

The lights from the tennis court dressed the park in tree shadows. Dora and I had gone on our favorite walk by the river, moonlight sparkling on the water. I looked at the Washington Monument and Capitol Building, the seat of hegemony and power, and I knew it would be months before I would take that walk by the river again. This is my favorite walk in Virginia. The water rippled just enough to move the light and make the water sparkle. But I was moving to Texas for the summer. I had volunteered to interview asylum applicants in a family detention facility at the heart of the “family separation crisis.” This moment of terror created by our government was one that I wanted to witness. As a federal government officer, I actually had the power to go to the epicenter and see it from the inside out.

The South Texas Family Residential Center in Dilley Texas was built on a former oil field workers’ camp during the Obama Administration. It is a series of tan trailers that blend into the dirt and countryside, surrounded with barbed wire fences. The Trump Administration issued its “zero tolerance” policy through the U.S. Department of Justice on May 7, 2018, and formalized separating children from parents who crossed the border without immigration paperwork. The announcement stated that all those seeking asylum, meaning protection for specific reasons under international and U.S. law, would be referred to the DOJ for prosecution, and automatically be charged for a crime instead of going through the regular asylum application process. Further, any accompanying children under the age of 18 would be handed over to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). HHS would then place these children hundreds – sometimes thousands – of miles away from their parents at one of the 100 Office of Refugee Resettlement shelters and other care arrangements across the country.

I had heard from other Refugee Officers at Homeland Security that Dilley was the worst assignment. The sheer number of cases to process was overwhelming. Mandatory overtime was normal, and the commute from San Antonio was over an hour each way, and the applicants were not just grown men and women, but small kids. But Dilley was now a makeshift “reunification hub” for women and children who had been separated, and I wanted to be there.

At the end of our night walks, Dora and I would go to the park and play “tag.” On this last night, we started chasing each other and I heard the clink of metal and the gate opened. A woman walked in with her dog, and we paused to say hello; I mentioned I was leaving for work and would miss the park and our night walks by the river. When she heard I was going to work in a prison interviewing children and mothers about trauma, she stopped and said: “I’m a therapist and I’m going to tell you three things to help you survive. First, everyone says to be grateful daily about something and write in their journals. But the key is to write about your part in that, no matter how small. You need to feel empowered so you need to connect that gratitude to some agency. Second, practice absorbing the senses around you. Mindfulness isn’t just breathing. When you’re in a bad moment, look at the walls, notice things like the colors, identify smells, pick out details and hang onto them. They’ll ground you.”

I cannot remember the third piece of advice from that night. But those first two pieces of advice did save me.

To find a sense of agency when transcribing trauma at a keyboard and processing legal casework a certain way at the behest of a supervisor, policy, or regime, felt nearly impossible. I didn't feel I could make a difference and often wondered if I was just perpetuating evil; I was a part of it. But there were small ways. I started to ask asylum applicants more about treatment by Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) Officers. When asylum applicants started to tell me more about abuse at the point of apprehension, I documented that and sent it into the DHS civil rights unit. The unit responded and said those pieces of information went into reports and ended up in news reports and sometimes policy. I sent an email to my unit on how to document civil rights and liberties abuses. I was surprised when, months later, special agents called to ask me about specific incidents. They asked about the CBP Officers, and I hope something happened, but probably nothing did.

It was the details though. Finding the colors. The smells. The noise. I smuggled a coffee pot through security and made coffee under my desk in the afternoons. The taste of bitter black coffee went straight through me. The plastic chairs that made jail feel like elementary school. The cardboard boxes we stacked to create makeshift standing desks. The muffled voices and sobs in other rooms where other officers were doing interviews. The chilliness of my metal desk.

The smell of urine when 10-year-old kids peed their pants and their moms said, "He started doing this when we were separated and now he can't go back. I don't know how to fix him!"

I had a window and the sunlight that came through warmed me, and I made sure to look outside in between interviews. I would leave for lunch and go to the gas station. To get outside in any way when working in prison reminded me I was not physically trapped. The subway sandwiches, the chalky bread and plasticky vegetables, with baked Lays potato chips. And the smacking of gum by my favorite interpreter over the phone. Those details held me together.

At night in San Antonio, Dora and I strolled in the one-hundred degree weather along the riverwalk. We would pass the old city arsenal, now HEB corporate headquarters, and watch the water shine from city lights and the moon. We had a favorite route. Certain houses, the yellow paint, the porches. Specific cracks in the sidewalk, best patches of grass. We would sit on special stone benches in the night. We could not find joy. But we found beauty.