OPINION



ILLUSTRATION BY MYENN RAHNOMA

I was unhoused. It doesn't look like what you think



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Editor's note: words in red are defined in glossary on page 2.

It started with a toothache.

I grew up in San Jose as the immigrant daughter of Bosnian refugees who escaped war and have to carry that trauma with them for the rest of their lives even if they don't want to admit it.

I lived in the same one-bedroom apartment for most of my life. I can still remember the address, where it was in the complex, the colors outside the home and how cluttered it was because of my mother's inclination to hoard objects.

I remember constantly complaining about that place, how I desperately wanted to leave that place in the city, how much I hated it, how I wanted better for my parents and how badly we needed a larger space.

The saying, "you're one paycheck away from being homeless," is a lesson I learned through a sequence of events that I would never have expected to lead my family and I to eventually become unhoused.

It started when my uncle died in a car accident in November 2016. He was my mom's younger brother and they were extremely close. The heartbreak and grief my mother felt was immeasurable.

The following month, my paternal grandmother died on Christmas Eve.

Those tragic events and my mother being a heavy smoker led to her having a stroke on Jan. 31, 2017.

I still remember my guilt over the stroke. I woke up in the early hours of the day, crying out in pain of my toothache. My parents always procrastinated over my dentist appointments. I couldn't take it anymore and started a massive argument with my mother about how much pain I was in and how she wasn't doing anything about it.

I remember waking up to her outside, disoriented, taking my dog Teddy on a walk and having to help her back inside. I had school that day and begged her to let me take her to the hospital. She told me not to worry and that she'd wait for my dad to come back from work.

I found out how severe the situation was from my dad during my photography class. From there on, I had to witness my mother learn how to live life after such a transformative event.

We had to face the immense weight of how we would survive financially in the city of San Jose after my mom was not able to work anymore.

She was a preschool teacher for most of her working career in the U.S. but had moved to cleaning houses, causing her great physical strain, which eventually led her to leave her job.

Our rent for our one-bedroom apartment was $2,500. We could barely make rent with my mother working, and now that she wasn't, it became impossible.

I could not afford to help my dad with my job and I kept thinking of the ways I could've pitched in more and how difficult it was for me to contend with the little I could do to help the situation.

My father ended up selling his beloved truck, a 2002 white Toyota Tacoma that was the first car he bought in the U.S.

He had to borrow money from multiple people just to scrape by for rent.

Then, to make matters worse for us, Teddy, my beloved childhood dog and best friend passed away after 15 years.

It felt as though life just kept throwing us one terrible situation one after the other. How much more could happen?

Moving houses was the only viable option.

A soccer friend of my father provided us with another choice: leave our apartment in San Jose and move to Aptos, a city near Capitola, for an apartment with a rent of $1,500 a month.

I was adamant we shouldn't leave. I could never imagine leaving San Jose especially for Aptos. Everything I had imagined in life for myself kept crashing down. Looking back, it was a selfish mindset to be in, but I just couldn't move past a decision over which I had no control.

However, the "friend" my father had was taking advantage of my father's help in renovating his house for nothing in return, knowing that my dad needed help with his income because work at his current construction company was slow.

I was at San Jose State and paying for school while working part-time, yet again not able to help.

After five months of broken and empty promises, along with a neighbor who did not like my parents and worked with my father's friend, we were given three days to leave the apartment complex.

Knowing what I know now about tenant rights, I know there was more I could have done to fight for us to stay. But back then, I knew absolutely nothing about what to do.

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I was terrified, the cruelty of the landlord-tenant relationship is one that I know well and it's a relationship that shouldn't exist.

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After those three days, we decided to move back in with my aunt in San Jose temporarily.

We were sheltered, but we were officially unhoused.

Finding new housing is not easy, especially in San Jose. My parents did not have a good credit score. I was also tired and traumatized so I tried to run away from the problem in front of me and did exactly what my parents did with me, not being able to handle it at the moment.

My aunt was moving into affordable senior housing and we had to stay in a motel for over a month. After that month, my dad's work started to dry up again. My parents and I lived in our respective cars.

The new routine started to settle. I would go to a Starbucks bathroom everyday, one with privacy where I was able to wash up and brush my teeth. I even did a makeshift skincare routine to restore a sense of normalcy in my life.

I remember lying down in my car, looking out the window in the early mornings, trying to see through the condensation, thinking about every life decision that led me to this moment, to this life.

Eventually, I lost my car in an accident and I ended up living with my parents in their car. My mom chose to sit in the front seat to sleep and let me have the back even though I begged her to take the back because of her disabilities from her stroke.

My dad would go to work and my mother and I would wait for him. I'd take the car to get us coffee and food, trying to start my day and then go back to the parking lot and wait for my dad to come back.

The days were slow and torturous with nothing to do but look for jobs and apartments, pretending to feel normal while waiting for change to come.

I would see my friends often, staying at their places with them not knowing I was unhoused. I was terrified of telling anyone outside of my family because of the shame and guilt I felt.

They knew something was wrong and would ask, "Why is she staying around so often when she has a place to be?" And I just couldn't tell them the reason.

Being houseless is a shame that I cannot describe. You don't feel human. You feel like it's all your fault for not working hard enough, for falling through the cracks of America's cruel social system, one where you are almost designed to fail.

I felt as though failure is an inevitable part of life and that I was one step away from losing a job, a step away from a medical emergency changing the entire trajectory of my life. This country is not made for you to live your life in comfort.

I was not able to shower for weeks, nor able to stay in one place for long periods of time because I was scared that a worker would realize I am using the bathroom for longer than normal because I just needed to feel some semblance of cleanness. No one understands that unhoused people do not want to be unhoused.

They do not want to go to the bathroom in a parking lot, they don't want to smell, they don't want any of the traits people associate with unhoused people.

It is high time we stop blaming people for the situations that they are in and realize that capitalism has failed us and that it is not sustainable to live in the system we do now.

I have come to the realization that the stroke, which felt like the turning point of my and my parents' lives, was not my fault, as much as I wanted to believe that it was.

My mother's health was not fully her responsibility and my parents not being able to afford a dentist wasn't their fault but the fault of a system that waits for you to fail and that is a system that cannot continue to exist.

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