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"Don't worry, it'll be OK," the lawyer whispered to her client, a young, dark-haired woman who sat on the edge of a bench, hands clenched, feet nervously weaving under a floral skirt. A few feet ahead, men tightly crossed their arms, hugging themselves. Parents hushed children on their knees.

I knew how they felt.

The small room at the Dallas Immigration Court was completely silent, but brimming with anxiety. There, a judge can alter lives forever: by allowing people to remain in the United States, or by ordering them to leave or to be forcibly removed to home countries such as El Salvador, Togo, India, Honduras, Ireland, Korea, Mexico.

For a few days this fall, I attended immigration proceedings obsessively, as an observer. I could easily imagine myself standing before the judge, explaining why I should be allowed to stay, why I am worthy of being an American.

It was the element of random personal chance – who gets caught, who must stay in or leave the U.S. and when – that kept bringing me back to the hearings. Because 15 years ago I, too, arrived in the United States, a teenager from Eastern Europe.

In immigration court, randomness and arbitrariness play major roles. The legal immigration process is a maze of quotas, interviews and court rulings.

Out of the millions of undocumented immigrants who come to make a living in the United States, very few get caught and are called before an immigration judge. Many decide or are allowed to leave voluntarily. And of those who get caught, only about 20 percent are criminals, referred to the court after being convicted. (Some of those with criminal convictions are legal permanent residents, who are also deportable by law.)

Many of the people I saw at the hearings had been caught while getting a simple traffic ticket. This was the case with 18-year-old Gustavo from Honduras. He came to the United States with his parents as a 6-year-old and had been living here undocumented until now. He is a senior at a Dallas high school.

As a consequence of his traffic violation, in a few months Gustavo will have to leave the United States forever.

Altogether, I have lived in the United States less time than Gustavo. (I spent part of my high school and college years studying in Europe.) But my family, my work and my entire life are now in the United States, and I couldn't imagine having to leave it all, as Gustavo will have to, for a country I have not lived in since I was a child.

My family emigrated from Poland in 1988, when the country was still communist. We lived in France for a year and a half. Then, in 1990, Catholic Charities of Hartford, Conn., and my aunt sponsored my parents, brother and me into the United States as political refugees.

You could say we were lucky. Poland's first free parliamentary elections were held a year later. The country soon became officially democratic, which made immigration for Poles questionable. But we didn't know then that we had come in time.

In immigration court in Dallas, I saw those whose arrival was not as timely or as fortunate.

I listened to a woman from El Salvador tell the story of how she fled to the United States with her son and daughter after testifying against a criminal gang that had killed her husband.

For 16 days, she traveled with her children through El Salvador, Guatemala and Mexico, only to be caught by authorities at the U.S.-Mexico border. She and her children now face deportation to El Salvador.

Another young woman, from Togo, a tiny African country known for abductions, torture and rigged elections, was trying to convince the judge that her documents were in order. She had fled first to France and then to the United States.

In French-accented English, she shyly told the judge about how one day she returned to Togo to renew her passport. She was captured at the border and shoved into a small holding pen for the night. She was able to free herself and hid at a friend's house before leaving the country again.

I felt survivor's guilt. If I had to go back to my country today, I could with no great harm to myself. This Togolese woman's life is still in limbo, full of anxiety.

Sitting in immigration court, I failed to understand what made my family so special to have been eligible for American welcome and citizenship. What made us better than the scores of hopeful, struggling immigrants who filed before my eyes, most of whom lead honest and hard-earned lives in this country?

It was not worthiness, but luck and chance, plus a combination of where we were born, how educated my parents were, when and how we decided to leave. I am the random immigrant.

I realized again what an honor it is for my family and me to be here – legally. Not everyone has this chance; not everyone has our luck. Many of those in immigration court don't even have a lawyer. Here, the right to government-appointed counsel does not apply. Only the right to a translator is specified.

Vanna Slaughter of Catholic Charities of Dallas, who trains paralegals to represent undocumented clients, says there aren't enough low-fee immigration lawyers to go around. The organization's sole attorney is able to choose only 1 out of every 15 applicants to represent, she says.

I remember how nervous and excited I felt waiting for my family's interview at the U.S. Embassy in France. How I thought of all the possibilities that stretched out before us. How relieved I was when we could pack our bags.

Most of us living in the United States, or our ancestors, have at one point in time felt that way. We have all taken a chance, and were given an opportunity by luck. We are all random immigrants. And some of us end up facing an immigration judge.

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