

WAKING UP TO
REALITY



MY FIRST WRITERS' CONFERENCE

My most exciting and life-altering day was the *Beginnings* Writers Conference Day on May 12, 2006. My teacher told me my essay was selected for the *Beginnings* book. I was very excited and I couldn't believe it. My essay would be published. I could not imagine this was true because I had a lot of problems with my English. I never thought I would write.

I thought about what to wear and what would the conference be like. I laid my dress out the night before and was very excited about the next day. When the day came, it seemed everything was going wrong. First, the weather wasn't right for May. It should have been warm with a light breeze that brings the smell of May flowers. It didn't happen. The day was cold and rainy and it was very windy. I knew my dress would be inappropriate for the weather or the conference. I didn't realize until I came to school that everybody wore a nice warm dress. I felt embarrassed and uncomfortable with what I wore. I wished I could go home and change my clothes, but it was too late.

We all were on the bus. The ride was longer than I thought. I told my classmate, "It seems the ride is longer than it should be." We found out why the ride was so long. The bus driver was lost. When I looked outside the bus window, the bus was at the edge of the road. Then our bus stopped both lanes of traffic to turn. I was worried about getting to the Writers' Conference. We were late but we made it.

When we got there, it was a warm and exciting atmosphere. They welcomed us even though we were late. It sounded so alive and everybody was enthusiastic to be there. It seems all of the students were ready and eager to talk about their stories. Their stories were unbelievable and amazing. It was the most fascinating experience I ever had.

Another memorable thing happened to me. It was at the end of the day when I was coming home on the bus. Two young ladies from different schools sat behind me. They were sharing their life stories with me. They talked about why they started the GED. One of the ladies said she had just passed her GED. She sounded very excited. She said passing the GED will make a change in her life. They explained how their lives will be changed and what they wanted to do. I just listened to them. It was amazing.

I enjoyed the fact that they shared with me their life story. I learned so much, and I am blessed with what I have. I never had a difficult life. At the beginning of the day I was concerned about my dress, the bus driver being lost, and the weather, but I forgot all about those things. It turned out to be the most exciting and most memorable day in my life. I really want to thank everybody who helped give me this opportunity.

~ Kilcha Canfield

THE FIRST STEPS OF A STRANGER

When days from your childhood become the dreams of your current life, when the echoes of past sounds call you night and day, when every scene of your past life plays as a movie in front of your eyes – the faces of your parents and friends, and even that of the driver who took you to school, the bistro that was your everyday place of friendship and warmth – when all these mismatch in time – then you are perhaps a stranger in a strange land.

My first experience of this began seven years ago when I left Iraq for Germany. It proved to be the most difficult period of my life. Living in a new country, I found myself changing from a hard working, independent woman, to an unemployed, completely dependent one. I felt I had become disabled. I was unable to do anything. Even speaking, which had been one of my joys, became an ordeal. I was living in a nightmare where there was no difference between day and night, no difference between the conscious and unconscious state. Slowly as time passed, I became more able to manage. Therefore, when I had to face this again, moving from Germany to the United States, I knew what it was like to be a stranger.

I realized after that first experience that the process of adapting to a new life would be hard but doable. I believe that every newcomer needs time to learn how to adjust. It's like breathing a different air, just as a new born baby takes its first breath out of the womb. Things that were done with great ease, almost instinctively, need to be learned and practiced. You have to think deeply about the most trivial of daily activities.

This dream life started to become more real as I learned some tricks to make the adjustment easier. It's like having a one pass ticket – it works everywhere and for anyone. You just start with a small, first step. Perhaps, because I am a

doctor, I compare it to the magic of the human body – an opening of the senses. You open your eyes, in the true sense of watching everything, even the lips of the speakers around you. You open your ears to listen to everyone around you, especially the children. You open your mouth and speak with everyone. This goes for the friends around you and those that might become your friends some day. Keep the possibility of the impossible far away. Eat not just out of hunger but to taste every bite and enjoy it.

I believe that these tricks worked well for me throughout the last seven years of my life, and I believe it is universal when one faces living in a new place and facing a new culture. Every person can make the necessary changes. This does not mean that you should forget your old life – the truth remains – your childhood memories will be a part of your life forever. They remind us of a time when life was innocent and free.

We are constantly gaining new knowledge. Life is about movement. There is no way to remain still. To step forward is the key of living.

~ Shanaz Shalli

TRAGEDY TO TRIUMPH

As a child my life was pretty normal. I went to school and hung out with my friends. But no one knew that I had a terrible secret eating away at me. Since the age of five, my father had been molesting me every night. He always said it's what real fathers do. For the longest time, I actually believed him. At night, when everyone else was asleep he would come into my room and touch me. I always pretended to be asleep, but the tears would always show. It got worse when my sister moved out when I was about thirteen. That's when he started calling me into his room when no one was home but him and me. That's when he started making me do things to him, and he would do more vile things to me. The crying for help, screaming for him to stop, and asking him why he would do this to me did not affect him at all.

When I turned fourteen years old, I finally opened up to my best friend about what was happening to me. She promised me that it would never happen again, and she would help me. All I could keep thinking was how is she going to help me? But she did. That day she told her parents what was happening to me, and they called Children's Services.

The next day at school was terrifying. A social worker came to school and asked me if my father was molesting me. I told her "No," but I knew she could see in my eyes that I was scared and afraid to tell the truth. That day the social worker came back to my house and talked to my parents before I got home from school. When I arrived home both of my parents said to me they needed to talk to me. My mother asked, "Tell me it isn't true. Is your father molesting you?" I told my mother it was not true because I was scared my father was making signals that he would kill me if I told the truth.

That night I tried killing myself by slicing my wrist with a knife, but I didn't succeed. I thought the rest of my life was going to be hell. But I thought wrong. The next day my sister took me to her house. When she asked me if the accusations were true, I broke down in tears and said "yes." My sister told me it had also happened to her ever since my mother and father had got married. She told me he actually raped her, and my mother walked in on it happening. She told me all our mom said was "go take a shower." My sister stayed in the shower for an hour crying. After she had got out of the shower, my parents acted like nothing happened at all.

The next day my mom called to tell my sister that she wanted me back home. My sister made an excuse to keep me another night. She did that every day for about four days. Throughout that time I was there, my sister and I went to the police and told them what was happening to us. The next week the cops came to my house and picked me up. They took me to the police station to verify that what I said in my report was true. They called my parents to the police station and told my father he was being arrested for molestation and rape. Two days later they released him to his parents' house and said he could not make any contact with me or my sister or he would be arrested on the spot.

Finally, I thought my life was going to get a lot better, but I was wrong. After everything that happened with my father, my mother started acting like she was the victim in everything, like he was raping her too, but my sister and I just did not want to hear or even talk about it anymore.

My mom tried to kill herself at least three or four times and has been in the mental hospital twice. She started going to counseling and was put on medication. The medication made her even crazier than she already was. My mother said she started hearing voices and was afraid she was going to hurt me and my two brothers. That's when we moved into my grandparents' house. We lived there for

about a year, but I had got kicked out of my grandparents' house and went to live with my aunt and uncle.

After about four months living with my aunt and uncle, my mother and oldest brother found an apartment in Amherst. We moved in, and that's when the real fun began. I began smoking weed and partying a lot with my friends in the apartment complex. I began to be unruly, always yelling and screaming at my mom. I told her I hated her and I wished she would have gone to jail along with my father. School started back up again. I was in eighth grade, but I was supposed to be in tenth. School was awesome – all my friends and I would do was smoke and party every day. In about April of 2006 a new neighbor moved in across the hall from me, and we became real good friends.

She introduced me to an amazing guy. He and I talked on the phone for about a month until we started dating. Everything was going great. I could tell him anything and he could tell me anything. We started hanging out a lot more. That's when I started to smoke and drink a lot more. With him, it was smoke all day everyday or he wouldn't be able to make it through his day. He would do anything to get what he wanted, whether it be weed or alcohol.

My family and I moved to Oberlin after my friend got me kicked out of the Amherst apartment. That's when the partying really started. In August of that year my boyfriend got arrested for theft. He had stolen a gun from his best friend to get weed to smoke. He hid at my house for about a day until he had got arrested. Watching him get arrested was the hardest thing I had ever had to see. About two days later, I found out I was pregnant. He called from the jailhouse and my mother told him I had taken a pregnancy test. When I got home from my friend's house after telling her I was pregnant, he called again. He asked me if he was going to be a daddy and I said "yes." We both started to cry. Four days later he got out of jail, but three months later he failed a drug test and had to go to Community-Based

Correctional Facility for about four months. When he was gone we wrote each other almost every day telling each other we would be together forever and nothing would tear us apart. When I was about eight months pregnant, he finally came home. Within a month, we had our beautiful 7 pound, 4 ounce daughter, Jasmine Nevaeh. About two weeks after our daughter was born, my sister also had a baby, a beautiful girl named Ava Maire.

Having my daughter changed my life completely. I have not touched drugs or alcohol in over 17 months. I am going back to school to get my GED to hopefully go to college to be an ultrasound technician. Being a mother is the greatest thing in the world. I would not change it for anything. Her father's life has changed drastically; he has been sober for 14 months. He is working and is enrolled in the Lorain County Community College to study business and entrepreneurship. He is an amazing father and a wonderful boyfriend.

My thought on life now is that it is worth living. Life does get better after a bad childhood, but you have to want it to make your life get better.

~ Rachel Forrider

MY LIFE AS A CHILD OF DIVORCE

Divorce is the toughest situation a family can go through or experience. When I was six years old, my parents came to the conclusion that their relationship was not healthy for any of us. At that point, I did not understand what they meant by "healthy," but as a young girl I experienced how my parents were growing apart. Two years later I started to have an empty feeling inside of me. This feeling grew more and more, and I found that emptiness was stemming from what I was missing out on, which turned out to be the love of parents as a family unit. After they separated, I stayed with my mother who took care of me while I was developing into a young woman. Though my father was not with me every day, he did call me every time he had a chance and sent me money every month.

I spent ninety-nine percent of my life with my mother. Since I only had a female role model while growing up, I came to think of my mother as a hero. We were together for almost all of my birthdays, during sad and happy moments, parent/teacher conferences, etc. As for my father, he did not attend or share many of those experiences with me then. I do not know the details of the obstacles that prevented my father from being with me, although I am 100 percent sure it was because my mother refused to let him be a part of my life.

This situation went on until a point of my life I will never forget. This was the night my father asked me not only to come live with him but to move with him and his family, who is my family as well, to the United States of America. I thought to myself, *this is the answer to my prayers. I can finally live with my father after all of these years of living apart.*

Several years have gone by and now I am in the United States of America. It has been five years since I left my mother in Venezuela. I cannot wait until I graduate from

college, so I can spend some time with my mother like the old days. By coming to America, I have grown and learned a lot. One of the things I learned is the difference between father/daughter relationships compared to mother/daughter relationships. I miss the wonderful relationship my mom and I had, but if I were to go back with my her I would also miss the remarkable relationship with my father.

Today I see my life with positives and negatives. The positives are becoming bilingual, participating in school and community activities, meeting the best teachers of my life, receiving recognition for my hard work, meeting friends who have helped me with the paradoxical moments of being a teenager in America, and the list goes on. The biggest negative is once again having that empty feeling I talked about before, and I am fully aware of what the cause is. I know the problem is my mother's absence, but on the contrary, I also know that her absence has made me stronger. I fear that if I go back to Venezuela I will once again become dependent on my mother. Moving here to America has helped me mature and taught me to become independent with the help of my father and stepmother. And to be honest, my mother's absence keeps me going every day, every hour and every second of my life. It drives me to do what I do and pushes me to succeed. I know I will see my mom again one day and this also helps me continue my path towards reaching my goals.

This entire experience has helped me become who I am and has made me stronger, more mature and more responsible than most people my age. For 14 years I received guidance and direction from my mother, but for the last five years it has been my father's turn to teach me the lessons of life from his point of view. My plan is to keep certain aspects from both of my parents, a divorced couple with two different points of view, and apply them to my life now and in the future.

~ Maite Yoselin Barrios

NEEDLES AND CAPS

I was angry, so very angry
always stuck in my drugged mind
never wanting to feel my emotions
always wanting my next fix.

People meant nothing to me
needles and caps
needles and caps
always my mind screaming
always numb to the world.

I lost my mind.
The voices chanted in my head
wanting me to die
paranoid of what will happen to me
I hid my arms in shame
never wanting people to see
never enjoying my teenage years.

I forgot how to feel;
then I snapped!
I was restrained, and institutionalized
weaned off my needles and caps.

It's been three years
I'm just now starting to feel
the emotion is overbearing
not used to feeling
never wanting another fix
still I live with the scars I am hiding.
this new world scares me
I hope to succeed!

~ Johnathon K. Janney

AS I CLOSE MY EYES

As I close my eyes...
I think of the person I once used to be,
But she's full of guilt and envy.

As I close my eyes...
The tears stream down my face.
Oh dear God! Am I a disgrace?

As I close my eyes...
I think of the things I should have done,
The only one left is my son.

As I open my eyes...
I see the eminent woman that stands before me now.
I no longer walk with my head hanging in disavow.

As I open my eyes...
I try to imagine my son,
His eyes shining bright like the midnight sun.

As I open my eyes...
I see another chapter of my life unfold.
I am eager to see what my life's yet to behold!

~ Laura Ickey

LIFE'S LESSONS

Life is the most important lesson of all. You have to respect yourself before you can respect anyone else.

When I was seventeen years old, I dropped out of school to support my family. It wasn't something I wanted to do...I had to. My father was addicted to crack. He was stealing money and food. I had a younger brother, and my goal was to make sure he did something with his life, so I started selling drugs to make a living.

By the time I reached eighteen, I was making three to four hundred dollars every day. I wasn't living at home. I chose to leave so that my mother and brother were safe. My mother didn't know what I was doing. I put money in the mailbox when she wasn't there, just to make sure the bills were paid and there was food in the house.

At the age of nineteen, I took my first bullet in the foot, and I still didn't change my ways. I paid for my brother's cap and gown, but I didn't see him walk across the stage because in his eyes, I was his father figure, but in mine, I was a drug dealer.

A few months later, my friend got killed just after I left his house. Three months after that, I took four shots to the chest area. After that I had a baby girl and promised her that I would be here to watch her grow up. She is six. My brother is in the Army. My mother is doing great, and I am making life changes. True story.

~ Antwan Leggett

SOME CHILDHOOD THINGS

I would like to share some of the things that happened when I was a child. I am the youngest of nine children. My mother was not married when I was born. She lived on my grandfather's farm.

Back then black people didn't own property. I don't know how my grandfather got the farm. Mom had to work so my sisters took care of me. Later, my two sisters and I went to stay with my oldest brother and his wife. Later on, I went to stay with my oldest sister after she got married.

Things were okay until my oldest sister started having children of her own. Then things changed. She was so mean to me. By this time I was seven years old. She made me do all the work. The only thing I didn't have to do was cook. We didn't have a washing machine so I washed the clothes on a washboard. We had hard wood floors. I had to get on my knees and scrub the floors. I was a babysitter, maid, and I worked in the fields. My sister would keep me out of school to do whatever needed to be done.

I don't remember how old I was but I had a problem with acid every time I ate tomatoes. I would break out with sores. I loved tomatoes. They were my favorite food. My sister told me not to eat tomatoes, but I didn't listen to her. Sores broke out all over me; they were really bad. One time while the sores were bad, I broke a jug. My sister beat me so bad blood was coming out of the sores. That weekend my mother and younger sister came to visit us. They saw how bad I was. My mother was so upset. My mother and younger sister came back that Monday and took me to the doctor. It is so strange; I can still remember the doctor's office. It was on North High Street in Daville, Virginia.

My mother and younger sister took me home with them. When I got well my oldest sister came and took me back

with her. I have to tell you something. My older sister would always say mean things about Mom, and I believed her. She would tell me Mom didn't want me and that's the reason I was with her. Mom told me I didn't have to go back with my oldest sister, but she had me brain-washed. She was a terrible person, but I wanted her to love me so much. I never had anyone to love me. That's all I wanted, just to be loved. So, things didn't get better; they got worse.

I left home when I was 16 years old. After that things went downhill. I started drinking. I was married three times. I have done so many bad things. But, one day, God changed my life. He gave me a new life. I am happy there are people that now care for me. I thank God for all the wonderful things He has done for me.

~ Ida Davis

A PROUD MOTHER

Cousteau, my first born son, was born in 1985 in Togo, West Africa. He was very quiet when he was a baby. He was very close to me, closer than my other children. He used to be afraid of military men in uniform. In 2002 our family of five moved to Cincinnati, Ohio. At that time, Cousteau could speak very little English. He attended Princeton High School and joined J.O.R.T.C. (Junior Officer Reserve Training Corps), but after one year, he quit the training corps.

In his last year of high school, I asked him, "What do you want to study in college?" He would say, "I don't know yet," and other times, "I want to be a pilot."

In 2006, he graduated from Princeton High School. He was unsure of what he wanted to do. I was surprised when one day my daughter, Christel, told me, "Your son took a military test, and he passed it."

I was shocked, but said, "If this is his dream, may God bless him." But truly I was sad. I was worried about him, thinking about his decision. Then the day came for him to leave. It was like a part of my body was missing. I started to cry, "Where is my baby, Cousteau, going?" I sat and looked at his picture. I remembered his hugs each morning. I remembered his sweet words, his shyness, and his smile.

That day, Cousteau moved to South Carolina for boot camp for 3 months. He couldn't call me; he just sent letters. A few days before his graduation from boot camp, the phone rang. I picked up the phone, and surprisingly, it was my son. I was very happy to hear his voice, and he was happy to hear mine too. He wanted to make sure that our family was coming to his graduation ceremony on March 9th. He knew we had never gone on a long trip.

The day before his graduation, my husband, two children and I drove nine hours to see Cousteau in South Carolina. We were tired but very excited to see him. When we arrived, he screamed with joy and then gave us all a hug. He then showed us his room and introduced us to his friends. He was so glad to become a Marine. The next day, we attended his graduation ceremony. I was so proud of him.

Today, he is stationed at Camp Pendleton in California. Now, he's that military man he used to be afraid of as a young child. I miss him and worry about him, but I am a very proud of him.

~ Afi Wozufia

MY DOG

Chicky was my first dog's name.
It was a gift from my daughter's school teacher.
We kept Chicky from when she was two months old
until she was ten years old.

When she was five years old,
I mated her with the neighbor's male dog.
Then she got pregnant.
One day before she gave birth,
Chicky was fighting with someone's dog
who was walking in front of our house.
Then that night the puppy was born.

The puppy was so small and weak.
It was born early!
I thought it would die, but it lived!
I wrapped it in a handkerchief,
then I put the puppy in a basket.
I saw that the puppy had no face.
There was just a tiny hole for the mouth.
My husband said, "It can't live."
But I said, "No, it's alive, I can help!"

Day by day, I took care of the puppy.
I poured some milk into an eyedropper
because the hole for the mouth was very tiny.
Everyday I saw a difference in her face.
It was growing! "Oh!...what a miracle!"
The puppy was growing outside the mom's womb.
That's what gave me more strength to take care of it.

In two weeks I saw two tiny holes
appearing to become a nose.
Then in three weeks, again two tiny holes became ears.
Then in a month I saw two eyeballs.
The last change made me scared

because the face was changing its form
to look like a triangle and to add the eyeballs
which were not open yet.

Three months later the puppy's face was complete.
The body was pudgy with beautiful colors for a mutt,
white, light brown and dark brown.
I gave her the name Fin-Fin.
She had a big mouth.
When someone came, she barked loudly.
A miracle happened! I'm so happy and thankful.
I'm not a doctor, I'm not a nurse,
but I was successful in keeping her alive.

This is only part of the story of my dog.

~ Kin Wijasa

A CHANCE TO LIVE IN PEACE

On April 15, 2004 I was returning home from school. Israeli soldiers came to my city in Palestine to arrest someone for some reason.

There was a clash between the Israeli soldiers and the Palestinian people. They shot each other. We looked at this from far away. The sound of the discharge of the guns was normal for us because it always happened, so we were not afraid.

For a short time, everything was quiet. The fight was almost done. We could take another way home, but the shooting stopped. So my brother and I took the normal way home. While we were walking down the street, I was surprised by one shot into my stomach. I didn't know why or how or what I did to be shot.

My brother, my friend, and I saw an ambulance, so we started running towards it. The ambulance came and picked me up. My brother, a doctor, and I were inside the ambulance. We went to the hospital very quickly. I stayed for three days.

Then I got out. It wasn't a dangerous wound, and I'm fine now. But there was something I didn't know. Before I got shot, I was thinking about going to study in America. I already had one sister, many cousins, and friends in America. Getting shot helped me to come and live here in America. I'm applying for political asylum now because it's too hard to live in a country that's at war. You can't live a normal life. You can't study. You can't go wherever you want and get whatever you need. This is real. I was living in a country at war, so I came to America because I know I can live comfortably here. I can study. I can do a lot of things. I hope to live in peace. Finally, I hope my country has peace someday.

~ Mohammed Abu-Kawik