

A STORY OF MODERN-DAY REFUGEES

This is an imagination of what Ruth's story might look like if it took place in the UK today. It is drawn from the real experiences of asylum seekers and refugees but it is not any one person's story.

Part One

Many years ago, a woman called Naomi moved to a new country with her husband and their sons. Elimelech had been invited by the newly elected president to work as part of the Ministry of Education. He loved his work and as the sons grew older, they followed in their father's footsteps and took up jobs within the Ministry. Naomi worked too, using her skills as a doctor in a local hospital.

All of them had many happy years together, establishing a life in their community. In time, the whole family applied for and were granted citizenship in this new country and they celebrated this milestone in the place where they expected to grow old and end their days.

Naomi met a young nurse called Ruth who she brought home to share in family meals from time to time. Naomi's son, Mahlon, enjoyed getting to know Ruth and over time they fell in love and got married. After a while, Elimelech and Naomi were delighted to welcome their first grandchildren, twins named Adam and Abigail.

Only a few years after the twins were born, it was time for elections to take place. The family and many others were concerned at the growing influence of a new hardline party. This party's manifesto was full of restrictions on what ideas could be shared in public life and proposed cuts to the education, social care and health budgets. Instead, they wanted to focus spending on the military, growing their strength to show power to neighbouring countries.

Elimelech and Mahlon were amongst some of those who campaigned the loudest against this party – making media appearances, and producing flyers and booklets. Sadly, when election night came the new party took victory (although there were many doubts about the validity of the vote counting) and the family wept at the future they feared for their country.

In the weeks that followed, many of those fears came to pass. Those who had been vocal against the now ruling party were arrested and many disappeared, rumoured to be killed by the military. The family tried hard to be careful and began making plans to leave the country. One night as Elimelech went to see a friend to arrange travel he was arrested. As soon as the family heard this news, Naomi, Ruth, Mahlon (and his brother Kilion) and the children fled in the night, leaving everything behind.

Part Two

As they had to leave so suddenly, the family were not able to plan a route, book travel, apply for visas, or pack luggage to take with them. Instead, they walked for 12 hours, crossing the border to the neighbouring country at night and drinking their water little by little so as not to run out. They

kept going until they reached a large city further away from the border and used all their bank cards to withdraw as much cash as possible. Finally they were able to pay for a warm meal and a hostel room to stay in to rest and think about what to do next.

The family chose the UK as their final destination – it was a country with previous good relations to the place they were fleeing, Kilion and Naomi spoke some English, and they had friends who lived there. With no documents and no way to claim asylum from outside the UK, they knew that the journey would need to be secretive and would be described by many as illegal but there was no other way to safety. They decided to use most of the money to send only the men, trusting that together they would stay safe and deal with the risks and rigours of the trek. Once the men had successfully claimed asylum, the others would join them.

The journey for Kilion and Mahlon was indeed fraught with trouble. They paid large sums of money to brokers who arranged travel at different points on foot, inside lorry containers, on trains, and in overfilled minibuses. They were often hungry, cold, and exhausted, they were tricked by brokers who promised much and delivered nothing, and they went for long periods of time with no way of contacting the women and children. In some countries, there were stories of gangs of men who looked for migrants passing through to beat and rob, and in others it was the police and potential arrest which they feared.

The men's final stage was to cross the English Channel in a small rubber dinghy. Fear and despair were high at this point – Kilion and Mahlon didn't know how long they would need to wait for the right weather conditions, which 'travel broker' to trust, and whether or not they would survive this part of the journey.

Finally, the day came when Mahlon used a borrowed phone to call Ruth and Naomi. Sadly, the news was mixed as he and Kilion had been separated into different dinghys. Mahlon had reached the UK successfully but he wept as he told his mother that her oldest son had died.

Part Three

Naomi had bad news to pass on as well as she had received word that Elimelech had died in prison. Many tears were shed as Naomi and Ruth held each other in their hostel and as Mahlon sat alone in the UK immigration centre.

Due to Elimelech's death, Naomi was able to apply for a resettlement scheme that was open to a small number of people from their country. With the help of a legal charity, she made her application and waited to be given a travel date. She felt a bewildered mix of emotions as she mourned and prepared, knowing that if her husband was alive this route to join her surviving son would not be open to her.

Mahlon had logged his initial claim for asylum at the immigration centre and the Home Office moved him to a shared house in another city while he waited for his assessment interview. It was a difficult wait and Mahlon struggled with loneliness as he tried to adapt to a new country. The accommodation was sparse and he had no money except for the basic £40/week allowance given

by the Home Office. He didn't have the right to work, he couldn't travel around the city easily, and English classes offered by colleges were only open to people whose claims had been granted.

The others living in the house were also asylum seekers and they told him about a charity which would help him with second-hand household items, clothes, and membership of a Food Hub. Someone gave him an old phone so that he'd be able to stay in touch with Naomi, Ruth and the children. He was also referred to a legal firm which offered free services to help him complete his asylum claim and prepare for the interview. In time, he found a church nearby and he drew comfort from being among fellow believers even though he didn't understand much. He began to volunteer with the Food Hub to have something to do and he joined an English conversation club offered by another church for people in his situation. Still, the wait felt impossibly long and Mahlon's prayers became more and more desperate.

Eventually, the date of the interview came and Mahlon came out of the 4-hour process drained but hopeful that soon he'd hear a positive decision and be able to bring the family to join him.

Part Four

After 5 hard months, Mahlon finally received the good news that he'd been granted Leave to Remain. It took another 9 months to complete the family reunification process and during that time Mahlon applied for housing and found temporary work as a night-shift cleaner. Again, he relied on charities and church to help and to keep faith with him through the times of despair. Some of the refugees he knew had become physically & mentally ill through the pain of waiting including one of his first housemates who very sadly died by suicide.

The joyful day eventually came when the women & children arrived and Mahlon was able to bring them to the small rental house they'd been allocated. They thanked God for the blessing of being together again, mourned their losses and prayed that they would find a way to make a new life in this place.

In time they found school places for the children and Ruth found part-time work at a community café. Mahlon looked for better jobs but struggled as he was limited by his lack of language qualifications. He really wanted to be able to put his time into studying English properly but this wasn't possible while the family needed his salary to survive.

Through her work Ruth met a retired GP called Boaz. He was impressed by how dedicated she was, often staying beyond her hours to talk to people. She seemed to have a real gift for connecting with people and helping them with their problems. As Boaz talked to Ruth he learned about her previous experience as a nurse. The following week he called her aside and told her about a program he'd found which would allow her to convert her nursing qualifications into ones recognised in the UK. He offered to help with the application and write a personal letter of recommendation to the program directors.

Ruth and the family decided to pursue this and thanks to Boaz's reference, she was accepted onto the next intake. After 6 months of studying, exams and placements, she found a full-time job in a nearby hospital and the family rejoiced at God's provision through her hard work. Mahlon was able

to leave his night-shifts and study English while Naomi filled the childcare gaps and volunteered at the community café alongside Boaz.

The following year as the children began secondary school, the family celebrated Ruth's promotion to head nurse of her ward as well as Mahlon's graduation with a diploma in English. He had successfully applied for a job in the college delivering the program of language courses and was excited to begin. And, joy of joys, Naomi and Boaz had moved from colleagues to friends to more and were making plans for a wedding in the summer! The whole family stayed active in their local church, walking alongside others as they faced highs and lows, knowing from their own experience that God was with them through it all.

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