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Writing Personal Narratives in a Political World

The Meaning of Papers

I cried as my mother tried to convince me that I should go to Mexico alone. I begged her to come with me, but she only shook her head. She wasn't giving me any valid explanations, so I kept refusing until she dropped the idea. But an eight-year-old like me could not just drop the subject. So I asked my dad. I asked him why my mom was trying to force me to go to Mexico alone.

As an only child, I got to share my parents with no one, and I had gotten used to them being by my side every single day. There was no way I was leaving them. The idea petrified me. I excitedly brought up the idea of a family vacation. It was getting chilly, and just thinking of Christmas in Mexico was enticing. My father sadly smiled and said, "Your mom and I don't have papers, we can't go." I didn't know what "having papers" meant. As I grew up, I came to learn that having papers was everything and that *I* had papers.

It was with the election of 2012 that I realized having "papers" was something to do with being American. Connecticut is a Democratic state, so I saw Barack Obama being praised on television and in school. One evening, my family and I were watching television and Barack Obama's face popped up on the screen. I jumped up from the couch and pointed at the screen. "You should vote for that guy," I told my parents. My father raised his eyebrows and replied, "We don't have papers, we *can't* vote." I stood there puzzled, realizing that my parents weren't American.

I had thought that by living in America, you were automatically American. I had no idea of the process it took to become American or how it was that I was an American. But what I did know was that you needed "papers." My parents learned English once they got here so my parents did everything on their own. They got their own jobs, paid their taxes, made phone calls, and did most of the average things adults do. They didn't have the setback of not knowing English as most immigrant adults do, so they didn't have to take advantage of their English-speaking American daughter.

During my pre-teen years, my brain was expanding its knowledge of the world. I was curious about so many things, and with the power of technology at my fingertips, I was able to find whatever I wanted. I searched "why do you need papers to travel?" I was presented with article after article about things like visas, homeland security, and travel requirements. It was then that I found out a requirement for traveling outside of the United States was a U.S. passport or a valid visa, things that my parents did not have.

The revelation brought me great sadness. Overwhelmed with emotion, I gave my parents a hug. The sudden affection startled them because I wasn't the type to give them hugs, but they hugged

me back lovingly. I was the closest link of the family they had and I wanted to make sure they knew I loved them.

I realized that without an American passport that my parents could never go back to Mexico, to their homeland. The weight of what this meant hit me. It meant not seeing their own parents and siblings for more than ten years. It meant not going back to the town where they grew up, to see their old friends, or to enjoy the foods they grew up eating. All they could do was reminisce about a place so significant to their lives, but so out of reach. I understood why they wanted me to go, they wanted me to see what they loved and missed.

I began wanting to protect my parents at all costs. The revelation brought the fear of them being taken away from me. They weren't *allowed* to be here. My heart raced anytime we were near the police. I began having nightmares about the police busting in and taking my parents, leaving me alone. My mother, a strong-willed woman, thought my fears were irrational. "We're going to be fine," she'd tell me.

My fear lessened as I grew older. We were going to be fine. I still hold out hope my parents are going to see their parents one day. I work for myself and for them. They struggle and work for me and for that I am forever grateful. Despite the lack of family vacations, I wouldn't replace my parents for the world. Seeing their perseverance and strength have shaped me into the person I am and will become.

I eventually visited Mexico when I was thirteen years old. I cried the first night I was there. I felt alone in a foreign country. It felt like everyone loved me, but since I did not know them I couldn't connect with them. As if I were a child, I cried for my parents. I counted down the days to my flight for a week. But as the days went on, I began to adjust. I started to love waking up every morning greeted by my grandmother and my four cousins. Before, I had never known how it felt to have a big family. Once I went home, I knew I wouldn't have that anymore.

The community I was engulfed in, the sights I was able to see, and the foods I was able to eat helped me understand why my parents reminisced so much. It was irreplaceable, nothing in the U.S. could compare. I wish I could go back sometimes. I am no longer an awkward thirteen year old. With the current climate of the world, the possibility of going back seems slim. But one day I will go back, maybe even with my parents.