

58. Example of Letter Home: “Five Minutes”

By Lin Lin, SOL 2004

What is five minutes to the life of an individual? The amount of time an alarm clock buzzes continuously before a summer intern wakes up in the morning. The amount of time a bachelor takes to microwave his Raman noodles late at night. The amount of time that elapses before a college student re-checks his email. But to one brother, five minutes seemed like an eternity...

During a staff meeting at Catholic Charities last week, we were informed by our supervisor that a new refugee family of three from Iran was to arrive at Albuquerque Airport at 3:00 pm on Thursday, June 17th. After some brief and rather interesting discussions, there was broad support to the suggestion that since this family had been through so much physical and emotional trauma during their long stay in the refugee camps, the first person they see in America should be someone who is “small and non threatening.”

Being one who is barely 5’1” with a petite body frame and a young looking face, I topped the rest in the competition pool for the honor of picking this family up from the airport. I was told that they will be resettled in Roswell, a town three and a half hours south of Albuquerque that is famous for its UFO museum and little else. The reason that this family will be going to this rather isolated town in the middle of nowhere was that the wife has a brother living there and he had insisted on taking them in. So with great excitement and little instructions, I arrived at the airport.

I walked into the waiting area outside of the passenger terminal around 2:45 pm or so.

Casually I checked the flight monitors and breathed a sigh of relief that the flight was arriving on time. My co-workers have been telling me horror stories about delayed flights causing case managers to wait in the airport for hours, or about refugees, confused and afraid, sitting inside the gates after arrival, while case managers worried outside at the pick-up area, or about miscommunications between refugee agencies and case managers, which lead to case managers' picking up of refugees from non-existent flights. Since I was doing well on time, with at least fifteen minutes to spare, I decided to get a cup of coffee. As I walked toward the airport cafe, a middle-age man of about 50 approached me. He was Middle Eastern and there was a tremendous amount of gray dominating his hair and mustache. His eyes seemed exhausted, with a little tinge of red, perhaps from excessive worries throughout most of his life, but more likely from sleep deprivation and insomnia.

“Excuse me, are you the representative from Catholic Charities?” He spoke to me in perfect English with the slightest of accents. “Yes, I am from Catholic Charities, and I am here to pick up a family of three from Iran. I presume that you are the brother?”

“Yes, I am here to pick up my sister and her family. She will be very happy to know that Catholic Charities will help her during this transitional period. For that I too am very grateful.”

As he spoke, I was struck by the sincerity and the graciousness of his tone, but at the same time, I sensed an absent-mindedness in his voice which hinted at nerves. “So how are you feeling? Nervous?” I tried to be as casual and as “non-threatening” as I possibly could.

“Oh believe me, nervousness doesn't even begin to describe the way I feel right now. I have not

slept well for the past three nights. I couldn't sleep. I got so terribly excited, yet equally nervous, waiting for today to come. I paced up and down the house, woke up the wife and all the kids. I started driving at 5:00 am this morning and got here by 9:00 am, even though her plane is not scheduled to arrive till 3:00 pm." He forced a rather helpless laugh, his eyes deep in thought for a moment.

"When was the last time you've seen her?"

"Twenty-seven years ago..." It was almost like a whisper. "The last time I saw my sister, she was 15 years old."

Subtly, I took out the little bio of the family that was faxed to me. Eighteen was the number written next to the age of the son. The nephew he has never seen is older than the sister he remembered. Silently, I folded the paper and stuffed it inside my pocket.

Just then, the flight monitor in front of us beeped and we both looked up and saw the status of a flight from Turkey changed from "on time" to "landed." The family of three was coming in from Turkey. Their flight from Turkey had lasted a little more than ten hours. Just as their stay in a refugee camp in Turkey lasted a little more than ten years.

"Ah, here they are. Finally." The brother's lips curled up for a moment into an almost half smile, but before it came into completion, it was quickly replaced by an unmistakable tension that clouded his face. The blinking of his eyes became more rapid, little drops of sweat appeared on

his forehead, and as if by habit, he relapsed into a zone where he paced back and forth in front of the huge flight monitors.

The first wave of passengers hurried past in clumps. Many were met by family and friends who had stood beside us moments before, while others raced to the baggage claim areas. Before long, the passenger passageway was quiet once again, with few occasional passersby. An old lady was wheeled out by an airport staff, and a couple of flight attendants chatted on their way out. A security guard walked back and forth. No family of three.

A few minutes passed in silence, and in the peripheral of my eyes I saw my companion raise and drop his head repeatedly, his eyes switching intensely between the flight monitor and his watch. He went into the nearby cafe to make sure that his watch showed the same time as the clock inside.

“You should be able to recognize my sister, she looks just like me.” He seemed to suddenly remember my presence, or maybe he was trying to solicit my help in locating the sister.

A second wave of passengers emerged. Countless strollers passed by, there were even families of three that excited me for a moment. But none of these trios fit our description. The child was a daughter and not a son, the mom had blond hair, the son seemed no more than 12 years of age.

“I don’t know which is longer, the past five minutes, or the past 27 years...” He was talking more to himself than to me, but it did cause me to look up. I couldn’t really see his eyes, because he was adjusting his glasses up and down, and for a moment, I thought I saw his palm wiping away

the mist in his eyes.

Another few minutes passed by, and from a distance I saw a tall, lanky teenager whose head and shoulders stood above all the rest. He caught my eyes because he looked so confused, so awkward. He walked a few steps ahead, then turned his head as if to converse with the people behind him. As he came into view, I saw a couple behind him, equally confused, and equally awkward. The woman carried a bouquet of fresh flowers in her arm, while the man stood next to the teenager and pointed to some distance ahead, either to give his son directions, or to ask him questions.

“Is it them? Is she my sister? My eyes are blurry, and I can’t see. Please help me.” My companion desperately pleaded.

But he did not wait for me to answer. In a blink of an eye he ran toward the end of the terminal, arms outstretched, as the woman with the bouquet shoved the flowers into her husband’s arm. Freeing herself from the flowers, she ran into the arms of her brother. The impact was such that it almost seemed like they crashed into each other. With her hands covering her face, she sobbed, while he kissed her forehead repeatedly, saying her name in Farsi over and over again.

I searched in vain for a physical resemblance between the brother and the sister. Perhaps in childhood they had looked alike, or perhaps over the years his memory had tricked him into believing that they had looked alike, but the truth presented itself differently. When he finally released her from his embrace and gazed lovingly into her face, he was taken aback for a

moment by the weathered face before him. Twenty-seven years stood between them. They had both aged, they had both seen hard times, and they had both lived lives without each other. There is much to learn and relearn, to remember and forget.

“New country, new life,” she spoke in broken English, but with a courage that had carried her through the years.

“New country, new life,” her brother whispered.