

A New Life of Hope

My friends and family were being killed because they believed in God. It had become too dangerous to be a Christian in our country of Burma. Many people in my village were being persecuted and killed because of ethnic and religious cleansing that had started in our country. This is why, one day, I gathered my most prized possessions and left with my husband, Ohnmar. I was terrified to leave everything I was familiar with, but I knew that fleeing to America would provide more opportunities for my family and me.

I was born and raised in Burma. Groups of families were escaping, but they were young and able-bodied. I was sixty-five, and my husband was sixty-nine. He was very ill. I knew that if we tried to escape, we might not make it very far. Because my husband was so weak, he would say, "Htet, you have to get out of here. You have to leave without me. I will only slow you down." I knew I could not leave him to die alone. We had a daughter, Mya, who by this time, had fled with her husband and two children to a refugee camp and maybe to America. Because my husband was so ill, our grandson had helped to run the farm. He would harvest our rice, beans, and vegetables, take them to the village market, and sell them. He would bring us back the little money had we earned. However, since my daughter's family had left, Ohnmar and I were unable to make any more money. It was very difficult to tend to the farm by myself. When our village was slowly being invaded, I knew it was time to leave. There were times when I would try and talk myself out of leaving, but after thinking it through, I realized that learning a completely new way of life was better than living life afraid of death.

I knew this was not going to be easy. With Ohnmar being so sick, it would be extremely straining to make the journey to the refugee camp. I remembered my daughter telling me about the process. We had to travel to the reception center first, to get an application approved to stay in the refugee camp. Once that was accomplished, we could go to the camp and apply to leave to America. Our plan was to harvest the produce from our small farm and take them to the market. When we had sold our goods, we would buy a little food for our journey, pack it in our car, and leave immediately after. I was the most frightened I had ever been in my life. If we were caught, we could be put in prison, but I prayed to God for the strength to persevere through this trial I knew we had to endure.

God provided safe travels for us all the way to the reception center. The journey was strenuous on poor Ohnmar's body. I could not imagine what it would have been like if we had to make our trek on foot. As we pulled up close to the reception center, I could see the line to enter the building was trailing outside of the door. "Lord, please let us get in tonight," I prayed. I helped Ohnmar out of the car, and we gathered our belongings. We walked up to the center to see if we could wait inside while we filled out our papers. We found a place to sit and catch our breath from the stress of a long day. We had been resting for a while when a woman came up to us and asked, "Are your papers filled out?" I nodded, but explained that we had not waited in line. I saw the woman's eyes looking back at me. She saw Ohnmar was very sick, and looked at my husband with compassion. She smiled at me and proceeded to say, "Your husband, he needs a doctor and rest. I will take your papers and get you set up as quickly as I can." Without another word, the woman took our papers and rushed away. After a while, she came back out again and said, "You are approved to leave for the refugee camp. We have a very nice, but small, hospital in the village there. Because of your husband's condition, we have arranged transportation for you to leave right away. God bless you. I am praying for you and your husband." The kindness and empathy of this woman's soul made my heart realize that in a world full of sorrow, there can still be glimmers of hope given to us by the Lord.

We arrived at the refugee camp, and drove to the hospital in the village. I did not want to leave Ohnmar there, but I needed to go to receive our rations and housing. I gave him a hug, kiss, and watched the nurses wheel him away. We pulled into the main area of the village where the office was to turn in our papers. I stepped out of the car and walked into the building. My heart stopped. I could not believe my eyes. There, standing in front of me, was my daughter Mya, and my grandchildren. I ran to greet them with tears flying down my face. "I thought you were in America!" I exclaimed. "We turned in our application, but we were denied. We have kept on applying ever since we arrived here months ago. Mama, I am so happy to see you," Mya told me. It was in that moment I realized that this process was not as easy as I thought. I was overjoyed to see my family, but I kept thinking, "Will we ever get out of here?"

I told Mya about her father, and after I turned in our application, we went back to the hospital to see Ohnmar. When I saw him, I immediately knew he would not make it to America with us. He was pale and breathing slowly. Mya rushed to his bedside and laid her head on her father's chest, gripping his hand as if for dear life. "I thought I would never see you again," Mya sobbed. Ohnmar lifted his head slightly to see his only child smiling at him. "Take care of your mother," he commanded, "Get to America safely, and thank God for his blessings." Ohnmar passed away quietly in the night. My husband was gone, and I felt helpless.

A few weeks later, I heard my application was denied, and I felt as if everything in the world was coming apart. I knelt on the dirt floor of my daughter's hut and cried out to God, "Please bring us out of this trial. Please bring us to America soon. Let us be safe and happy again." The Lord heard my cries and after a few weeks, my daughter's and my application were approved for immigration to America. We gathered our things and drove to our plane together. I thanked God for this miracle. In the midst of the happiness we felt for finally being granted this blessing, I felt sorrow that my husband could not be with us. He would have loved to make it to America and start a new life of accomplishment, but I believe God kept my daughter in the camp so I would not have to travel alone. I was very worried to fly on an airplane. I had never been inside one before. The thought of flying in a giant metal structure was not a thought that appealed to me. My palms were sweating and my heart was racing, but I prayed to God to give me strength. The flight was long and uncomfortable. I felt closed in and confined by thick walls. I decided to close my eyes and rest. As soon as my eyes closed, I fell asleep.

We arrived in America and were met by a team of people who told us they were going to help us navigate our new lives in our new country. We were exhausted from a long day of traveling, but I knew we were going to be alright when I saw my grandchildren smile. We arrived at our host family's house, and settled into our rooms. I was told that I would go to school the next day and begin to learn English, apply for a visa, and become an American citizen. It would be a long process, but again I was reminded of the miracles and blessings that God provides.

I walked into the school classroom alone. These were the times when I missed Ohnmar most. I knew learning English would be difficult even with Ohnmar here, but it would have made it easier to know we were both learning the same thing and could help each other. Learning English was very straining for me. Because of my old mind, I often times would forget everything I had learned in class by the time I arrived at home. I was frustrated that I was unable to learn as fast as the younger people. They all seemed to be advancing so quickly, and I could not keep up. Being behind in my English made it difficult to move on with everything in the process of becoming an American citizen. I was unable to read, write, drive, and speak. This made simple tasks such as going to the grocery store extremely maddening. I could not go

anywhere by myself. When I was living in Burma, I was independent. I could go to the market, talk with my friends, and make my way around all by myself. In America, I am dependent. I do not like the feeling of dependency. Not only does it make me feel weak, but it makes me feel old. Some people might say, "Htet, you are old," but I do not feel old. At least I did not feel old until I came to America. It was a relief to go back to my daughter's house and not have to speak English all of the time. Even though their family can all speak English, they still speak in our village's Karen language.

After living in America for seven years now, I am beginning to understand and speak English very well. I have begun working at a local grocery store and have finally become an American citizen. I wish my husband was here to see what I have accomplished, but I know he is smiling down on me from Heaven. I hope and pray to see my grandchildren thrive in America. I am thankful for the opportunities America has provided for my family and continue to thank God for all he has done and will do.

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