

The Believer

I can hardly believe that I made it to America alive. My name is “Shin,” which means belief. I did not have much belief before I came here, to the United States of America.

I was born and raised in North Korea. My family farmed, but the drought shrank our crops greatly. My father had also died in my late teens without leaving my family any money. Because of that, I was only twenty-two years old when I decided to find work. I bribed my way onto a list of government-sponsored painters going to Russia. I arrived in Vladivostok, Russia, and became a house painter. After years of working there and sending my hard-earned money back home to my impoverished family, I learned that the government was taking almost all of the earnings I was sending back. I overheard a sailor from North Korea gossiping that the painters’ families were still starving, and that a group of them were caught stealing food and were publicly executed. He then told his friend the list of names of the deceased families. I heard my family's name spoken. I was devastated, because my family had died.

After processing the horrible news, I decided to make a new life in a new country. A Russian cargo ship captain told me and a few others that America welcomed refugees. I was confused. In North Korea, I heard that Americans were monsters that wanted to kill us! I then thought, “Even if they do want to kill us, it will not matter. After all, I have nothing to lose. I might as well take the chance.” I offered to bribe the captain with my savings to take me to America. He agreed, and I was assigned as the dishwasher in the galley. Frantic thoughts continued to run through my mind before we left. “What if he turns me in to the North Korean guards? He may throw me overboard! I hope that he keeps his promise. All I can do is trust and believe that he will.”

After five weeks at sea, I arrived in Long Beach, California. I was soon found by a customs agent and I tried to explain to him that I was seeking asylum in America. He began shouting strange words at me and started to shove me to back to the cargo ship. Beads of sweat ran down my forehead. The Russian captain had already helped me enough, what if he took me back to Vladivostok? I would surely be killed! I felt as though I was living in a nightmare. I tried to resist and waved my hands, “No! No!” He finally gave up and motioned for me to stay there. He then ran and found another agent who spoke Korean. The agent led me through a series of immigration steps. Throughout the whole process, I was still distressed. I had no idea how I would find a house and job, but, the immigration office also helped me contact an organization that would help me with this. The organization settled me in a Korean-American neighborhood and put me in contact with a Korean-American social worker who helped me find work.

Several weeks later, I was living in an apartment and was working as a house painter. Even though I lived with the Korean-Americans who spoke my language, I felt out of place. I almost regretted coming here, until I reminded myself that if I went back to North Korea or Russia I would be executed. Although I did not believe that Americans were monsters anymore, they were not very helpful, either. I considered taking English lessons, but could not afford it. Finally, a Korean American neighbor in the apartment next to me started to converse with me. I found that he was a kind man, and he began trying to teach me English. He would come once a week, then a few times a week, then every day. He also convinced me to go to the Korean Christian church with him. After attending for a month or two, I began to feel welcomed, normal, and comfortable in my new life. Days turned into weeks, which turned into months, which turned into years. I then moved into a small house in the Los Angeles suburbs.

I am now thirty-two years old. I am still working as a house painter, yet over these many years I have greatly changed. I now have many friends and am active in my community. I often volunteer in community events and I talk to Korean immigrants who are afraid, like I was. In the future, I hope to go to school and pursue a new career. I also have a greater hope that one day, the whole world will have peace. No wars, no poverty, but true peace. In North Korea, I did not have peace or belief. Here in America, though, I am helping others find it, just as I had.

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