

Loving the Strangers amongst Us

Written by U.S Immigration News
Monday, 04 February 2013 23:48 -



It was the coldest day of winter - the kind that real comfort come from a mug of hot chocolate and some comforters. My husband and I had just dropped off my assistant at the subway station in Jamaica, Queens. Even the usual hubbub of the place was tempered by the weather, as hundreds of pedestrians hurried towards warmer destinations. We watched as my young assistant reached the top of the lighted stairway and disappeared into the cavernous station. As we were about to drive away, we saw two women standing next to a taxi cab in front of us. What was unusual was that the women wore very light cotton clothing - no coats, no gloves, not even scarves. The younger one poked frantically in her handbag while she spoke to the cab driver through the window. The older woman stood next to her shaking uncontrollably.

My husband took \$20 from his wallet and handed it to me, "They are new here, take this money and pay the cab."

Bracing myself against the cold I got out of our car and walked up to the cab. I caught part of the conversation between the driver and the young woman.

Shooing her away with his hand, he said, "Get away from my car, you boat people. You come to this country and take away our jobs. Get away!"

She pleaded with him, "I lost my money, please take us home. Somebody there will pay you. Please sir, we are cold."

The scene filled me with indignation and I touched the young woman's arm to calm her down and turned to the cab driver, "How much is it, sir?"

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"I'm not taking these boat people!" He exclaimed before driving away and maneuvering his way into traffic.

I quickly led both women to our car. They got in and I turned up the heat. In tears the younger one explained that she had gone for a job interview earlier in the day, but lost the paper with their home address and did not know what bus to take. She had also realized that she had left her money in her jean pants at home. She had used a few coins she found at the bottom of her bag to call her cousin explaining their dilemma. The cousin promised to pick them up right away. They had been standing there for four hours in the dead winter cold - waiting. Finally they decided to seek help. They had been warned at home to talk to no one except to a cop or a taxi driver.

I loaned them my cell phone to call home. I could hear as their female host berated the young woman. She claimed that she had driven around the area twice and did not see them and since it was so cold she went back home. I took the phone from the girl and spoke to the woman trying to calmly get the address from her. I must admit that it must have taken a host of angels to keep me from yelling at this unsympathetic hostess. After sometime, the woman finally gave me the address. Curiously it was not too far from the station. In less than 5 minutes we would be there.

Oh, how my heart cried out for these two women. My husband and I tried to engage them in conversation. Only the daughter spoke, and I thought that perhaps the mother was mute or did not speak English. We learned that they had just come from tropical Guyana three-days earlier. Life had been very hard. Their father was very abusive. Her mother's cousin had offered to have them stay with her in America. It was a chance at a better life for both and an opportunity for the daughter to study. It seemed, however, that their New York family was not very helpful in preparing them for the weather. Except for a few warnings about talking to strangers, these women were definitely ill-prepared for other things. I wondered if no one in the family could have spared a coat, some gloves or a simple scarf.

When we finally arrived at the cousin's home, the mother came up to the driver's side and grabbed my husband's hands saying, "Thank you, thank you because if it wasn't for you we would have died. You are a blessed man." Besides the shock that she did speak and that she had a voice, we were overwhelmed by the sad recognition that she was fully aware of the unjust way in which they had both been treated. It was, to me, her way of saying, "Thanks for acknowledging that we are also human".

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The most outrageous aspect of this story is not that these women were treated unfairly, and that they were practically left to die in the cold. The most shocking part of this story, which I purposely refused to share before now, was that the cab driver's accent had betrayed him. I realized that he is also an immigrant. However, perhaps he was a citizen of the US and had benefited from the opportunities this country affords, and maybe has a house of his own and his children are educated in the American way, he has totally forgotten that humanity overrides citizenship.

We often forget that this nation is a nation of immigrants, men and women who crossed oceans, by air, land or sea in search of freedom and opportunity leaving their families behind. Nevertheless, they all, at different time periods, invested their lives and energies in the building of this great United States of America. But most importantly, we forget that it is our collective humanity that makes this country so great. Because citizens, nationals, "legals", "illegals", strangers, foreigners are all of the same human condition. It is our humanity that makes us all equal, for the truth is that we are all foreigners here. As quoted best from the Bible, "You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were all strangers in the land of Egypt..." (Leviticus 19:34 ESV).

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