Cesar Zamudio

Stepping Out of the Shadows:

A Story about Compassion, Proximity, and Redemption

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If you ask me where I am from, I will tell you Manchester, New Hampshire. But then, before you toss my features — my brown skin, my dark wavy hair, and my thick Spanish tongue — around in your head, wondering how a brown boy like me could seemingly coexist in such a white part of America, I will interrupt you to tell you that I immigrated to the U.S. from Colombia when I was 5. And then you will still wonder why my family or I would come to such a place as New Hampshire, half of you wondering why, if places like Miami and Los Angeles exist, we wouldn't go *there* instead of *here*, and the other half implying that my existence here is somewhat of an anomaly. But I've gotten used to your questions, and I admire them, because in the process of me answering your questions, I, too, have answered some of my own.

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So where are you really from? On April 25, 1997, I was born to Claudia Milena Suarez in Pereira, Risaralda, Colombia. My mother had very short hair, and sitting next to her collection of glass angels in the living room, one can see a photo album showing my mom rocking the '90s short hair, dressed in a maternal gown. My dad, John James Zamudio, on the other hand, looks the same today as he did in 1997, just fewer wrinkles and blacker hair. I was their second child. Their first, Juan Esteban Zamudio, was born on March 2, 1996. My memories of Colombia are few, but I still have a faint, hazy image of one special memory.

It was November 1999, and I was 2. My dad was leaving for the U.S. for the first time. The airport halls were green. Dad had kissed all of us goodbye. Of course, this was a pre-September 11 world, when families could go up to the gate without a ticket. The reality of what was happening did not hit me until Dad had finally disappeared through the gate. There I was screaming at the window, looking out to his plane, crying for him not to leave. Mom told me once that some people at the gate were also crying, and Dad told me that he had half a mind to get off that plane so he wouldn't leave my mom, my brother, and me alone in Colombia. But he did what he had to do, and left for Miami to work and build a future for all of us.

Life was stagnant after Dad left. He was the one who would get out of work, pick my brother and me from *La Guarderia*, carry one of us on one shoulder and the other on the other shoulder, march toward the bus station, and head home. In 2000, the rest of us came to the U.S. on tourist visas, stayed with dad, and left after the six-month visas had expired. The only thing I have left of this memory is the "Approved" stamp from the Miami immigration agent on the last page of my passport.

My mom, my brother, and I came back to the U.S. in 2002. We lived in Miami for a couple of months, then moved to New Jersey, where we slept in a piss-ridden apartment with no beds and no heat. The carpets smelled like vomit, and all we ate were the generic brand of Kraft Singles, Canadian white bread and bologna. The train ravaged through the city of Elizabeth, its loud horn serving both to warn drivers and to wake up the men and women who had to get up early in the morning for work. I had the best view — out the second-floor window, iced but not enough to keep me from admiring the beast. We were either too young for school, or mom did not know where the school even was. Even if she did know, the only English words she knew were "Thank you" and "I no speak English." Mom worked the first shift at a pen factory, and

Dad worked third shift at a shoe factory. Our only mode of transportation was a Little Tikes Cozy Coupe that Dad had found in the garbage. You know, those little red-and-yellow cars that would scrape your ankles if you didn't lift them up in time? Once the winter was over, Dad got a job offer at a paintbrush factory in Manchester. He accepted, and the whole family moved over to the great city of Manchester, New Hampshire.

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We moved into an apartment on Granite Street on Manchester's west side. We lived on the third floor. My dad's friend, Oscar, had given him albums of CDs as well as a CD player. Now, this CD player was 3 feet tall, had about 60 buttons and I did not know what a single word on that damn CD player meant. I played with it until a song came on. It was the very first song I heard in the United States of America. *Disclaimer: I was 5 years old.* Fifty Cent's "In Da Club" blared through those speakers. The loud drums bounced throughout the apartment, dubbed by Fitty's "*Go, go, go, go, go, go, go shawty it's your birthday. We gon' party like it's your birthday.*" Now today, I of course understand the complexity of nightlife culture and the misogynistic implications of Fitty's words, but at the time "In Da Club" was to me what "Do You Want to Build a Snowman" is to 5-year-olds today: absolute opposites, I know, but nonetheless Mom and Dad didn't know what any of it meant. Later on, their obliviousness became a gift and a curse.

My next set of memories is of those spent at 177 Beech Hill Drive. Beech Hill was on the east side of Manchester, and our condition improved tenfold. Dad still had his job at Felton Brush. Mom was doing manicures and pedicures at home. Juan and I were going to Highland-Goffe's Falls, one of the best-performing elementary schools in Manchester. Our townhouse

never ran out of heat. The carpets were cleaned before we had moved in. We ended up getting Internet in 2004, and yes, I had to learn how to use AOL dial-up. Internet Explorer taught me how to be patient, *RuneScape* taught me to how to be an entrepreneur and *Arthur* taught me how to speak English. It was a magical time.

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In May 2006, I came home to Dad and his friends having a party. It wasn't a birthday party, or a baby shower. I learned it was a farewell party, organized by my dad's co-workers for him. Going away? Where was he going? Did Dad lose his job? Was it because he couldn't speak English? Or did he quit?

In that moment, my mother revealed to me what has become one of the biggest parts of my identity—the one very important jigsaw puzzle piece that, still today, has continued to keep me from showing you the complete, beautiful picture behind the puzzle. So here it was: *For the past 14 years, I have been living in the United States of America without proper documentation. For the past 14 years, I have been living in the United States of America as an undocumented immigrant. Dad lost his job because he did not have a valid Social Security number. Dad lost his job because he was not legally allowed to work in the United States. Dad lost his job because he wasn't supposed to be in the United States in the first place. Our existence in the U.S. was in direct violation of the law. I was in the midst of a happy childhood that had seen its fair share of struggle and stability. "Maybe, just maybe, if I worked hard enough, my legal status would be overlooked by my success," I thought to myself. I entered a contest against myself to legitimize and justify my parents' breaking of the law.*

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In 2004, we met the Martinez family at the gathering of the Zapata family's Christmas party. In between counting the thousand Hail Mary's we had to do per Roman Catholic tradition and shoving *buñuelos* and *natilla* down our throats—for us, the first time we had eaten traditional Colombian food since leaving—my family was introduced to Mauricio, Leidy, Bryan, and Mauricio Jr. Meeting Mauricio made me realize how glad I was to be *John's* son and not his. Mauricio laughed only when he was making sexual jokes or when he was drunk. I could never tell when he was joking or being serious, so I stayed on his good side by never misbehaving like his little one did, at least in front of him. Leidy, the mother, was like every other Colombian woman I had met in Manchester. She had highlights, a curvy body and regularly wore makeup. But the unique thing about Leidy was that she treated me like her own son. *Si, mi amor. Por supuesto, mi amor. De nada, mi amor.* My first memory of 2007 was of her pressing my head against her large breasts, yelling, "*Feliz año nuevo, mi amor*," as the strong scent of her perfume clogged my sense of awareness. Bryan was their eldest son. Bryan was two years older than me, but when your only friends outside of school are your parents' friends' toddlers, you take anything you have to keep yourself from staying at home and watching another rerun of a badly Spanish-dubbed version of *Armageddon*. You truly can only watch Liv Tyler cry so many times before you physically feel exhausted. In fact, the only shows I could watch on our Comcast Basic Cable plan were *Arthur, Jerry Springer, Maury* and the usual telenovelas my mom played every night. Bryan had all the channels because his dad had a stable job as a construction worker and his mom cleaned offices at night. Bryan also had a PlayStation 2, making our trips over to his apartment in Manchester Gardens all the more fun and exciting. And lastly was Mauricio... Mauricio was the anomaly of the family. Everyone else had brown skin, brown eyes and brown hair, but Mauricio had white skin, orange hair and light-brown eyes. Mauricio was a toddler

when I met him, and my only memory of him is limited to the time he cut my skin with a nail clipper. But fading memories of me holding him in my arms and playing with him pop up in my mind.

In 2007, a former friend of the Martinezes, out of jealousy and pure wickedness, called Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE, to tell them that there was a family of four living in Manchester without proper documentation. Upon receiving such information, ICE investigated the tip, found them, arrested them and gave them an ultimatum: leave voluntarily within 90 days or be forcibly removed from the U.S. They chose the former, and had 90 days to make arrangements to leave the country. Eighty-nine days came and went, and on the last night before they were to leave, everyone who knew the family met at Cielo's house for one last time. Cielo was a short woman. She was tightly packed in a tanned and wrinkled body, and her eyes popped out of her sockets like a Chihuahua's.

Cielo's house that night, as I remember it, was surrounded by an atmosphere of love and joy, which later became quite depressive. Spanish music played to lighten the mood; the kids went upstairs to play; the parents drank beer. It seemed like a normal get-together. But at the end, when we all came downstairs for the final goodbyes, I was struck by the reality of the moment. Leidy was crying, hopeless to say the least. She cried not for herself or for her house or job, but for her two kids. She cried because the sacrifice she and Mauricio had made, coming to the U.S. *with nothing*, was made *for nothing*. The person I related to most was Bryan. Bryan was the one stuck in limbo. He didn't decide to come to the U.S. He simply worked hard in school, as his parents told him to. Bryan had become a victim and a pawn of a broken immigration system, one that destroyed his dreams and hopes.

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The deportation of the Martinez family personalized the reality of deportation. The truth was that there was no difference between my family and their family. We were essentially the same—physically, we were all characterized by our native features of brownness and Spanish accents (except, of course, for little Mauricio), but more than that, our stories were almost identical. It was as simple as one police officer pulling us over. It was as simple as someone calling ICE on us, and having us deported. Mom made Juan and me swear that we would never tell anyone of our status, which partly explained why I never spoke of it. Undocumented was not my whole; it was a part within me that had no effect on who I was as a person, sort of like your religion or your sexuality. *No one would ask, so no one had to know.* I was undocumented, afraid to live in the country that had raised me, afraid to step without the boundaries of normalcy—if I stepped out of line, I would be noticed, and being noticed meant being sent back to a country that I had not known. I vowed that I would continue to work hard for Mom and for Dad.

The years went on. Not much changed. Dad struggled for a long time in his pursuit of work. Between 2006 and 2011, my dad was a gardener, construction worker, mechanic, Stonyfield factory worker, house cleaner, office cleaner and car cleaner. I have seen my dad cry only two times. The second time was when his father died in 2014. The last time he had seen him was in 1999, neither of them even grasping the idea that that would be the last time they would see and feel each other. The first was when he couldn't find a job. He felt frozen, watching his kids need clothes and school supplies without being able to do anything. I became quite pessimistic after the 2009 financial crisis. We spent winters without enough money for heat, and I had learned to say I was full when I really wasn't. I learned to ask for one or two toys for Christmas. I even learned to walk home from school to keep my parents from wasting gas and work time. I had always been told that with dedication and hard work, I could do anything, but

those words seemed to lose all of their meaning in 2011 when Mom and Dad brought us to McDonald's on one cold, February night.

"*Que quieren comer?*" We were the only ones in the McDonald's. It was 9:30 at night, and we had school the next day. Bedtime didn't exist for us. Bedtime was another magical rule that all the little white boys and girls in my class had to follow that I didn't, which made me feel superior in some way. I ordered a $1 vanilla cone. Juan ordered the same. Mom ordered a $1 sundae with mocha fudge and nuts. Dad abstained. "*Sientense,*" he said. "*Les vamos a decir algo muy importante que va cambiar sus futuros*." ("We are going to tell you both something very important that will change your futures.") They were separating. I knew it. The source was and had always been money. You know when people say money doesn't buy happiness? That's a flat lie. Money does buy happiness, because it's a lot easier to be happy if you know you have food to cook dinner for your two kids that night, if you know that you can drive anywhere because you have a valid license, or if you can be with your children on the weekends and help them with their homework, not cleaning shit-stained toilets at three offices for below minimum wage. But this wasn't the reason. The real reason was that we had been defrauded by an immigration lawyer who'd promised my parents to file immigration paperwork so that we could get our green cards. He had stolen $7,500 from my family, and, as it turned out, actually filed an asylum case on our behalf. If you are not familiar with the immigration system, it is virtually impossible to file an asylum case one year after your initial date of arrival. We were eight years too late. They showed us the letter, and stamped on the front in big black letters read, "**ORDER OF DEPORTATION**." We had 120 days to leave the U.S.

In the blink of an eye, my worst nightmare had finally become reality. My secret life, the source of my self-hatred, had been discovered. It was as if everything my parents had done had

been thrown out the window. I immediately thought of Bryan, and the disruption it had caused to his life. He was torn away from his classmates and friends. He was never given the peaceful and free childhood every child ought to have. And likewise, I thought of my teachers, and friends, and my future. I thought of all the work I had to do to learn English, to do my homework on my own, to be the best in the class, to continue my education because it was, as my fifth-grade teacher said, the only thing that could not be stolen from me. I thought of the Saturdays spent at South Little League playing baseball under the blinding lights. I chewed on sunflower seeds like the rest of the boys. I ate hot dogs and cheese fries like the rest of them. I even cried when the Red Sox won the World Series, just like the rest of them. *But I was not like the rest of them. And even though I liked to think of myself as American as they were, I was not. The only country I had known refused to recognize me as one of her own.*

But *here I am* today. Five years have passed since Mom and Dad read us that deportation order, and *here I am*. An immigration judge closed our case in 2012 using his prosecutorial discretion. Even though our case is administratively closed, my family continues to be puppets of an immigration system that is broken — puppets in the hands of politicians who think of my family and me as a threat. In 2012, President Obama signed an executive action by the name of DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) that has given my brother and me more control over our fate. We can drive, work, and go to college now that we have Social Security numbers. We can travel abroad for employment, educational or humanitarian purposes. But even with all these hopeful policies, thousands of undocumented immigrants continue to lie in limbo, suspended in a fate over which they have no control. This limbo has paralyzed my parents. They cannot drive, nor work. They cannot visit their relatives, most of whom are sick and most of whom they have not seen for more than a decade. My mom has not had the privilege of hugging

her mother or kissing her for 14 years now. Every New Year's when my mom calls her mom, my grandmother always cries over her loneliness. She always ends her New Year's blessing with "*Maybe this will be the year*," but another year has passed and the horizon continues to look dim. Mom and Dad have done all of this for my brother and me. They have given up their own comfort and freedom so that my brother and me could have a life that would not know poverty or violence or hunger.

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The immigration problem is something from which most of you are far removed. Few of you notice the way immigration affects our daily lives. You don't notice that oranges and strawberries are cheap because undocumented immigrants spend sometimes 12 or 14 hours, backs hunched and foreheads drenched, under the deep Californian sun to pick your vegetables and fruits. You don't notice how nice it is to have your grandmother right down the street or in the next town over or even in the same country. You don't notice that your house was probably built by an undocumented *Guatemalteco* or that your son's best friend from Colombia is secretly undocumented. Every time that you get pulled over, you don't fear that that traffic ticket will lead to your deportation. You apply to college because you think it's a fit, *not* because it will accept students "like you." When your grandmother is sick you can visit her, not just see her behind a phone screen because returning to Colombia would mean you couldn't return to the U.S. This is my reality. This is my reality. This is my reality. Say it 10 more times, and hopefully you will understand just a little bit of what undocumented immigrants go through. "Well, Cesar, your parents could have just, like, *not* broken the law, ya' know?" Yes, but let me tell you something from first experience: *The line doesn't exist*. It was either starve, join a gang or get killed. And when you have two little boys in your hands, you choose to break the law because

they are your life, and you will do anything in your power to make sure your kids never experience any of what you experienced. I am here today to personalize this issue to you and to this community—to shock you with the fact that someone at your Harkness table, in your dorm, on your team has been living in this country without proper documentation. They are not killing anyone. They are not stealing anyone's jobs. They are not living off of welfare. Right alongside you there they are, eager to work hard and succeed, the very root of the American Dream.

Jose Antonio Vargas, a prominent undocumented journalist, once said, "I remember thinking, if I'm not supposed to be here, how do I tell people that I exist on paper? I learned that when you write a story there's something called a byline, meaning that your name is on the paper, and I remember just seeing my name on paper and thinking to myself that if I'm not supposed to be here because I don't have the right kind of papers, what if I'm on the paper? As far as I was concerned, this was a way of existing." So I have put my name on this paper in hopes that my name, my story and the untold stories of thousands of men, women and children living in this country without proper documentation will exist in your hearts, in this Academy and in America's larger story.

Thank you.