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RADICAL TEACHER

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Instability, Uncertainty, and Responsibility

by Catarina

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There are nights when nightmares haunt me. I tell myself it's just the summer heat, but deep down I know it's because Tom Homan and Kristi Noem have instigated fear in our communities. In the thick of summer, the only thing keeping my baby brother and me cool is a fan at night. We avoid using the AC. Our utilities are included in the rent, and we try to avoid extra electricity charges from our landlady, an elderly woman with medical problems. My mother says saving money helps protect both our families, both vulnerable in different ways. Still, I wake up drenched in cold sweat, my heart pounding. I feel trapped. I force myself to stay awake. If I fall asleep, they might come. They'll slip through the windows and catch us off guard. First, they'll take my brother. He's a U.S. citizen and a minor, so they'll send him to Administration for Children's Services. Then they'll come for me. I'm on their records. I applied for a visa. They know where I am. Your parents are next, the voice in my head whispers. You won't see your mother again. Your brother will grow up without you. If you're lucky, he'll be reunited with her. Maybe your stepdad will be sent directly to Mexico and won't be held long in detention. Pray they don't send him to El Salvador.

And you? You might get to appeal. You might be deported. If you're lucky, they'll send you back to Mexico and not some foreign country you've never set foot in. Wake up. Don't fall asleep. I think they're out there, preying. I think they're in the backyard. Careful. They'll come through the window. You left it unlocked, didn't you? Thoughts like that echo nonstop when fear takes over. Get up. Now. I jump out of bed, disoriented. I check the windows. The noise rumbles in my head. I feel dizzy, as if someone had hit my head with a bat. I rush to the front door, check that both locks are shut. Then I crawl back into bed and pull my brother close. I hold him tight. If they try to take him, they'll have to rip us apart.

I never understood my immigration status or how to navigate it and almost a decade after my arrival in the U.S., I still don't. During the past year, I had to attend college as a full-time student, work part time, contribute to the household with domestic labor as well as child care for my baby brother. My family depends on me, not just financially, but emotionally. That kind of responsibility is part of being an immigrant. So is the isolation that often comes with it.

From an early age I learned that I had to be a person that took care of my mother. It started after my parents separated. I had to be that wooden cane my mother could rely on, due to the lack of family support, economic instability, and no broader village that looked out for one another. Almost two decades later, things have not changed much; the difference now is that we live in a foreign country. This is also something that most immigrant children experience due to the distance and being isolated from families back home.

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But when we moved to the United States, it went from my mother relying on me emotionally to relying on me for a variety of simple tasks due to the language barrier--relying on me with watery eyes to translate with my broken English things that I still did not comprehend or helping her count because she couldn't differentiate nickels from dimes. I was always ashamed of my thick accent and people not understanding.

Experiences like these made me feel like my mother's needs were a burden. But my mother's needs were not the burden, it was the fear of being exposed that *I wasn't from here* that caused that burden. I was shamed for my tongue that was learning to trace two nations with my thick accent, when words in Spanish would slip out of my mouth mid-sentence. That was when the burden felt heavier.

It was our legal status that was a burden. In 2019, I applied for the Special Immigrant Juvenile Visa status; being neglected and abandoned by my father during my childhood, and because it was unsafe for me to return, I was eligible to obtain this visa. Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS) was created by Congress to protect individuals younger than 21 years old who have been abused or neglected by one or both parents and cannot be reunified with them. An order from a state court is needed to prove they cannot be reunified with one or both of their parents because they have survived parental abuse, abandonment, or neglect, and that it would not be in their best interest to be returned to their country of origin or previous residence or that of their parents.

It has been seven years now and I am still in limbo. These visas are supposed to allow young people to regularize their status and obtain a green card. But it is now summer of 2025 and my status still is not adjusted. Plus, SIJS has a pathway to citizenship for young people, compared to DACA.

Some background on these two different pathways for undocumented children: On June 15, 2012, the Secretary of Homeland Security announced that certain migrants who came to the United States as children and meet several requirements may request consideration of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) for 2 years, and that status can be renewed. DACA recipients are eligible to request work authorization as well as Deferred Action. The Trump administration attempted to terminate the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program in September 2017. But in 2020, the United States Supreme Court issued a 5–4 ruling stating that the Trump administration's attempt to rescind the DACA program was subject to judicial review and had been carried out in an arbitrary and capricious manner, thereby violating the Administrative Procedure Act. According to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (n.d.), DACA provides temporary protection from deportation to eligible undocumented youth. But in order to apply to DACA you have to meet these requirements and gather the following documents: Proof of identity, proof you came to the United States before your 16th birthday, proof of immigration status, proof of presence in U.S. on June 15, 2012, proof you continuously resided in U.S. since June 15, 2007, and proof of your student status at the time of requesting DACA, or proof you are an honorably discharged veteran of the U.S. Coast Guard or armed forces of the United States.

DACA has always imposed rigorous documentation requirements, and while it offers important protections, its

limitations can be incredibly challenging, and many people are left out from ever applying. Its exclusivity sets an unrealistic standard for undocumented immigrant youth, requiring individuals to be nearly perfect in order to qualify. This definition overlooks the full humanity and diverse experiences of immigrants. Many undocumented individuals are forced to leave school and enter the workforce at a young age due to lack of family and financial support, left vulnerable to navigating life without the protections that come with formal education or legal status.

SIJS is another valuable pathway for undocumented youth, but it requires navigating a complex two-step process. First, applicants must go through family court to establish eligibility by demonstrating abuse, neglect, or abandonment. Only after this determination can they apply to USCIS for SIJS. Children with SIJS are eligible to apply for lawful permanent resident status under the fourth employment-based green card category. But even then, recipients have to compete for visas within the EB-4 category, which has an annual limit, which contributes to the backlog. The Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) limits the number of employment-based preference immigrant visas and the annual limit for EB-4 visas is 7.1 percent of the worldwide employment limit (U.S. Department of State, 2025). In 2022, I went from being 6 months away to submitting an application for an adjustment of status and obtaining a green card to waiting 3 more years. It is now July 2025 and there are currently no more visas available for this fiscal year. They ran out for the year in February.

During 2025, fear of ICE raids and aggressive immigration enforcement tactics have also discouraged many families including my own from attending immigration court hearings, creating yet another barrier for those who might qualify for this relief. ICE raids shape how my family conducts our everyday life; their constant presence reinforces the precarity of undocumented life, instilling fear and limiting access to basic rights as well as social services. Using newly released government data from ICE, analyzed by the Deportation Data Project, the Prison Policy Initiative determined that states cooperating with the Trump administration accounted for more than 1,000 ICE arrests per day.

While I was applying to SIJS, everything felt uncertain. I was afraid that they would end the program, just like DACA, and then I would face all these fears of having to self deport. Then in 2022, I was approved for Form I-765, Application for Employment Authorization. This is a work permit that allows you to legally work in the United States. I finally had some kind of relief, including a temporary SSN and Deferred Action–a protection from deportation in case I was detained by ICE, DHS, or any law enforcement. Research on undocumented immigrants has shown how the social environment of living without legal status can shape an individual's self-perception and worldview, ultimately contributing to psychological distress (Garcini et al., 2021). Thanks to a temporary work permit and SSN, I was able for apply to different opportunities and felt a sense of relief, security, and moderate stability. I received a paid internship in the mental health field, advocating for girls at the risk of suicide, and was able provide the proper documentation employers require. Having the opportunity to explore, learn, and contribute to society in my field of study gave me a sense of hope and belonging, and helped me overcome feelings of self-doubt, which contributed to my own better mental health. One of my concerns has been not being able to provide for my family in the long run.

Not Perfect Enough

On June 6th, 2025, the Trump administration decided to end Deferred Action for SIJS. In my case, I won't be able to renew my work permit, and I am at risk of being deported if I encounter law enforcement and they decide I can't have due process. If detained under the current administration, my future will be in the hands of a federal law enforcement agent, rather than the immigration jurisdiction. If he wakes up in a good mood, my rights might be respected. If God has abandoned me, a US bounty hunter will kidnap me.

A few weeks ago, I could have been detained by law enforcement officers but not be deported until due process. Today, the reality is now totally different. Taking away SIJS Deferred Action and the possibility of legally working in the United States puts children with SIJS and potential SIJS applicants at a higher risk, making them vulnerable to labor exploitation.

Children that apply to this category are children who have been abused, neglected, and abandoned by one or both parents. Many children don't report the abuse they endure and in order to qualify, a report has to be made and they will have to first petition a state court (family court) judge for findings of parental abuse. If you are under 18 years old, you will need a legal guardian and have them be granted full custody. However, this process often excludes unaccompanied minors who arrive in the United States without an immediate family member to petition on their behalf.

I've lived through uncertainty and I know what it is like to navigate this country without safety, stability, or the protections that every child deserves. According to the Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (2023), Homeland Security Investigations identified or assisted 1,806 child exploitation victims and helped 731 human trafficking victims in fiscal year 2023. At the same time, as children grow up, they still need protection. Immigrant youth are often seen with compassion due to the fact that they are still minors, and that compassion and empathy fade when they turn 18 years old. Our support is often tied to the idea of innocence, reserved for children but not for young adults. Many who claim to support immigrants often turn away when the person is no longer a child, no longer "innocent." Unaccompanied children become young adults, young adults become parents, and parents eventually become grandparents, yet the need for safety, dignity, and stability never disappears. Still, the current administration deports immigrants that have spent more than half of their lives in the United States.

"I am not surprised if the current administration decides to give the minimum visas they can. This is pure evil and cruelty." That is what my lawyer said to me when I called him to ask what I can do to prepare and if I could renew my

work permit. Hearing I was not going to be able to renew my permit and Deferred Action felt like hot soup in 90 degree weather. People talk about shock feeling like buckets of cold water hitting their bodies but for me, it is the feeling of hot broth burning your tongue, your throat, and finally your chest, that kind of burning pain.

PHOTO COURTESY OF AUTHOR.

During the past year, my family and I have been facing instability due to current rhetoric against immigrants, encouraged by the current president Donald Trump. My brother was born last year, before Trump was elected. More than ever since he took office, I have been the one my mother and stepdad rely on, having to go to governmental agencies, being their full-time secretary and personal assistant. I have filled out multiple documents for them, having to explain what we need to do. But still I worry if I filled out the "Are You a U.S Citizen?" question wrong and will then have to face deportation over a mistake. This explains how we live in fear and the instability we face. According to the American Psychological Association Presidential Task Force on Immigration (2012), children and youth living in households with undocumented family members often live in fear of separation due to apprehension or deportation. This creates ongoing psychological and emotional stress that affects their mental health and overall well-being. Similarly, Rafieifar, Gallegos, and Praetorius (in press) highlight that the threat of removal profoundly shapes the lives of undocumented immigrants, restricting personal autonomy, undermining emotional well-being, and limiting future opportunities for entire families. Because most immigrant children grow up in mixed-status households, these circumstances often produce complex family dynamics and emotionally ambivalent relationships among relatives. I am expected to care for my brother if my parents are detained, positioning me not only as a sibling but as a stabilizing presence and potential parent figure. Our relationships are now guided by preparedness and the constant management of uncertainty.

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The recent ICE raids have made it even harder to build support networks or maintain meaningful connections. I take care of my 11-month-old brother who is still breast fed. It pains me to think that families similar to mine are being ripped apart, babies being separated from their mothers, fathers sent to prisons in El Salvador, siblings growing without each other and sent to countries they never visited or barely remember.

My mother and stepdad never leave the house without giving us a proper good-bye, praying that we will reunite before the sunset sets in. I see how much my family relies on me and how a deportation could deeply affect my family. My mother has taken care of me since I was born and being apart from her would deeply affect us both. Now that new individuals have joined our family of two, it hurts to think that all of us could be separated, ripped apart by dehumanizing rhetoric against immigrants, cruelty, and blatant xenophobia from this administration. I worry about putting my family at risk if I get detained or being separated if I am deported. But I worry most about my baby brother--about him being ripped away from our family.

I have nightmares of ICE coming into our home to detain us. I wake up in panic and quickly search for my brother so I know he has not been kidnapped by law enforcement officials, just in case it is not a nightmare but the beginning of my new reality. That's the type of instability you live with when you've taken all the right steps but are denied a path to legal status.

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Contributor's note

Catarina graduated from Brooklyn College in spring of 2025 with a major in Psychology and a minor in Spanish Translation. Catarina enjoys writing poetry in English and finds writing poetry in Spanish quite silly. Catarina is pursuing a Master's Degree in social work and is committed to upholding human dignity throughout her career. Catarina obtained her nickname after her father saw her dancing to a song by a singer named Catarino.

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