

Fleeing for Safety

Pain surged through my body and blood gushed down my side, turning the ground where I collapsed into a bloody puddle. I screamed for help. It seemed like hours, but it was really only minutes, before a villager heard my cries and rushed to my aid. He carried me to the home of the local doctor where they managed to stop the bleeding. Healing slowly came. The biggest heartache, however, was not my missing arm. It was the dreadful reality that, for our safety, my family must leave our country.

My sister, Dim-Dim, my mother, Dante, and I, Shreya, live together in our bamboo hut near the southeast border of Myanmar (also known as Burma). We are from the Karen tribe, and our people have long been persecuted by our fellow Burmese. Landmines are scattered around our war-torn jungle, and one day, I had the great misfortune of triggering one. I am very thankful, though, that only my arm was blown off. My father died from a land bomb about a year ago and some people at church are missing multiple limbs.

A loud rap woke me from my sleep. Mother beckoned in the stranger at the door, and they sat down, talking in low tones. After several minutes, Mother stood up and asked, "How would you like to go to America?" Dim-Dim squealed with delight, but my heart sank. I didn't want to go to America, however, I knew it was best for my family's safety.

Mother woke us early in the morning to walk the many miles to the refugee camp which was just across the border in Thailand. We arrived exhausted! The refugee village was repulsive. Trash was littered everywhere and the stench was sickening. Our "house" consisted of several tarps draped over some poles.

I was worried that it would take several months to get all the paperwork, but in four weeks our documents were complete. I had signed all my papers, before we realized Mother and Dim-Dim's documents were missing. Mother told me to continue to America without them, assuring me that she and Dim-Dim would come when their paperwork arrived. I reluctantly agreed, but two weeks later, I regretted my decision. As we said a tearful goodbye, I wept bitterly and rested my head on my mother's shoulder, comforted by her warm hug and kisses. I bid Dim-Dim goodbye and realized how much my family meant to me.

I was weary and overwhelmed when my plane landed in Los Angeles. My caseworker, Kennedy, was at the airport to meet me, along with an interpreter. She told me that World Relief was working to locate an apartment, but, for now, I would be staying in a hotel. In my opinion, most anything would be better than the refugee camp. As soon as we scrambled into the car Kennedy said, "A church group has provided some necessary items to get your started, and a couple people from their group will help you learn basic English." I was so grateful for such kindness!

Now, two months later, I am desperately searching for a much needed job. Every job interview has the same answer: "No." I feel so disheartened and discouraged. The government has provided a limited amount of money to get me started, and those funds are quickly disappearing. Money is a continual worry. In addition, transportation is a big challenge. I have to rely on public transportation since I don't have a license or a vehicle. Language is another ongoing struggle. While I have mastered some beginner words, I still have much to learn. I have discovered Americans have many unusual expressions that have such interesting meanings. Recently, on a rainy trip to the store, I overheard a lady tell her son it was raining cats and dogs. All I saw were raindrops pouring down. On a positive note, I recently discovered a nearby market that sells Burmese food. It is very comforting to have food such as Mohinga, my favorite rice noodle and fish soup.

Although my challenges are discouraging at the moment, I am still hopeful for this chance to start a new life in America. I want to make new friends, go to school, and get a job. I also want to help other refugees from Burma. I miss my family dreadfully, and my deepest desire is for Dante and Dim-Dim to arrive in America. I am very grateful to have a fresh start in America. It has not been easy, but, for the first time in my life, I feel safe!

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