



Help Us Run Away... Please

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They were already in the flat for four days when I knocked on the door. I waited for close to ten minutes before one of the women came to the window, lowering the slat just enough to get a look at me.

With stomachs so wrenched with hunger, they were willing to take the risk to trust a stranger. A bag with three oranges, a loaf of bread and hard-boiled eggs that I slipped through the window was sign enough that I meant them no harm; but it didn't lessen their fear.

"The agent is coming!" she whispered through the window, eight semi-transparent slats of glass that could be turned on a hinge to reveal her eyes, mouth, chin. We couldn't talk for long so I asked them why they were locked up inside the flat. Why they hadn't been given food since they arrived.

"Because no one wants us. We're too old!" said Afra, the one who does the talking.

"Too old for what?" I wonder, but they had no answer. They came to Penang from Indonesia to work as maids. Once they arrived in their agent's care, their work permits weren't returned to them.

"Help us run away," Afra pleaded. "Before she comes."

I asked them if they had their passports, but of course they didn't. "Our agent took them." I paused a moment to let the words sink in. Tina, the woman who owns both flats across from me, my neighbour for three years, is more than just the quiet, fashionable middle-aged woman that she appears to be.

"I can't help you run away then," I said, words that made my heart sink even as I said them out loud. "Without your documents it will only cause you more problems." I told them I could help them to file a police report instead.

But they begged me not to, near frantic at the thought of going to the police behind Tina's back and risking a visit to the police station with no passports or a work permit. "They'll send us home before we can work and earn any of the money we already owe."

"I'll make sure they don't!" But before I had time to say another word, we heard the sound of someone coming up the staircase toward the door.

"It's her!" Afra said, closing the slats of glass.

I stepped back to the open door of my apartment as Tina arrived on the landing. I greeted her and watched her as she silently nodded her head. "That's a lot of locks," I said as she struggled with the keys, before she stepped through the door and closed it behind her.

Overcrowded Housing for Migrant Workers

Imagine you decided to take a new job in a foreign country. The company provides your housing; you're told it's a benefit. Once you arrive you learn you're living with 16 other strangers in a small three room flat! You have no space for yourself, no time by yourself; you share one bathroom, one area to cook food. Now imagine this is your home for the next two years — you have no choice.

Overcrowding is a serious problem for most migrant workers coming to Malaysia today. In a housing survey of over 1,000 migrant workers in Penang State, results show that greater than two-thirds (66%) share accommodation with eight or more people.¹¹ Many who responded to the survey indicate living with fourteen, fifteen, sixteen or more people. Regardless of what nation they came from or what work they do here in Malaysia, migrant workers face overcrowded living conditions; many face living in sub-standard conditions (outside toilet, a water pipe if any water at all, and shipping containers and even tents for shelter).

Workers have no say in their housing conditions, no say in the amount of money deducted from their salary for housing, and few options to resolve grievances about their living conditions. What is more, oftentimes as punishment or in order to control them, agents and employers will lock their workers in the home during the hours when they are not working.

Prayer

Time and time again, God, you remind us to be impartial when we consider the poor and the alien living among us. We remember your words from Deuteronomy 24:14 that "You shall not oppress a hired servant who is poor and needy, whether he is one of your countrymen or one of your aliens who is in your land in your towns" and Leviticus 19:34, that "the foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself." Father, remind us to treat foreign people more like our close friends and family, more like we treat ourselves.