

When I was nine my mom put my younger brother and me on a bus from Ohio to Arizona to visit our dad. She claimed she was going to attend a multi-level marketing conference in Phoenix, which was true. What she failed to mention was that my brother and I would not be going back.

Mom was trying to get us away from her new husband's physical and emotional abuse. He never hurt us, only her, but that was almost worse. She had tried to get us away before. One Easter she took us to a hotel and asked the staff not to tell anyone our whereabouts. Somehow he found us anyway. He came to our room and kept banging on the door. We begged her not to open it, but eventually she let him in. He promised never to hurt my mom again, and since he had brought us Easter baskets of candy, for the moment everyone was pacified. Eventually, of course, he went back to his violent ways. Looking back I am amazed at my mom's courage and self-sacrifice in taking my brother and me to live with our dad, but at the time I was only angry that she had left my precious dolls behind.

My father was a recluse and seldom came out of his room. When he occasionally cooked for us, it was usually a giant Costco tortilla topped with a can of refried beans and smothered in Heinz ketchup. I decided I would do the cooking. From the time I was sixteen, I held the credit card and bought and prepared all of my meals. Basically, I took care of myself. I got myself to and from school every day, whether it was bumming a ride with a friend or taking the city bus. When challenges came up, like a high school math class that was over my head, I had my friends tutor me. Some might say I developed a mercantile view of friendship, but I have no problem with people relying on each other to survive if it mutually increases their freedom.

However, what I do have a problem with is the kind of dependence that operated in my father's family. My father and his brothers depended on their wealthy mother for their financial support, and with that support came a lot of strings. The decisions they made, the opinions they held, and even the ways they thought and spoke were all influenced by their patron, Grandma \_\_\_\_\_. I could not accept that kind of dependence for myself. At age sixteen I got a job at a Chinese take-out place and have held a job ever since. I arranged my classes to graduate high school a year early so that I could move out and finally begin living my own life.

If I have to choose, I will take freedom and independence over security any day.

But of course I'd rather have all three! That's what a law degree represents to me: security, independence and freedom to control my own life while protecting the freedom of others to control theirs. I never want to find myself helpless to protect myself or my children. I don't want to end up having to work at a call center like my mom does because she never anticipated entering the work force. Many of my aunts are bright women who work in low-level positions because they never planned on having to support themselves. This will not happen to me. If my childhood has taught me anything, it's that I can rely on myself, and that it's foolish not to.

Lately, I've been reading Martin Luther King, Jr.'s book *Why We Can't Wait*. I admire King because he would not accept the injustices handed to him, and at the same time he knew it was pointless to wait for someone else to deal with his problems or lend him a helping hand. I am moved by the examples of King and his fellow protesters. They would sooner accept a physical beating than an unjust principle. They would not raise a hand against their attackers, but they did raise their voices in prayer for those same attackers. I feel honored to call their story part of my American legacy, and I feel called to the ongoing fight for freedom.

I am currently enjoying an internship at \_\_\_\_\_, a mid-size public relations firm in the heart of Manhattan. My Harlem apartment building, covered with graffiti, is a world away from the affluent all-white town where I was raised. Yet I feel more at home, in a way, here among people like my roommate, Denise. She's an aspiring Broadway actress, and she has been working doggedly for years to land her dream role. Sometimes I wonder how she can endure thirty try-outs without a call back and still get up the next morning and go to another audition. But change acting to law, change Broadway to \_\_\_\_\_, change a few other details and Denise's story is mine. There's a cost for the freedom to walk and think and live in your own way, and some of us will pay any price. Of course there are easier ways to live, people who will gladly take you under their wing. I've been there before, and I'm never going back.