

## Ten Years Apart

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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.