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Freedom

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Maria Cabrera Yannotta

First-Place Winner

Creative Non-fiction Category

2019 Emerging Writers Contest

Freedom

January 23, 2019 was the day in which Venezuelan history and my life changed. The Venezuelan dictatorship regime started to fall apart, as we got a new interim president. I've lived my whole life under a repressive government, under a country filled with misery. On this day, my hopes of a better life for me and my family became real.

While I was walking that morning, I could not put my hands inside the pockets of my jacket, because holding my phone was more important than my cold hands. My aunt texted me "Maria, here's a YouTube link for you to watch what's going to happen in Venezuela". She was as excited and intrigued as I was about this important day in Venezuela. I opened the link right away and the first thing that appeared on the screen was a big crowd of people with the Venezuelan flag everywhere. The colors yellow, blue and red were the protagonists of the day, presents in every single corner of the streets of Caracas. There were protests signs everywhere, but something written in an old lady's protest sign made me feel powerful: "Nos quitaron tanto, que nos quitaron el miedo" (they took us away so much, that they took our fear away).

This was not the first time I watched something like this. In 2017 and 2014 Venezuelans protested for months, asking for peace and liberty. A lot of university students were murdered in the protests, including a boy who lived close to my house. I vividly remember the day that that boy got killed. The night before his death, I remember it was a week day,

so I went to bed early. The next morning, when I was getting ready for school, my mom came into my room and told me “you’re not going to school, look what happened”. She showed me an article from Twitter describing that the boy got shot dead by the National Guard while he was protesting. He had been killed very close to my house. The next couple of days I was afraid, I felt the fear, anger, and sadness in my bones. He was just 20 years old, the same age as my brother at that time. I could not process that something like this was happening for the sake of freedom.

On January 23, 2019 around 9:00 AM, I was sitting in the library, ready to study. My mind tried to focus on my psychology textbook, but I was not able to concentrate, because my mind, my heart, and my soul were in Venezuela. All I wanted at that moment was to be on the streets of Caracas, singing the national anthem and screaming out loud that they, the regime, should be afraid of the power that we have. But all I could do from 3,546 km of distance was to watch the news, support everyone I know in Venezuela and tell them to keep fighting. There were moments in which we, the Venezuelans, lost our hope, moments in which we did not have the power to fight against what made us swim in misery, but now we are strong, we stand up for freedom once again.

Time flew in the library. I noticed that it was 12 PM, time to go to class again. At that time, the president of the national assembly was about to speak. This was the moment everyone has been waiting for, and I was about to miss it.

At that moment, I texted my friend who lives in Germany “Corina, please send me a message as soon as Guaidó starts to speak”. She was watching the news too.

My phone started to vibrate repeatedly, but I could not check the messages because I needed to pay attention to class. Even though I did not check the phone since I needed to concentrate, my mind could not stop thinking about all the things going on. Class finished

soon, and I ran outside. My heart was beating fast and my legs were shaking. I checked my messages:

“Maria, he’s speaking right now”

“MARIA, WATCH THE NEWS”

“HE SWORE HIMSELF IN”

“I’m crying right now”

I texted to my friends “I can’t believe it” and I also texted my mom “Mom, do we have a new president?” and she confirmed the news I was waiting for: “Yes, we have a new president.”

I could not believe my eyes. Tears started to fall from my eyes. I don’t know if someone stared at me or not, but I didn’t care anyway. I turned on the news immediately and there he was, the new interim president of Venezuela. The president of the national assembly, Juan Guaidó, proclaimed himself interim president under the constitutional laws that dictate that if the current president of the country is illegitimate, the president of the National Assembly should take charge of the presidency. Although he is just a temporary president until fair democratic elections occur, this huge moment means that Nicolas Maduro is no longer president of Venezuela.

I remember walking, feeling strong and not caring about anyone or anything because this was the day I waited for so long. Since I was a kid, I have always felt that deep love for my country, a love that makes you cry, that makes you feel proud that you belong to that piece of earth. Unfortunately, I grew up with the same people governing the country. As I was getting older, my country was getting worse and worse, to the point that I had to leave my country, my family and my whole life behind in search of a better future. Opportunities that my country cannot bring me now.

I remember watching a video that morning showing all the wonderful things that my country has: landscapes, fauna, flora. The *Ávila*, a colossal mountain that divides two cities: Caracas and La Guaira. Also, the “Maracaibo Bridge” which crosses the Maracaibo Lake. There was another picture showing the indigenous people of Venezuela dancing in the state of Bolívar with “Angel Falls” in the background, and finally the beautiful people of Venezuela dancing and enjoying the moment. All these images accompanied by the most heartwarming song “Venezuela”.

I had a bittersweet feeling when I left Venezuela. I asked myself, why can't I have the opportunities and the life I want in the country that hugged me so hard all my life? And now, that country had to let me go because it cannot take care of me. Another daughter, another part of that big family left everything behind to go to strange lands, and all because of one word, because of the lack of one thing, what Venezuelans desperately need: freedom.

On January 23, 2019, I cried a lot. The last time I cried so hard was when I left my country, with the difference that now my tears didn't reflect sadness and pain, but hope, happiness, love, and strength; these tears reflected the freedom that's knocking the door on Venezuela right now.