I have a memory, sharp as a papercut: my father at the kitchen table, his head in his hands. In front of him was not a bill or a work problem, but a government form. I was young, but I understood enough to know that these papers held a power over us that nothing else did. They could tell us to leave. That moment never really left me. It was the first of what I call my "paper scars", the permanent marks left by our family's immigration journey. They aren't marks of weakness. They're the proof of our fight, a fight waged with highlighters and hope that taught me what advocacy really means.

For years, our kitchen table was a battlefield. The enemy was a language we didn't fully understand, in a system that assumed we did. The sound of the mailbox closing was enough to change the mood in our house. My parents, the strongest people I know, were rendered helpless by bureaucratic language. But since our case was a civil matter, we had no right to a public defender (Source A). So, I became one. At fifteen, my legal library was my phone's dictionary and a binder. My job was to translate fear into action, to take a letter that made my mom cry and turn it into a series of concrete steps. It started with small things. I'd circle deadlines in red on the wall calendar so we couldn't ignore them. I made a cheat sheet of important phone numbers and our case number, taped to the fridge. This wasn't just organization; it was our way of building a fortress out of sticky notes, a small defense against the chaos.

The work was in the details. I remember one question on a form: "List all addresses for the last ten years." A simple question, until you've moved three times and dates start to blur together. We spent an entire weekend digging through old bills and arguing about dates. It felt ridiculous, but we knew a single mistake could be seen as lying. It was a lesson in precision born from pure fear. Another time, a question asked if we'd ever been a member of any organization. My dad, thinking of the soccer club he played in back home, almost checked 'yes.' We spent an hour researching online until we were sure that a recreational sports team wouldn't be misconstrued as a threat. At that moment, I wasn't a kid helping with homework; I was a strategist, learning that every word on a form was a potential trapdoor.

This is why a Supreme Court case I read about later, Pereira v. Sessions (Source B), resonated with me so deeply. The court threw out a deportation order because the government's notice forgot to include the time and date of the hearing. A tiny, administrative oversight. I read that and I didn't feel smart for being so careful. I felt angry. It meant that our weekend of stress

over old addresses was necessary. It means the system is so fragile that it can break your life over a typo, but offers you no help to avoid it. The pressure on families is immense, and the safety net is invisible. That case put a name to our silent struggle. It was called 'due process.' But for us, it didn't feel like a process; it felt like a test we hadn't been taught how to pass. The Supreme Court could afford to be strict about a missing line on a form because they have law clerks and endless resources. We had a fifteen-year-old with a Wi-Fi connection. That gap between law and practice became my most defining paper scar, a permanent reminder that fairness depends on having someone in your corner.

But these paper scars aren't just about the pain. The deepest ones are also records of our strength. The scar from the night we got a scary letter is also the scar of my mom making tea and my dad saying, "We're a team. We will solve this." Advocacy, I learned, isn't a solo act. It's the quiet work of making sure no one on your team feels alone. It's the patience to explain a complicated letter to your little sister for the third time. It's the courage to double-check an envelope even when your hands are shaking. I have a scar from the day we finally got our approval. It doesn't look like the others. It's the ghost of a feeling: the weight lifting off my parents' shoulders, the sound of my mom actually laughing in the kitchen again. That scar is a reminder that the goal of advocacy isn't just to win a case; it's to give people back their peace.

These scars have shaped who I am. They've given me a patience for complexity and a deep empathy for anyone who feels lost in a system they can't control. I learned to listen not just to words, but to the fear behind them. I learned that sometimes, the most powerful thing you can do is not to have all the answers, but to be willing to sit with someone in their confusion until an answer seems possible. I see now that my paper scars are a map. They chart a journey through fear and confusion, but they ultimately lead to a place of resilience.

I don't see these scars as weaknesses. They are a reminder. They remind me that for every family drowning in paperwork, there is a profound need for someone to throw them a rope. My family's journey taught me that advocacy is that rope. It's not about grand speeches; it's about the gritty, unglamorous work of fighting for someone's right to simply stay home. It's a fight I am committed to joining, for anyone who needs a partner in their corner.

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Certification

I, Prajit Manivannan, certify that this essay submission is my original work and represents my own thoughts and writing.