

## Ten Years Apart

Shahad Al-sakini

One dreary morning, there were growing patches of blue, a color that was both delicate and bright. The base of the cloud was a gray that deepened to steel, but the leading edge was a lovely white, like the pages of a new book. I knew it was a new beginning. On December 12, 2012, around 6 am, I got in a car with my parents and siblings. There were tons of suitcases in the trunk. We were headed to Dulles airport in the U.S, leaving my hometown Baghdad, Iraq.

My family and I were going to see my grandmother, who had spent the last eight years in Charlottesville, Virginia, after leaving Iraq in 2003 due to the civil war. I had little recollection of my grandma because she hadn't seen me since I was born, but I knew that she was the only living grandparent I had left. We arrived at the airport, and my mother pulled out the tickets as tears rolled down her face, unsure how long it would take Dad's paper to go through. My father hugged my siblings and me and kissed us all goodbye. He told us he would see us at grandma's house in a couple of days. I waved at Dad goodbye with a smile, not knowing the years I was about to face without him; I was only eight years old.

I followed Mom as I held my sister's hand tightly, afraid of getting lost at Baghdad airport. I remember thinking, why is my mother crying? We would see Father in the states anyways. After a long trip from Baghdad airport to Istanbul airport in Turkey, I finally made it to Dulles airport in Washington, D.C. was welcomed by many relatives, but strangely it was my first time meeting them.

During the car ride from DC to Charlottesville, I looked out the window and noticed tiny white flakes falling from the sky. Surprisingly, they were not making any harmful noise or breaking anything. I could see my breath instantly forming icicles, my palms starting to sweat

and feel numb, and I could feel my body starting to shiver. A relative I had never met hugged me to keep me warm and explained snow to me as I fell asleep.

After coming to the United States, we celebrated New Year's 2013 not long after; that was my first holiday with my mother's family. Unfortunately, not long later, I started feeling heavily uncomfortable, sharing a room with four people and even sharing a bed with my sister. The house was feeling very crowded. Mother was now working two jobs, even three, so we could move out of grandma's house. The once welcoming, warm home felt unbreathable even for her.

I was feeling homesick, knowing I couldn't go back home or not knowing what even home was. In 2014, my mother finally bought a computer, and we were able to Skype Dad after almost a year of no contact and were still waiting for his paperwork to come through. Tears were forming in Dad's eyes; he looked like he had aged a few years. My mother told him she wanted to return to Iraq, but my brother didn't want to leave; he explained to Dad how fun elementary school was. In America, he told our Dad, teachers are friendly, harsh behavior results in dismissal, and physical abuse is never used to discipline kids. My brother also described how teachers encourage participation in class by giving children candy and praise. I didn't know what to think or feel because I did not understand what home was. My Dad then encouraged Mom to hold on till he came. It will only take a couple more months, or that is what he thought.

My family moved out of my grandma's house in 2015, and Mom had been working non-stop. My Dad missed 5th grade, middle school, and even my high school graduation in 2021, and we still hadn't heard anything from immigration. Of course, I missed my father, but I was consumed with guilt. I felt guilty for being able to live without him. Not only was my Dad not present throughout my life, but even my mom due to work. I envied many of my classmates who

had parents who taught them how to ride bikes and how they would describe their family vacations after winter break. I felt like I lost my childhood, ensuring my sister had one. I was responsible for my siblings at age 10. I would wake up, drop my sister at the bus stop, make breakfast for Mom before she went to work, wake my brother up so we could go to school, and so on. At some point, I even believed my parents were divorced.

It's been ten years, and on January 29, 2022, my Dad finally arrived in the United States. We only found out he was coming five days before. After years of stress and having lawyer after lawyer to get his Visa approved by the U.S, my mom did everything she could to reunite us with Dad. Ten years were wasted without a father because someone didn't want to do their job right. Unfortunately, that's the case for many immigrants waiting to bring their loved ones to the U.S. I had to process everything in five days. I was consumed with worry and anxiety about what it would be like to live with my Dad and will I lose some of my freedom. I questioned what life would be like with a Dad at home. It was complicated to accept that he was finally coming. Waiting at the airport for him felt surreal. I looked around, and people were crying and rubbing their hands with excitement to meet their loved ones; I wondered what other people's stories might be. My mother jumped in excitement when a man wearing a brown leather jacket entered the gate, but I was frozen, unsure of whether my father was there or whether I was dreaming. I raced over to give him a bear hug. All of my troubles seemed to disappear instantly, and I suddenly felt like his little girl again.

## The Art of Turning What You Have into What You're Missing

Stephania Cervantes

Growing up, I was always encouraged to be creative. My parents proudly treasure my “first body of work” which is a collection of all my drawings and paintings I made in Mexico while attending Montessori school. My cup of coffee, as they called it, was pushing paint around on a large piece of paper and creating whatever doodle I wanted and then moving on to my next activity while the painting dried. I remember always having a small, heart-shaped purse filled with crayons. I never left the house without it. Coincidentally, one of my formative memories has to do with my first cross country trip and the contents of that tiny purse. This long and tiring train journey was the first of a string of pitstops my family would make before living in the United States indefinitely. I was about three years old when my family decided to relocate from California to Virginia. Before that, back in Mexico, my mom and dad had newly minted oral surgeon degrees. They differed their dreams to open a dental practice, shifting the utility of their dexterity to farm work.

After spending a year in Fresno packing cotton, peaches and grapes it was time to move again. We didn't have much money, but somehow my dad managed to save up to buy us train tickets. There were seven of us, including my newborn brother. While couldn't pack very much, most of our possessions fit into one tattered piece of luggage. Even so, my mom made sure I had a thick coloring book and my crayons. She knew how safe I felt when she and I would race around picture outlines together. I was routinely bundled up and carried in a heavy, colorfully striped *cobija*. It was the blanket I was brought home from the hospital in, and eventually, the same thick blanket I was carried across the desert in. Once on the train, my baby brother started crying and I remember my dad holding me tight against his chest as we made our way through

the sea of inquisitive gaze. When we got settled, I was given my beloved coloring book. My mom coiled the red crayon purse around me and told me to color as much as I wanted. After that, a lot of it is a blur; a memory compiled with a collection of retold stories. All I know is that somewhere between Chicago and Manassas, I lost my coloring book.

In transit, we had an unexpected layover in the outskirts of Chicago. We were dusted with snow as we made our way to a hotel room paid for with equal parts compassion and train vouchers. My brother and I bathed in a bubbly tub and for the first time in days, we slept through the night. We woke up early to make it back to the train station. Still tightly wrapped in my blanket with a bundle of crayons secured by my side, I was ready for the next leg of the trip. Remember, there were seven of us. All the grown-ups were sure they packed my coloring book, but distracted by chaos and infant cries, it was left behind. In an effort to keep me calm, we spent the rest of trip doodling on boarding passes, newspapers and even a phone book. Later that summer, my uncles gifted me a replacement coloring book for my birthday. They even managed to find a copy of the exact one I lost. I was ecstatic to doodle on a new treasure. But by that moment, something in my mind had changed and it still lives with me today.

I recently traveled with all my belongings crumpled and cramped in one rented van moved from DC to Harrisonburg. It was an uprooting fresh start that led me to finding old treasures. I was reacquainted with childhood drawings, paintings and even my old baby blanket. Woven into its dense fibers, was a fragrant sense of security. As I held it against my chest, I was transported to a time when it shielded me from the gusts wind, a sandy desert border and the Chicago snow. I found myself feeling a sort of nostalgic, de ja vu energy come over me as I traveled with all these bits of myself across the valley. I realized that my blanket, along with a collection of art supplies had been with me through many pivotal moments in my life. Together,

acting as a cape worn to explore the unknown. In my new studio, I feel as though I am shedding little scraps of my existence and stitching new memory patches to my life quilt. It provides a sense of comfort when I'm flooded with longing for places I've called home. My paintings and drawings are made on found materials; collaged with scraps of my material experience. Making art is misunderstood by my parents. Ironically, they wish I had become a dentist. With age and long arguments, I've been able to explain that following the instinctive urge to use my hands isn't much different than theirs. Up until this recent move, I've carried the weight of their delayed actualization to the point of postponing my own. How can they argue with something they stitched into the fabric of my existence? Creative resourcefulness has always been a mode for survival, and it will carry me forward regardless of my career aspirations. A part of me thinks that my parents have come around to the idea of me being an artist. A validating sign of hope was seeing a painting of mine proudly adorning my mom's dental office in Mexico.

Cargo 200

Garrett Hicks

For as long as there have been playgrounds, there have been playground arguments. For as long as there have been playground arguments, there has been the phrase, “My dad can beat up your dad.” It’s an oddly specific relic of a bygone era, born in a culture where the family name carried weight and respect. A boy was not simply a boy. He was someone’s son, and by his words and actions, he could polish or tarnish the reputation of his father. The power of a last name slowly died when America urbanized, but this one-liner refuses to die alongside its origin. That said, the phrase has been supplanted in some places by a much more pointed attack; “My dad outranks your dad.”

On the playgrounds of Colin Powell Elementary, this variation was as natural as breathing or walking. Perhaps it speaks to the atypical structure and values of a military family, or perhaps it’s a weapon of convenience- proving rank is much simpler than proving martial prowess, and the process causes far less harm. I never heard the line directed at me; my father was a full colonel, and well on his way to receiving the first star. In retrospect, it may have been a consequence of my introversion more than anything. The kids who boasted about their parents’ ranks tended to be far too loud for my autistic ears.

While I can’t personally testify to this, anecdotes from old friends suggest that this unique derivative of the typical caste system in schools perfuses military towns in general. Friends are temporary in the military life, whisked away with little notice by new orders. With nothing else to go on, any new classmate- and there will be plenty- is promptly stratified according to their father’s rank, and in the absence of at least one military parent, relegated to the dustbin of our miniature society. “Being cool” can only get you so far. That said, there is a social

circle to which one can be unceremoniously admitted regardless of rank. It is a circle of equals, elevated but painfully isolated, and completely inescapable.

The mark which signifies membership typically hangs next to the American flag on the front porch. Without context, one would think it to be a potent warding sigil, diverting the uncomfortable gaze of neighbors regardless of their intentions. It may well be the only sign which has successfully deterred a door-to-door salesman. It is the black ribbon, usually plain but sometimes embroidered with a branch of service, and it signifies the home of men returning from deployments in zinc-lined boxes.

You can't help but stare at the ribbon. Be it sympathy, sorrow, or morbid curiosity, the black ribbon draws the eye for just long enough to remind its bearer that they are forever changed. Courtesy dictates you look away if noticed, but by then the damage has been done. I sometimes wonder if the loss of a spouse is less impactful than the loss of a typical life that comes with it. There's no way to act normal around a recent war widow.

A few children will put a black ribbon on their backpacks; most do not. Military communities gossip so extensively that any casualty will be public knowledge before the body hits the dirt. This information is typically kept from other children for a while under the guise of "giving the family some time and privacy," a noble but completely pointless gesture. The unexplained absence of a classmate is the first clue; the vague, noncommittal response of teachers when questioned is the second clue. The third and most telling clue is the poorly disguised grief on the teacher's face as they shoo you back to your seat.

As strange as this sounds, the hardest part for me as a kid was seeing the dogs. Nearly every house had a dog, and as far as I was concerned, the people who owned the dog were usually an afterthought. I knew most of my neighbors by their dogs. My favorite, a golden

retriever named Hobbes, was six doors to the left. I probably spent more time in their yard than I did in my own. Hobbes' owners were Corporal McKendrick and his teenage daughter Alice, names I only remember from how many times I asked them if Hobbes could come outside and play. Rusty the mastiff lived next door alongside a boy my age, a girl two or three years younger, a second lieutenant, and his wife. Try as I might, I can't recall their names, but I can still see Rusty lying in the driveway for hours on end each day after the black ribbon went up, waiting for his master to return. Rusty died lying beside the mailbox a few weeks before I moved; loyal to the end.

I still compulsively look for black ribbons when I walk around my new neighborhood. I've yet to see one, but the chance is always there. With my own father retiring a few years after his tour of Iraq and my only sibling medically ineligible for service, I know now that I'll never have to live under a black ribbon, but my formative years were earmarked by constant reminders of what my father was getting himself into. When you spend enough time living amongst the dead and the deformed souls they leave behind, you quickly condition yourself to keep an eye on every flagpole. The next ribbon might be closer than you expect.

## The Only One

Mia Martinez

Fluvanna county: population 27,249. One courthouse, one high school, one stoplight. My family from the big city used to balk at our town. With cries of “What do you mean there’s no fast food here?” and “You’re telling me the nearest Walmart is 30 minutes away?”. I would only laugh at this. We didn’t even live in the rural part of Fluvanna. Sure, on my way to school I would look out the window for a glimpse of the cows that live on the side of the highway. And yes, I would savor the smell of the country, or as my cousins knew it, manure and dirt. But the country was all I ever knew and I was proud of it.

It’s the little places that some may see as ordinary that have special meanings in a small town. Take our town’s only strip mall. The sprawling parking lots and half-broken, dimly lit signs are a staple in suburban America, but ours is special. This was home to the Goodwill where my friends and I celebrated my 16th birthday. We bought old homecoming dresses and ran around in the Food Lion across the street. It’s also the home to the sushi restaurant where my girlfriend and I had our first date, followed by a very awkward hug in the parking lot. Or our park, Pleasant Grove, where my childish hands sticky with candy apple and kettle corn residue would hold on tightly to a mechanical bull during our town’s ‘Old Farm Day’. Where many years later, the same girlfriend almost got us arrested for trespassing after she claimed she couldn’t read the “DO NOT ENTER” signs. They let us go, though, I have a feeling it might have something to do with my mom’s friendship with our sheriff. Fluvanna’s homey in that way.

However, as soon as the hot, sticky summer air bleed to a crisp fall breeze, the small town comfort began to wrap its familiar hands around my neck and squeeze. Friends began to stack an ungodly amount of dorm supplies in their living rooms and plan their final goodbyes. Time's tidal wave quickly swept me off my feet, just like the river that runs through our town. The selfish part of me wanted to dig my heels in the sand, dam up the river, and stop the ebb and flow of growing up. So when familiar faces at work started commenting: "PVCC is a great starting point." or "Oh well, there's nothing wrong with community college. Four-year college isn't for everyone,." I wanted to tell them, 'I never asked for your opinion. Of course, there's nothing wrong with my choice. You're the only one implying that there is,'. But instead, I'd plaster on my customer service smile and tell them to "Have a great day!".

The park where I had all of my birthday parties did not feel special anymore. It was just a park where the county's fair was held. No mechanical bull, no more 'Old Farm Day' celebrations where we would see who could guess the weight of the county's biggest cow, just a couple of rigged carnival games. The strip mall that I used to love now is home to a couple of old buildings and bittersweet memories. I was confronted by the fact that my home was just another small town just off of a busy interstate where no one stopped in. The reason I loved this place was because of the people who had already left for bigger, brighter things. There's nothing more isolating than knowing that the people you love are out having new experiences, meeting new people and you're stuck with the same old town.

Slowly but surely I'm crawling my way back to the surface, determined not to let the waves of time sweep me away. Sometimes loneliness still sinks its ugly claws into my chest, reminding me that things will never be the same. When that happens I like to reflect on all the good memories I have and remind myself that although the core people of my adolescence may

be in other parts of the country, I still have a connection to them no one can take away. I will make new memories while cherishing the ones I already have. No matter what, this place will always be my home.

## Finding My New Home

Khamilo Mohamed

I was born into a refugee camp in a small town in Kenya named, Kakuma. Living in the camps was a nightmare. I don't remember anything from my life in Africa, through family stories I could only imagine how horrendous it was. You could barely sleep at night, knowing the violence and starvation was like no other. Not knowing if you'd even be on the next list to flee to the states.

Getting on the list was hard. Sometimes you'd get separated from your family and get thrown into a different state. In our last camp and first camp ever in Kenya, where I was born was our final stop. We were dying to see our names on that board. In April of 2004, when I was 8 months old, we got to come within the U.S. It wasn't easy living here: learning a language you have no knowledge of, and not knowing a single person. School was always hard, but ESL helped a lot. I've done it from pre-k all the way to 8th grade.

A few years pass, and I finally start to feel as if I found my voice. I was in the Amnesty Club, and I was asked to write a story for our hunger banquet. It took place in our school's cafeteria, with brick walls, lots of tables, and decorations. There was a quartet near the entrance, which played various combinations of songs. When it came time to read my story, I got really nervous. I had practiced my deliverance with our club sponsor, Ms. Horne. When it came down to delivery, I felt vulnerable. My hands were shaking while I was holding the paper and my voice quivered. As I was reading, my pace got quicker, nervous! My heart beat was faster and my breathing became shallow which made it even harder to stay calm.

Throughout that evening till now, I started to see a different perspective of myself. One that others saw in me, that I couldn't recognize at first. From then on, I still struggled with writing, but I took it more seriously. All the way from, research papers in class, speeches in public speaking, all the way to making a commencement speech at my own graduation. I asked

myself, “if those around you can see your potential as a writer, what's stopping you from seeing it in yourself?”

Within my story I wanted to grab the audience's attention. I started off with the events my family had gone through. My family has been in a lot of different refugee camps. We've been to about three in Somalia. It all started in the midst of a genocide. That's when we all had to flee. There were unpleasant moments. Camps were horrible, but what else did we have? In the midst of everything, life within the camps were tragic, specifically when it came down to necessities and safety. The fences weren't all that protective, you'd see animals at night inside the camps. You'd get portions of food. One bag of rice, 2 gallons of oil, some beans, and 2 gallons of water, which wasn't always clean. Everyone had the same amount no matter how big your family is. My mother would give up her food to let us eat.

My sister worked as a maid and only made 300 shillings which is about 3 dollars in American currency. My father would go out job hunting with my brothers to get hardworking jobs. My mother would stay at home and be a housewife like other mothers. She would cook food and take care of the house, kids, and herself. We only had one choice of making food which was with fire. We had to pay the turkana people who were the tribe in that region, for logs of wood because they own everything in that region.

My parents didn't let us see how much we struggled, but we knew. You could also go to school, learn different languages from that region and basic studies. Everyone could go to school, even the girls, which isn't normal in some countries. It wasn't in the ones we were in, but it was in the camps. My parents, they didn't get much educational knowledge, but they were homeschooled. I wish they had more knowledge.

In conclusion, I gained trust with this whole experience. Trusting the process of which you are in, knowing you'll become better for it and get growth. Ms. Horne would make us say, “I am someone, I have something to say, you should listen to me, you'll be better for it.” That

stayed with me throughout all my years of highschool. I hope that someday my story will inspire more. America isn't the best, but it is better than what my family and I have had in the past!

## The Broken Road

Aileen Brown

April 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021. I was standing in the parking lot of a detox center in South Florida. I had been up all night, playing the agonizing game that comes with managing withdrawal symptoms. Finding just the right amount of alcohol to drink to keep me from getting violently ill, but not too much to send me into a full blackout. Considering that turning back now would almost certainly lead to my untimely death, drinking myself into oblivion before taking my first steps towards healing seemed like the easier choice. I was chugging some Bud Light in a can at this point. I was terrified, but hopeful, that this time would finally be my last visit to a detox center. April 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021 is the last time I took a drink.

Alcoholism and addiction had its grip on me for about 15 years. It stole everything from me. I had no interest in things I was once passionate about. Goals that I once felt so driven to work towards, seemed like they were unattainable. Towards the end of my drinking, I couldn't even look in the mirror. Not only was I physically unrecognizable, but I was also emotionally and mentally changed. I was a shell of a human being. The slow progression of this disease is often described as slow suicide.

My alcoholism showed up for me at a very young age. A lot of alcoholics talk about that “white light moment,” the first time they had a good drunk. I remember vividly the first time I drank to get drunk, and it was a spiritual experience for me. From that point on, I chased that feeling. Little did I know I would be chasing that feeling for years to come and have to suffer incomprehensible amounts of pain in order to finally say “enough”.

In early 2020, I started off the year by checking into a detox center. This would be detox visit number 10 for me over the last 4 years. I was what they call a regular at the hospitals and

rehab facilities up in Northern Virginia. Every time I checked in, there would be a “welcome back, Aileen” with sarcastic undertones from the staff. I *thought* each and every time I sought help, that I was truly done. Inevitably though, this disease would creep its way back in, and I’d be drinking again in a month. A few months went by, and I was in just as deep as ever. With the pandemic and shut down in full swing, it was the perfect storm for an alcoholic like me.

At this point I was merely existing. I was living to drink and drinking to live. I was not present. My drinking even prevented me from being present for my own father’s death. April 14<sup>th</sup> is the last time I ever saw him – he was in a hospital bed in full covid gear. I was told I could go visit him in hospice, but my alcoholism had other plans for me. He died April 17<sup>th</sup>, alone.

The months after my father’s death are all a blur to me. Alcoholic chaos and complete oblivion. It was a pitiful existence. One night, I had been drinking for 24 hours straight, up all night, and pacing my apartment until 6 am when the 7-11 started selling alcohol again. Some feeling came over me in that very moment that said “enough”. I had felt this many times before, but I had to trust that maybe – hopefully – this time was going to be different. I made a few phone calls, and the next day I was on a plane to Florida.

I was terrified. This disease has a brilliant way of playing games with our minds. I knew that I wanted a different life. I knew that I was meant for more. But here I was, going to detox yet again. I had to question myself as to whether this would just be another oil change and then back to the races. Something in me felt different this time. I had to trust that feeling and follow it. Thank God I did.

As I stood outside that detox center, defeated, exhausted, tired and so empty, I took that last swig of cheap beer, and I walked inside to be admitted. My blood-alcohol content was

dangerously high, but I felt this sense of relief that I had made it to safety and could start my journey into sobriety.

I frequently think about that day. That last drink. Over the years, I probably had over 1000 last drinks. Each time I swore I was done. Something was different that day, that exact moment. I said goodbye to this substance that had such control over me for my entire adult life. A year and some change later, my life is as different as you could ever imagine. I must remember that moment, every single day, to keep living this life that I've built. I cannot romanticize alcohol, or how fun it was, or what I'm missing out on. I must remember the despair and desperation I felt. It's what keeps me motivated, and allows me to say, "no more". April 7<sup>th</sup>, 2022, I celebrated a year of continual sobriety.

It is often hard to describe the true, ugly nature of alcoholism to those who have not experienced it firsthand. It is not always like how you see it in various forms of media – having one too many drinks at dinner or hiding a flask underneath the desk at work. While those scenarios are the reality for some, it often goes much, much deeper. My alcoholism was taking shots of liquor before work so that I would stop shaking. My alcoholism was losing my sense of self-worth and having my entire life dictated by my next drink. My alcoholism was numbing myself into complacency while my father died alone. In all its cunning ways, alcohol has come close to winning the fight, but I have worked every day since standing in that parking lot, to fight back. I am working towards reconciling the damage that terrible addiction has inflicted upon my life. The journey hasn't been an easy one and there is still plenty of more work to do. Yet despite all the struggles, I feel grateful for all the blessings that a sober way of living has brought me.

The Release  
Erica Strong

As my mother's car slowed to a stop, my stomach was full of butterflies. I was so nervous. I didn't want to see his face, and even the thought of it created the feeling of sandpaper in my throat. My mom interrupted my thoughts with a calm and loving touch. I looked out the window to take in my surroundings. It was a gorgeous sunny day, and I could feel the warmth from the sun coming in the passenger window. My mom slowly eased her small black sports car into a parking spot right in front of the courthouse, and it loomed over me like a haunted house in a Halloween movie. I opened the black folder I had on my lap and fingered through the pages, even though I knew exactly what was in that folder. I had carefully and meticulously constructed every inch of it.

I had always taken the brunt of his sinful ways. I had children to protect and was willing to take the pain for them. I know I didn't deserve this treatment, but they shouldn't have to see it either. Part of my heart was here for them today, to no longer endure the scenes of their mother's abuse. I wanted to tell him I'm not afraid of you anymore! Instead, I would let the courts handle him. I had all the proof I needed to demonstrate that he had hurt me repeatedly, and now I was ready to tell the world.

My thoughts were interrupted by my mom tapping on my passenger window. I gathered my things and stepped out of the car. I walked to the door with a quickened stride. I entered with my folder clenched tightly to my chest. My high heels echoed loudly across the shining floor of the court hallway until I approached the large wooden door to Courtroom 2. I stepped through the doorway into the large hollow room, and my eyes scanned for him. The Bailiff directed us to all rise as the judge took his seat. I could feel my heart beating out of my chest, and for a moment, I felt people could see the constant rhythm through my white blouse. I could feel him

standing next to me at the other podium. My mind went back to so many occasions when that voice was deep, and the evil things he said spewed out of his mouth like hot lava, stinging me with every word. The judge was an older man with wispy white hair and a soft-spoken voice that made me feel at ease as he directed his attention to me to speak on the charges of domestic violence. My stomach was a knot of nerves traveling up to my throat, and I could feel his compassionless eyes burning a hole into me. I approached the microphone slowly and mentally prepared myself for the minutes ahead. I placed my hands flat on the podium and could see the traces of a handprint from the sweat that accumulated on my palms. I opened my black folder and began.

It was the most challenging speech I had ever had to give in my life. I told story after story of how I was beaten and broken. He had physically, mentally, and emotionally scarred me. No one deserves to be treated the way I had been, and I was here to stand for it. As I finished reading my statement, the tears became inevitable. I could feel the warm salty drops stream down my cheeks and watched as each one left a perfect circle on the paper in front of me. The judge thanked me and I approached my mother, and she consumed me in her warm embrace. I felt slightly calm for a moment. The moment vanished quickly as my mind started to race.

The judge asked him to approach the microphone. I braced myself. The judge showed no expression as he listened to his story of exaggerations and excuses. As he concluded his statement, the judge politely thanked him. He then shot a glance in my direction, and I could feel his eyes piercing me like a hot brand. The seconds ticked by like hours as I looked on to see if I could see any telling expression on the judge's face. I felt as if I was at the top of a roller coaster and were only seconds from going over the edge. The judge then stiffly cleared his throat. The moment of truth.

The words almost came with a sort of echo when he spoke. The judge looked at him, and the words that followed were music to my ears. Guilty. As I continued to listen, my heartbeat began to slow to a more normal pace, and the happiness inside felt as if it would burst at the seams. I had done it; I again began to cry, but the tears were different this time. They were tears of happiness. I felt so many emotions at that moment. Satisfaction, accomplishment, relief, and many more. He got what he deserved, and I pursed my lips to keep from smiling.

As the case ended and the Bailiff directed us to leave the courtroom, I walked down the aisle to the large brown door again. My mom took my hand as we happily walked toward the exit. As I stepped outside into the fresh air, I took a deep breath and let it out. At that moment, I felt it leave me. I was finally able to release it. As I walked to the car, the world outside suddenly felt like a better place. As I plopped into the passenger seat my smile became permanent, and I had never felt so proud of myself. A day to remember as I continued to remind myself to leave it all behind. At that moment, the release I had been expecting came full circle.