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A Transient Citizen

“...I hereby declare, on oath, that I absolutely and entirely renounce all allegiance and fidelity to any foreign prince or state of whom or which I have been a subject or citizen....”

This is a clause from an oath I took on February 6, 2002—an ordinary day of no significance to most people, a climatic point in my life—it was the day I became a U.S. citizen. I did not attend the formal ceremony in the Los Angeles Convention Center, yet for me it did not matter; I was still just as excited, for this was the day I became a true American. There were many people from different cultures in the noisy office where I received my certificate, yet we were all filled with the same excitement—the potential of the American Dream and to be part of the greatest nation.

It seemed that every time an employee came out they called someone else, as if I was not even there, and I started to worry. The fear of returning home without being a citizen of this nation started to cross my mind. Two hours passed and I was sitting in the same chair listening to the noise of the typewriters inside the offices. Then, as if time itself had stopped, it happened; they called me to the front window. It was as if I was walking to the doors of heaven. I recognized that it was not the end but rather a new beginning. It was the creation of a new person. The oath was simple; I had promised to support and defend the Constitution and laws of the United States of America against all enemies. I choked on the very words when I realized I had just taken an oath promising to bear arms even against the country of my birth. For so long I envisioned perfection as the day I would become a citizen of a country that I had learned to love. I realized that in order to start a new life as a citizen I would have to stir the shadows of my past in order to learn where I come from and where I want to go. With this, I renounced a part of me, and Mexico now became a foreign country.

The word "citizen" has become more complex, for unlike my first citizenship it is not something that I possessed from birth. Also unlike my religion, it was not something that my parents gave to me when I was born. Becoming a citizen of the United States was a decision that I made. Becoming a citizen of a new nation, even if you have lived in it for many years is something that you have to work for, and it is this price, time, and dedication that gives personal satisfaction. The ability to choose whether to become a citizen of another nation

and drop any legal bonds with a birth country is what makes a citizenship ceremony unlike anything else because the modern political systems seldom gives us the opportunity of choice. However, when one faces the opportunity to make a choice of citizenship, it also forces them to give something up. It is not only giving up the citizenship from a birth country, but also heritage and traditions; and to a certain point it is also giving up friendships and family because one becomes a traitor of their own country. Not only do you give your word that if The United States and your birth country ever go to war you will defend The United States; but you are also a traitor in the views of others who think you have forgotten where you came from.

During the ceremony, the only thing that is celebrated is this new possession, and the fact that a legal bond is given up does not really play a role until a person returning to their country of birth is told that they are only tourists and they find themselves strangers amongst familiar people. This devastating feeling is often ignored because suddenly new opportunities are opened when you become a citizen of the greatest country in the world. I realized that the heart becomes a stronger asset because what matters most is knowing who I am, my identity should not depend on what country I'm a citizen of, but it should be strengthen by that country and the experiences that I have encountered.

Soon I saw myself in a struggle between two very different nations. Sure, I eat Mexican food, and sure, I speak Spanish, and sure, I respect Mexican traditions, but I am torn between the United States and Mexico. I am torn

between the knowledge and opportunity that being a citizen of America can offer and the comfort that Mexico can give me.

Mexico was my life, a place of my childhood and the definition of who I am. I can still hear the roosters waking up the neighborhood in the morning and my dog barking as people passed through our front door; absent was the noise of a bustling city and its traffic. I can still remember the smell that would fill the house every Saturday afternoon—the aroma of homemade tortillas. Now I have to settle for the smell of tortillas from the local market. Now all I have left are distant memories of an environment that once allowed me to appreciate life's simplicity. Mexico was a place where I could develop my morals; it was the simplest of lives where everyone went to church on Sunday mornings with their whole family. It offered me a place where my mind could connect with nature. Mexico is place where you can walk for miles and smell nothing but fresh air that enabled you to relax and not have to worry about anything. A place where I could escape reality and solve my problems. Mexico is also the place where I developed my faith. I am not saying that in The United States I am not able to practice my catholic believes, but it is so much easier in Mexico where you do not have a hundred things happening at once.

Now, as a U.S. citizen I enjoy everything that comes with living in America. I enjoy the thrill of living in the city with everyday scenes of American societies: people from different cultures working, talking, living, and even playing together. Not only this but I also treasure the educational opportunities guaranteed to me as a citizen—something that will promote my well-being, future, and progress in

this country. Living in America has taught me to tolerate diversity. This is perhaps the most important thing that everyone can learn to do because it is the only way to live in peace.

Struggling to fit into two nations should mean that you have twice as much as most people, it should not mean that you have to give everything up; there are things that no matter what will always remain with you. For example language, because no matter what the only way to communicate with my parents is by speaking Spanish, the only way for me to pray before a midterm is in Spanish—although my education has transferred to a new language, a new state of evolution, my religion has always and will always be in Spanish.

The American dream is not only a vision that immigrants have about how they would like to live, it is a drive that pushes everyone in America to achieve their goals, it is a standard on which Americans base those goals, and it is the ultimate goal they seek. Unfortunately, this dream acquires a different meaning when I become an American citizen. It is no longer the yearning for a better life, but it is the hope that I would never forget where I came from. It is the hope that it will be possible to live in a new country with a foreign culture and tradition without been in conflict with society. The American dream is the ability to cope with the American society without the worry of fitting in. The American dream for me is no longer short term goals aimed at success, having a stable job or owning a house, but it is now a long-term goal that seeks to find a stable point between two nations even if the nations themselves are not at peace.

Now that I have gone through the process of applying for United States citizenship, I have taken the responsibility to choose between Mexico and The United States—between my roots and my future. I have taken an oath, not only before The Great American seal, but also and most importantly before God. I do not wish to question whether I regret becoming a citizen or not, for the only obstacle that is always holding us back is not being able to let go of the past. However, I cannot completely erase what I feel for Mexico, for I do not want to forget my heritage, *mi cultura*. I may be bound to the American flag and the U.S. Constitution, but I am still proud of being Mexican.