

## Amendment 14

*~by Brooke Weaver~*

I wasn't looking for my life-changing revelation at 17, and I definitely didn't want one, either. Ignorance is bliss—or at least, that's what I thought...before. It was typical to let history remain safely confined to textbooks and overplayed History Channel documentaries. Sure, I'd cry during lessons on Women's Suffrage or the Civil Rights Movement, but the tears dried as soon as the bell rang, and the stories of struggle stayed behind in the classroom, neatly filed away while I moved on with my life. I would acknowledge a few threads of the hurt-stained quilt of America, then leave the past behind where I thought it belonged as if it never belonged to *me*. Before. That's how it always was—before today. Today, I saw something I'll never forget.

"Shh!"

Mrs. Barnard's sharp hiss cuts through the chatter as we approach the towering bronze doors. I shoot an annoyed glance at the group of boys yelping about something on one of their phones. Typical. Meanwhile, I *try* to look invested in this so-called "once-in-a-lifetime experience." I've already snapped my one-in-a-million photo of me blowing a kiss to the Guardianship statue from a respectable distance—no climbing allowed, of course.

The bronze doors to the National Archives groan softly as they open. After the flood of students before me, I step inside, and the change in atmosphere hits me immediately. The air is cool and crisp, carrying a faint scent of polished stone, old books, and something chemical. Everyone's shoes click against the marble floor,

echoing softly in the vast space, while the quiet hum of voices and camera clicks buzz in the background.

This place is *big*—bigger than I imagined—with towering marble columns and a ceiling that seems to stretch up forever. The walls are smooth and pale, covered in etched inscriptions about freedom and democracy. I feel like an ant—so seemingly small and insignificant compared to the world around me. The grandeur demands respect, and without thinking, I straighten my posture, trying to match the weight of the room. Slouching suddenly feels inadequate, inappropriate in a place like this...

*Beep.* The sound of the metal detector pulls me back to reality. I look up, realizing I've reached the security checkpoint. I get in line and slip my phone into the bin as I walk through the detector. The beep doesn't sound, and I move forward, relieved.

After passing through security, I amble toward a table at the far end of the room where a stack of maps sits. I grab one and unfold the stiff paper that offers a guide to the different rooms and exhibits and their contents. I choose my next room, fold the map carefully, slip it into my back pocket, and walk past the lobby's high, marble columns of neoclassical architecture.

The door marked *The Rotunda for the Charters of Freedom* opens to a round and even more impressive room. A small sign near the entrance bans flash photography, though I spot students sneaking selfies with George Washington. Some of my classmates are clustered near a massive display case, pointing and whispering about the Declaration of Independence, its faded ink barely visible under the protective glass. Others hang back, laughing at something on their phones, treating this like just another field trip. To my left, there's a map of the original 13 colonies, its edges browned

with age, encased in glass, and mounted on the wall. Nearby, a larger display case holds a Revolutionary War-era musket, its wooden stock smooth from centuries of preservation.

I notice people scribbling in tiny notebooks. A woman with a camera snaps pictures of a parchment document, while another visitor stands perfectly still, head bowed as if in prayer. The same loud group of boys interrupts my silent awe, yanking me back to reality. I walk toward the room's centerpiece—the Declaration of Independence—and try to focus on the tiny, barely legible scrawl. But Mrs. Barnard's stern lecture about respect pulls my attention away. I promise myself I'll return to this room later, but for now, I search the building for a quieter space, one where I can sink into the profound weight of history that's suddenly settled over me.

This new room is quieter, filled with the scent of old books and the low hum of the air conditioner. In front of me stretch narrow rows of once-vibrant, leather-bound volumes. I wander slowly down each aisle, breathing in the musty aroma of ink-filled pages, guessing the age of each book until something unusual catches my eye. A sleek black screen framed in iron leans against the wall in the far corner of the room. A touch screen—out of place, too modern, too clean—stands in contrast to the worn mahogany shelves and rich burgundy carpet surrounding it.

Intrigued by this eyesore of a device, I weave through the last narrow row of bookshelves and approach the sleek mass until its screen tilts just below my chest. Before my hand even touches it, the black surface flickers to life. A burst of bright white fades into a pale blue, and bold black letters flash across the display: *The 14th*

*Amendment, 1868.* Although annoyed by its abrupt activation, I feel a scruple of disappointment—this elaborate contraption for a mere amendment?

Below the title, words scroll upward in a Star Wars-style animation, fading into the distance: *All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside...*

*Blah, blah,* I think, as I recall my history teacher's endless lectures on the complexities of the amendments. If memory serves, the 14th Amendment guaranteed protection for any true citizen of the United States. The screen lingers on the full text of the amendment, the words fading into the pale background, and I wait, expecting something more.

But nothing happens. The screen remains blank white for an uncomfortably long time. I tap it, confused. That can't be everything this device has to offer. I tap again. Still nothing. Unwarranted teen-induced frustration bubbles, but then, almost instinctively, I swipe to the right.

The screen transforms into a vivid scene: a street corner where a group of women stand gathered, holding signs. They're dignified and strong, though their faces betray exhaustion and a flicker of fear. Men nearby shout and laugh, their taunts sharp and cruel. I feel an immediate urge to root for the women, though I don't yet know what their fight is about.

Suddenly, the scene warps like one of those old TV shows where someone enters a dream sequence, minus the whimsical harp sound. My vision blurs and a wave of dizziness washes over me. The air feels as if it's been punched from my lungs, my

feet seem to lose contact with the ground, and my ears ring with a shrill mosquito-like buzz. My heart pounds violently as if it's about to burst from my chest. And then—

My eyes remain shut as the smell of strong coffee fills my nose and warmth radiates between my palms. I open my eyes, startled to see a plate piled with eggs, bacon, and toast in front of me. My hands, wrapped around a sturdy cup of coffee—not the sugary Starbucks kind, but the kind with bitter steam that burns the nose—don't look like mine. These hands are wrinkled and rough, the hands of an old man.

*Where am I? Who am I?*

I try to move, to shake off this unfamiliar body, but I'm paralyzed in it. The only thing I can move is my eyes. I glance out the window and spot a backward sign that reads: "Election Day 1872." My stomach churns as I search for something familiar. And then I see it—the same street corner from the screen.

Outside, women stand holding signs, their bonnets tied tightly and sashes embroidered with "Votes For Women." They look tired but resolute, their shoulders squared against the jeers of the men surrounding them. Some women shift nervously under the scrutiny, while others meet the men's mocking stares with defiance.

Panic overtakes me, and I squeeze my eyes shut, willing myself out of this scene. I reconnect with my real hands again, and with all my strength, I yank them away from the cool screen.

*Zip!*

Suddenly, my feet land firmly on the burgundy carpet of the National Archives. I'm back. My chest heaves as I gulp down air, my heart racing. I sink to the floor, overwhelmed, and glance around, expecting a witness, but no one is near. This must

be some cutting-edge technology—surely a place like this could afford it—but shouldn't there have been a warning?

As my heart rate slows, I replay the scene in my head: Election Day, 1872, women fighting for the vote, 6 years after the 14th Amendment was ratified... What was this device trying to teach me?

Despite myself, I feel a spark of excitement. That was... kind of fun. Curiosity burns in my chest, and before I can stop myself, I stand up, reach out, and swipe the screen again.

A new scene appears: a mother is standing by her worn-out son, who is drinking from a water fountain. The screen starts to warp, and I shut my eyes tightly, bracing myself. My feet leave the floor, and I hear the mosquito-like sound and a quick zip before I open my eyes again. Quiet chatter fills my ears, and I see the same mother in a long yellow coat with her thirsty son.

I look down at my hands, gripping a newspaper that's being tugged by the wind. The date reads: "*Week of July 13–20, 1953.*" My hands are soft, dark, and wrapped in white lace gloves. This time, I start moving—although I still have no control of my body—toward the fountain. But before I can reach it, a burly man in a colorful sweater steps ahead of me. My feet stop, waiting in line behind him.

Curiously, I stare at the man, waiting for another clue to the puzzle, when movement from the water fountain beside ours catches my eye. The mother in the yellow coat suddenly grabs her son from the fountain, pulls him close, and stares at the man in front of me with an expression I can't quite pin. She whispers something in her

son's ear, then briskly turns him around and walks away. As she passes, she glances back and meets my eyes, and for a moment, I feel completely out of place.

Her gaze burns with something I can only describe as contempt. It's sharp, and it cuts through me. If I could move, I'd check myself—my clothes, my hair—wondering what's wrong. Confused, I look back at the man, who watches the mother and son leave for just a second before shrugging it off and continuing to drink.

Once he's done, he wipes his mouth with the back of his hand, nods politely at me, and strolls away, utterly unbothered. My body moves forward automatically. I reach the fountain, and then I notice it—a sign above the fountain that reads: *Colored*.

My heart drops. I glance at the other fountain, the one the mother and her son had used, and see the sign: *White*.

The signs leave my view as my head dips toward the water, but I can't shake the mother's look—the way she pulled her son away from me and the man, the feeling of being hated and feared. It's overwhelming and wrong. I close my eyes hard, willing myself to leave and focus on my real hands.

*Swipe!*

The scene changes and I see the same street corner where the women stood fighting for their vote and the building where the now-removed fountains were drilled against. The cobblestone streets are now replaced by asphalt, and the beautiful architectural buildings are torn down and replaced with cheap houses and construction zones. It's ugly and modern. Well...not quite—my hand holds a flip phone with the brand name Motorola StarTAC. With my right-hand thumb, I type XOXO to somebody, flip the phone closed, and start walking down the sidewalk by the same old building. I see a

bag lying against the stone wall, no, a human. From the rags, a head appears—a chiseled, tired, hungry face, with slick black hair. A fat man from inside the building walks toward him with a broom.

“I can’t have no drunk Indian laying outside my shop. You’re stopping business, the sight of ya. Get up.” He jabs him with the end of the broom. “Get up I say! You have no right...” and my body walks out of hearing and view.

*Swipe!*

My heart aches as the pieces of the puzzle fall into place. The 14th Amendment, meant to protect everyone equally, was never enforced as it should have been. It failed these people—three among countless others. Women, African Americans, and Native Americans were a few of many groups that were discriminated against—unprotected despite the promise of protection.

Yet, realizing how women now have the right to vote, there is no longer segregation, and tribes were given back money and land, I feel a small sense of relief, believing that, in modern times, the amendment has finally been fulfilled. This screen is telling me that the 14th Amendment, even though slowly implemented, was crucial to getting to where we are today. We’ve fixed these injustices. We’ve healed.

I step back from the scene and take a moment to reflect. A few tears trail down my cheeks, but they’re accompanied by a faint smile. I feel hopeful, even proud, knowing that we’ve worked to create a better world. Everyone is protected now, and I no longer have to witness such suffering. But then, a question gnaws at me: how could people stand by and let these things happen back then?

Feeling assured that I've reached the final moments of this journey—nearly at modern times—I swipe once more, expecting to see words that confirm my understanding of the puzzle. But instead, another scene unfolds on the screen. Before I can prepare myself, I am pulled into it.

The first thing I see is flashing red and blue lights behind me. I sit, small and tense, in a child's body, staring into the blinding rearview mirror. A man in the driver's seat turns to me and places a firm but calming hand on my knee.

"Stay calm, son. If you ever get pulled over by the cops, follow what I do."

My head nods automatically, and I place my tiny hands in my lap, watching what I presume to be this body's father. He pulls a card from his wallet, sets it on the dashboard, rolls down the window, and places both hands visibly on the steering wheel with a modern-times *Ford* symbol in the middle. The cop approaches, going through all the familiar motions I've seen when my own mother broke the speed limit once. The father hands over his card, his tone polite and measured.

Unprovoked, the officer pulls out his flashlight.

"Unlock your doors. I'm doing a search," he says.

"No, Sir, not unless you have a reason,"

The cop ignores him, opening the back door instead. My small body scurries to the far side, curling up and hiding. I feel the quick, warm breath on my upper lip, the tiny heart pounding in my fragile rib cage. All I can see is the back of the passenger seat, drenched in red and blue light.

"I did not give consent!" the father shouts. "I said, leave my boy alone!" I can sense the fear in his voice. I'm completely confused by the whole scene. The police

never searched my mom's car, and she was never as frightened or careful around the police as the father and his small son are right now.

I hear the driver's side door swing open. My head lifts just in time to see the man step out, phone in hand. Through the driver's window, I catch a glimpse of him raising it—then the cop seizes it out of his hand, grabs his wrists, and—

*Swipe!*

I can't take it anymore. Before I can focus on reconnecting with my hands, tearing them from this screen, and leaving it all behind forever, I feel an excruciating pain radiating through my body. I see my knees, poking through bloodstained rips in cheap jeans, are pulled tightly against my chest, my bruised arms wrapped around them in the fetal position. My back presses against a grimy dumpster, its vomit-inducing stench burning my nose. My stomach churns violently, threatening to turn itself inside out. My mouth is dry, bitter with a taste I don't recognize.

I hear footsteps before I see him. A man's legs come into view, and the body recognizes the presence before I do. With a sharp, stabbing pain in my...her chest, she hoarsely squeaks out, "Help."

His legs freeze. I can feel her struggle to lift her head—to look at him, to see his face. Finally, his gaze lands on her, crumpled against the rotting dumpster. Shock flashes across his tan face, stark and unmistakable.

"What happened?" he asks, his voice clipped, his tone suggesting he already knows whatever he assumes to be true.

"A man..." she chokes out, the words barely audible, her throat raw.

He crouches down, his knees cracking as he leans closer. His face comes into view: weathered, lined, and faintly concerned. His breath smells faintly of coffee and breath mints. His hands land on her shoulders, firm and heavy, pressing down as though trying to anchor her. I can feel her tremble, pulling her knees closer...traumatized. A shaky breath passes her lips and the man's face twists into disgust.

"You've been drinking... You need to pray," he says, his voice dripping with acidic conviction as if delivering some divine truth. This is not the response I expected. I expected him to call 911, to carry her, to yell for help, to do *something!*

"This is God calling you back to Him. He doesn't punish without reason. He's giving you a chance to turn your life around—but you have to take responsibility for what led you here."

I'm shocked. He believes this is *her* fault? Surely, God wouldn't punish someone this way. My heart flares with anger before sinking into hopelessness. He wouldn't leave her alone, right? This scene feels so personal... as if it's my burden to bear. Especially while living in the body of the victim—feeling her pain, her energy slowly waning. My thoughts spiral back to all the times older men got too close to me, too comfortable, and I always thought it was okay. It was normal. We weren't supposed to talk about it. Out of respect for them. Protecting *them*.

On this path of sudden enlightenment, I think of all the times people have insulted African Americans and Native Americans in front of me, online, and on TV; I went about my day as if it were just the way things were. I remember seeing Black men abused by the police on the news, treated like threats. I remember Native Americans

fighting to protect sacred land. But I never took the time to live in their shoes, until now. I almost had to be forced to see things through their eyes and I feel ashamed.

"I will pray for you," the man says, pushing up from his knees to stand. The body's head dips in exhaustion, in helplessness, as he places something beside her before walking away. Her heart races, as mine would in hope for her. I want it to be money, food, anything that could truly help her.

Her bruised, bloodied hand reaches for it, trembling from the effort. I feel how much strength it takes, as she pulls the object into her lap. A New King James Version Bible Mini. Her hand drops the Bible as her body collapses sideways onto the cold gravel. I swipe, desperate to escape the pain she's feeling.

I was wrong. We haven't completely healed. The 14th Amendment stands as an empty promise—a slow, agonizing work in progress that should have been enforced from the beginning.

Suddenly, I realize I'm not in any scene anymore. I'm standing, my hands pressed against the black screen—I've reached the end. I drop to the floor with an overwhelming tiredness, not caring who sees me. Warm, salty tears flow down my cheeks, into my sobbing mouth, and down my neck.

We've been lied to—told that we've come so far, that we've achieved equality, that America is the land of opportunity. But not everyone has access to that opportunity. I used to wonder how people could stand by while others were treated so terribly, but it's the same reason we still do: normalcy. Echo chambers of shared experiences, the glorification of our country, and the comfort of what is considered "normal" keep us complacent.

We tell ourselves that politicians and the “qualified” will solve these problems. But how can they? How can they know the weight of these struggles if they’ve never lived them? These money-making white men know nothing of the fear of a small Black child watching his or her father being attacked by the police. They don’t know the suffocating pressure of cultural erasure, leaving Native Americans broken, turning to alcohol, or being forced onto the streets. They don’t know the crushing loneliness of a woman standing alone in a courtroom, wondering whether justice is worth the shame it brings her.

I wasn’t expecting my revelation at 17, but ignorance, in fact, isn’t bliss. Ignorance is turning a blind eye to discrimination, starvation, homelessness, and cultural appropriation because it’s too hard to stomach. Ignorance is letting oneself be told things are normal without questioning the fact that normal and right aren’t synonymous. Ignorance is believing that America’s problems are someone else’s responsibility. My revelation is this: my problems are America’s problems, and America’s problems are now mine.