with a sense that if we fill all the check boxes the desired goal must follow. We have earned it, we deserve it. And yet, I have a terrible thing to say today that all of you already know: sometimes, plans fall through. Even when you do everything right, even when you try your best and work your hardest, plans fall through.

And I should know, as my life has been a spectacular failure of plan making. When I was thirteen years old I had my entire life planned out, as most of you. I knew what I was going to study, where I was going to work, when I would get married and exactly how many children I was going to have one day. But I also lived in Colombia in the early 2000s, and the violence that had for years been escalating in the countryside one day came knocking on my door. My family was being threatened by guerillas, and within a month, we found ourselves at the Miami International Airport with everything we could fit in four suitcases.

I kicked and screamed and complained about the unfathomable unfairness of the world. But life has an implacable way of continuing without break, regardless of how we feel about our broken hearts or trampled dreams. Soon enough, I had to pick myself up, learn English, and get through school as everyone else. After a few more ups and downs, I somehow ended up at Harvard.

When I was a sophomore, my family's asylum case came to its final step in the court. Despite nearly a decade of building a new life, of working hard, and doing

everything right, plans fell through. Our asylum claim was denied, and once again we found ourselves packing what could fit in a suitcase. Three years ago I left Harvard not knowing when I would have the luxury of staying up all night at Lamont again, or complaining over my house open list about the lack of hot breakfast. I left Harvard with the fear that I may have been forever giving up the opportunity to wait with you tomorrow for that piece of paper that would validate all of my efforts.

In the year that I was gone, I found that it was not the prospect of not having the opportunity to drop that H-Bomb in conversation, or have it top my like a golden seal of excellence that really mattered anymore. I missed the impassioned debates with my friends in the Pfoho dining hall. I missed the exhilarating feeling of walking into Annenberg and being reminded of the dream that it is to be a Harvard student. I missed walking around Harvard Yard in the fall, taking pictures of the changing leaves like a wide-eyed tourist.

I cannot step in front of this microphone, the same age as the rest of you and probably less smart, and presume to impart on you some sort of wisdom that you haven't yet discovered on your own. All I can share is what I have learned from my uncanny ability to have my life plans completely fall through: make sure that you live life in such a way, that even if you don't get where you meant to go, it was well worth the trip.

Often people won't congratulate you on doing the things you love, they won't cite you and they won't pay you more. You won't be able to put them on your resume (though most of us will probably find a way). The great privilege we have had access to comes with great responsibility. But don't forget the great responsibility you have to yourself. Have the courage, every once in a while, to not make plans and discover the wonderful things that could happen. Find, in your busy lives, time to enjoy beauty, to let yourself be fascinated, to get carried away.

I'm not telling you to abandon all goals and go for instant gratification, and I am by no means denying the immense worth of hard work and dedication. Work hard, be successful, make a difference. But, for my dead cow's sake, don't forget yourself.