



Citizenship

LALLY PIA - SACRAMENTO

Still consumed with the profound emotion that hit when I saw the Liberty Bell, I waited in a long, polished hallway, knees knocking together with dozens of other nervous applicants. Their faces ranged in hue from the snowiest white to ebony black. After what seemed like an eternity, a uniformed bailiff opened a door to usher us into a courtroom. An elderly black-frosted Caucasian judge with a deadpan expression presided behind a raised podium. The early morning light shone through tall windows and skipping dust particles, to illuminate a magnificent American flag that stood beside him. The oak trees outside were decked in their brightest green finery for the occasion. Leaves danced in exultation, which mirrored the skipping rhythm of my own heart.

We shuffled around, a few nervous coughs and muffled whispers contributing to the tension. I caught a whiff of Old Spice. Beside me, an older Hispanic man with weathered hands fiddled with the top button of his impeccable navy blue suit. Cracked, blackened fingernails occasionally reached up to brush tears from the side of his face, which made tears arise in my own eyes.

I looked away, guilty that I'd intruded on his emotional journey, but fully embracing the camaraderie with a stranger whose nervous exultation seemed to match my own. What was

his story, I wondered? Might it have been as tortuous as my own? The bailiff shut the door, and moved to stand beside the judge, and it became eerily quiet. In this hush of anticipation, my palms began to sweat. The momentous nature of the step I was about to take made my temples pound to match the erratic rhythm of my heart.

I was overcome with gratitude. Gratitude for all the blessings this wonderful country had already showered on me. In just a few moments I would join my siblings and parents in our commitment to this land that had become our home. The oak leaves still swayed outside in delight. I imagined palm fronds waving at me from Sri Lanka, and a delicate shower of fragrant pink and white frangipani blossoms falling on my shoulders in Ghana to herald this final step.

How far away those countries seemed now. Tears pricked at my eyes. What I'd absorbed from both countries would always be an integral part of who I was, but America had captured my soul. Standing in those shafts of slanted sunlight, we faced the glorious flag, placed our hands on our hearts, and recited the pledge of allegiance. My heart threatened to burst out of my body, and I wanted to scream out my sheer exultation. I imagined that Liberty Bell triumphantly pealing out to proclaim to the world that an American citizen had joined its ranks. And just as suddenly, a deep yearning flowered within me, seemingly coming out of thin air. It reverberated within my body, shocking me with its intensity.

I want to be free.