

It was Easter and we should've been celebrating with our family, but my father had locked us in the house. If he wasn't going out, neither were my mother and I.

My mother came to the U.S. from Mexico to study English. She'd been an exceptional student and had a bright future ahead of her. But she fell in love and eloped with the man that eventually became my father. He loved her in an unhealthy way, and was both physically and verbally abusive. My mother lacked the courage to start over so she stayed with him and slowly let go of her dreams and aspirations. But she wouldn't allow for the same to happen to me.

In the summer before my junior year I was offered a scholarship to study abroad in Egypt. Not to my surprise, my father refused to let me go. But my mother wouldn't let him crush my dreams as well. I'd do this for myself and for my mother's unfulfilled aspirations. I accepted the scholarship.

I thought I'd finally have all the freedom I longed for in Egypt, but initially I didn't. On a weekly basis I heard insults and received harassment in the streets, yet I didn't yield to the societal expectations for women by staying indoors. I continued to roam throughout Egypt, exploring the Great Pyramids of Giza, cruising on the Nile, and traveling to Luxor and Aswan. And before I returned to the U.S. I received the unexpected opportunity to travel to London and Paris. It was surreal: a girl from the ghetto traveling alone around the world with a map in her hands. And no man or cultural standards could dictate what I was to do. I rode the subway from Cambridge University to the British Museum. I took a train from London to Paris and in two days I visited the Eiffel Tower, the Louvre, Notre Dame Cathedral, and took a cruise on the Seine. Despite the language barrier I found I had the self-confidence to approach anyone for directions.

While I was in Europe enjoying my freedom, my mother moved out and rented her own place. It was as if we'd simultaneously gained our independence. We were proud of each other. And she vicariously lived through my experiences as I sent her pictures and told her about my adventures.

Finally, we were free.

I currently live in the U.S with my mother. My father has gradually transformed from a frigid man to the loving father I always yearned for. Life isn't perfect, but for the moment I'm enjoying tranquility and stability with my family and are communicating much better than ever before.

I'm involved in my school's Leadership Council as leader of our events committee. We plan and execute school dances and create effective donation letters. I see this as a stepping-stone for my future, as I plan to double major in Women's Studies and International Relations with a focus on Middle Eastern studies. After the political turmoil of the Arab Spring many Middle Eastern countries refuse to grant women equal positions in society because that would contradict Islamic texts. By oppressing women they're silencing half of their population. I believe these Islamic texts have been misinterpreted throughout time, and my journey towards my own independence has inspired me to help other women find liberation as well.

My Easter will drastically differ from past years. Rather than being locked at home, my mother and I will celebrate outdoors our rebirth and renewal.