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## A Refugee's Choice

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Every two months on a Saturday morning, I would wake up with the sun for a kind of ritual. This particular Saturday was cool, gray, and dreary; all of the colored leaves were now wet brown piles laying on the dead grass waiting for a blanket of snow to cover them. After washing my face, I went into the kitchen and prepared Uji, an African porridge. I sat down in front of my mother and readied myself for the next six hours: that's how long it would take to braid my hair. I would dread this ritual because the day was long, but even so, I anticipated the excitement of having a shared opportunity to strengthen my relationship with my mother. The highlight of this ritual was that, for the next six hours, I would get to hear African folk tales and sing songs in Swahili. On this particular Saturday, the topic of our family's origin and how we became refugees was heavy on my heart, but I was determined to ask about it.

Growing up, I rarely questioned my family's economic circumstances. We had very little, so I was taught and reminded to be gracious, respectful, and humble. As a curious child, I would often ask questions out of turn, and I eventually exhausted the question of my family's origin and how we had come to have so little. My queries often went unanswered – maybe because I was too young to truly understand. Whenever the topic of “home” was brought up, my mother's eyes would be filled with unimaginable sorrow.

While braiding, my mother would start each box-braid and I would have the responsibility of finishing it as she started on another. As we fell into this rhythm of braiding, I

turned around and asked her to tell me the story of how we got to America and why we chose to become refugees. Although this issue was sensitive, my mother decided that at the age of sixteen, it was right that I learned the reality of our circumstances. As she attempted to form words to explain her tale—my tale—tears began to well up in her eyes. I reached over, placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder, and said a silent prayer.

She started at the beginning of her story with her eyes gleaming. She told me about her family; she described how she was born in the Democratic Republic of Congo in 1966: the calm before the storm. She told me about her experience as the youngest of seven children and both the pain and the excitement she experienced as she watched her siblings leave home to be married. She told me about her first encounter with my father and how, after she was led to Christ at the age of nineteen, they fell in love with each other and with their mutual calling to ministry. She told me about the pain she endured with the loss of her first child, but the joy she received with the birth of those who followed. She described the estate she and my father had built; it was filled with fields of banana trees and acres of rich soil for her gardens. Then, with no hesitation, her voice became dark, her eyes shut, and she exhaled deeply. This change in her tone indicated the war of 1996. She described the anguish of watching hundreds of family members and friends heartlessly butchered by the ungodly militia; she remembered the smell of neighboring villages that had been burned down and transformed into mass burial grounds. She seemed to relive the moments she had stared at death—even at gunpoint. With nothing left of the desolate estate she had watched crumble, there was no choice but to gather her children and remaining precious belongings and join the endless lines of thousands that were fleeing their home country.

That is the story of how I became a refugee, but I was too young to know. I was cradled in the arms of my mother; I was safe. I did not understand that it was only by the grace of God that I received the opportunity to flee my home country and move to the land of the free. The journey to America was not easy. We passed through Uganda and were resettled in Nairobi, Kenya for three years. With persistence, prayer, and regular appointments with the United Nations Refugee Agency, we were finally allowed to resettle in Wisconsin. As my mother was telling me this story, she reiterated how God had been faithful through it all. She also made me aware of the fact that the choice to become a refugee of war is barely a choice but a decision between survival or sudden death.

No person has the desire to lose everything he or she holds dear and become a refugee. She expressed that “refugees” are people who are fighting for survival and striving to attain a better life for themselves and for their loved ones. The only difference between me and a person who is not a refugee is the location and time of our birth. I fell short of understanding the state of this reality until that day. My fascination with the world led me to read the news each morning. Every time I read anti-immigrant or refugee rhetoric, it belittled my family and me and disparaged our American experience. I am forced to revisit these scars each time I am bombarded with issues of immigrants and refugees at the head of every tabloid, but I am also reminded of the providence of God. I am grateful that my family and I are blessed to live among the free, because not all are fortunate enough to escape the bondages of war, poverty, and despair and attain their freedom.