

A couple dozen stuffed animals surrounded my father and six-year old me as he explained everything from volcanoes to dictatorships to The Beatles. As his words revealed the world's complexities, my stuffed animals' stories would begin to reflect real life: the dog plush would learn to raise a child after a difficult divorce; the elephant would struggle with morality as a famous artist; the kangaroo would have the impossible dream of becoming Batman. Through these playtimes, my father and I would face the worst tragedies with laughter.

But this picture is incomplete. Within my memories reside absences, too: my father's weekly flights across the country, manipulated by a software industry waving the next immigration visas over our heads. At those times, I sat in my room clutching my stuffed animals, or stared out the window as my mother tried to play with me, trying to breathe life into my world again, but it was gray and meaningless without my father. No matter how much my small Mexican immigrant family loved each other, we were also very much alone.

As my father prioritized his work deadlines over his physical and mental health, I felt my once natural ability to elicit his laughter fade. It was like talking to a brick wall: even if I screamed or cried, he would only slip further away. Through the end of elementary school and all of middle school, I began to lose confidence in myself: I stopped believing that people wanted to be friends with me, and started scrutinizing myself for every little thing. After all, I thought, my father sacrificed so much for me, and I was only a burden.

Then, when I was fourteen, my grandmother visited.

Whether we sat in my bedroom, or the kitchen, or the park, my mind relaxed as we showed each other our worlds, discussed our philosophies, and shared our favorite foods. Every night I would crawl into her bed as if I were six again and fall asleep to the sound of her voice and the warmth of her hands as they held mine. As easily as Spanish rolled off my tongue, I trusted her like a third parent. I realized even if I couldn't change my father, my world could be safe again. I just needed to find that safety within myself.

Through hundreds of discussions and exercises with my therapist, it slowly sank in: I am valuable. Just by existing I have an immense amount of potential; so much love, time, and passion has been invested into my very being. I am the most important person to myself, and I'm not responsible for my father.

At the end of freshman year, I joined Ambassadors, a leadership group at my high school, to prove to myself that I am capable of new and difficult things. Its purpose is to show students that they are supported by an entire community, giving them space to express themselves. And I found that I resonated with this. I began to discover that I could actually excel at it, that the immigrant kid in me familiar with loneliness and invisibility could connect with the people the group focused on helping. Meeting kids who had just immigrated from another country and couldn't speak any English, I discovered that I could reach them even through something small like a school tour or lunchtime event. I could watch as their nervous, withdrawn presence transformed into confidence and power.

My father goes to therapy now. Even though I'm older and our relationship has not fully recovered, we still find time to sit down and communicate through my plushies again, and smile and laugh and cry.