

Red Ship

Category: New Voices

written by Livja Koka | November 16, 2021



A desperate
flight toward
something better...

Editor's Note: As New Voices' first editor, I am thrilled to launch Pulse's newest feature with this story by Livja Koka, depicting, among other things, the difficult choices that parents make in hopes of giving their children a better future. This story, we hope, is only the first of many accounts by writers whose voices and experiences have often gone unseen and unheard. If you have such a story to tell, we hope you'll consider submitting it to New Voices. – Olapeju Simoyan

Every family has things they do not discuss. The emotions are too real, the pain is too raw, the guilt is too intense, the denial is still too young to be interrupted. In my family, we have little problem discussing most things, except for the events of one dark day.

The date was March 19, 1997. The place, Tirana, Albania. I was barely six, so my memory of the day feels like a dream that fades in and out and has no finite beginning or ending.

A few weeks prior, the country had broken out in chaos, disorder and rebellion. Six hundred and fifty-six thousand guns, 1.5 billion rounds of ammunition and 3.5 million hand grenades were looted from army barracks. Every daring male aged ten and older possessed at least a few firearms and ample ammunition.

Taking advantage of the chaos, criminal groups armed themselves and took siege of entire cities. Gunshots and bloodshed plagued the streets. My parents sold every bit of property and borrowed money from friends and family

to pay our way onto one of two human-trafficking boats that would be sailing from the coast of Albania, to flee to Italy. The boats would carry hundreds of Albanians to a new land of opportunity.

When we headed down to the rocky beach, we saw a troop of brazen young men standing there, holding rifles up to the air, often casually pointing them at us while bellowing out commands. The young men tried their best to look bold and authoritative, but their trembling hands gave away that they were merely timid boys trying to play the part of powerful villains. They ordered the children and women to be separated from the men and commanded us to kneel down on the rough gravel.

They sporadically fired their weapons towards the sky to quiet the huddled masses and make us submit, but most of us were too accustomed to the sound of gunshots to flinch.

One of these men stood right beside my mother and me. He had thick, black curls, a strong jaw and a crass look in his eyes. I still meet him in my dreams sometimes. Each time he fired his gun, the bullet's empty shell landed inches away from my face. My mother held my head wrapped in her arms. I felt her body shiver and tighten around me, felt her deep sighs and fearful breaths with each gunshot. I felt my father's absence beside us.

Another girl wearing a flowing white dress similar to mine was wrapped in her mother's arms too. She was about my age. Mesmerized, I fixed my gaze on her. I needed to in order to distract myself from the intensity and confusion happening around me.

The curly-haired man seemed to be in a position of power. After firing his gun into the air once again, he kneeled down and in a kind tone told my mother we could head down to the first ship. His eyes softened as he looked into my mother's vulnerable, beautiful face.

As we started to crawl, my mother cried out, "My husband! Please let my husband come with me!" The man's expression changed. In a harsher tone, he responded, "Fine!" My mother called out my father's name in relief as he dragged his way towards us on his knees, then grabbed me tight. Together we crawled down to the shore with blood dripping down our legs.

We boarded a white boat that smelled of bitter metallic and damp paint in the crisp morning air.

An hour into the trip, an enormous red ship approached us, towering overhead. This red ship was full of confident Italian officers. Its purpose was to stop us from reaching Italy, dead or alive.

Loud sirens screamed from the red ship. Men on booming megaphones speaking in brisk, proper Italian ordered us over and over again to turn our boats around immediately. The thumping of my own heartbeat pounded in my ears through the siren's calls. I couldn't comprehend what was happening, but I did know that I had never seen that sort of panic on my father's face before.

Soon after, a red helicopter appeared, roaring above our heads. Chaos and

confusion, screaming and crying broke out among our people.

My father lifted me up in his arms and told me to wave to the helicopter above us. He told me that a camera in the helicopter was filming us, to say hello to my grandparents who would see me waving to them on TV. So I waved enthusiastically, with a smile on my face. All the other children beside me were waving too. It wasn't until years later that I understood the melancholy message our waves were meant to convey: *"Please do not kill our children."*

The Italian officers started throwing nets towards our boat's propellers. Some of our young men, with knives in their hands and rage in their eyes, jumped into the water to cut open the nets and prevent us from sinking. Our captain soon realized that we had no chance against the Italian forces and frantically turned us around. He screamed at us, pleading with us to maintain peace and distribute ourselves evenly throughout the boat, but the prevailing panic and shrieking sirens made it difficult to hear.

Though we did not accomplish what we had set out to do that day, our small Albanian boat had an okay ending: We made it back home safely.

The other boat did not. It sank, along with the hundreds of trembling souls on board.

I often think of that beautiful little girl wearing a flowing white dress like me. Although I looked for her on my boat, I never saw her. There is a chance that she's out there living a meaningful life and making contributions to the world, but more likely her bones lie quietly at the bottom of the Ionian Sea.

But tell me, who are the villains in this story? Who took the lives of the children who drowned that day, along with those in the many other boats that followed in the months and years to come?

Was it the Albanian people? Were they wrong to have no respect for Albanian law, though they lived in continual fear, victims of a corrupt government that robbed them of their youths' lives and offered nothing in return? Were they wrong to have no respect for Italian law, though the brazen Italian soldiers didn't hesitate to take the Albanian children's lives as they saw fit? Was it wrong for these parents to want to change their children's lives, to give them hope, safety, food, electricity, running water, security?

Or were the Italian officers to blame? What if they let every ravaged immigrant through? What would that do to the stability of their home country? How would they support all that hunger? How would that impact crime rates, and the safety of their own children?

There are things from that day that I understand, things that I do not, things that I never want to. I am hesitant to bring them up with my parents. As a parent now myself, I comprehend the gravity of making difficult decisions in impossible situations.

My parents took a chance in a moment of love and desperation. Whatever chances they took, whatever sacrifices they made, they did so because that is

what they thought was best for me, for my future.

When we returned home, we had nothing—no money, no jobs, no earthly possessions— but we had each other. We hugged and kissed, celebrating in the cold, dirty streets like we never had before.

That same night, my parents took another chance. In a convenience store, among the broken, flashing neon signs they spotted an advertisement for the US green-card lottery, which would allow selected families to immigrate and eventually obtain citizenship.

My parents, eternal dreamers, filled with youthful excitement after making it out of that ship alive, went into the store and tried their luck once more that day. Six months later, we received the news that we had been selected to come to the US.

So here I am now, twenty-four years later, raising a family, about to become a doctor, pursuing my passions. I hardly ever think about that experience. The full ramifications of its impact on my young mind are still unclear.

But sometimes, as I sit in my home overlooking the Brooklyn Bridge, my eyes instinctively catch a glimpse of a red helicopter soaring towards me, flying over the Statue of Liberty and around the boldly erect Freedom Tower. I feel chills run down my spine.

I think of the day my father lifted me up in the air to wave to that red helicopter, pleading for my life to be spared. I think of the shivering of my mother's arms as she wrapped them around my head to protect me from flying bullets. I think of how lucky I am to be here.

I think of that little girl in her flowing white dress who looked a lot like me.