

SHOW ME YOUR SCARS

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When John rolled up the legs of his pants, I noticed a long white scar on each of his shins. I had expected such marks, yet it came as a shock to see his scars as a survivor of human trafficking.

I met John in a clinic waiting room two days before Thanksgiving 2021. In a brightly lit room emptied out for the evening, we were both waiting for a forensic medical evaluation. But that is where our similarities diverged. He was the client, and I the interpreter. Dr. Nick Cuneo, the medical director of HEAL Refugee Health and Asylum Collaborative, had reached out for an interpreter for an

asylum evaluation. Despite knowing nothing about asylum medicine, I agreed to interpret.

John told his story during the three-hour evaluation, sometimes stumbling over parts, and sometimes explosively releasing what had been bottled up inside him. Fifteen years ago, he had arrived in the United States looking for better work and a brighter future. Instead, he had been coerced into forced labor for more than a decade as an undocumented immigrant, his passport withheld, and violence held over his head. He broke free six months prior—escaping with scars on his body and in his mind.

After clinic, I went home, but John’s story stayed with me. I arrived in the United States at the same time as John, but as a teenager. What I remember of the first New England winter was the presidential inauguration speech. Amidst the chills of a global economic crisis, the speech glowed with hope, the spirit of “Yes we can,” painting America as a shining city upon a hill for all immigrants. Young and ambitious, I wanted a better education beyond what was offered in Korea, and was fortunate to be able to study abroad in the U.S.

Alone and abroad, I was the captain of my ship. At times, I felt stranded, a castaway befuddled by strange

customs like the Thanksgiving turkey, and struggling to fit in at prep school half a world away from home. At other times, I was sailing in an ocean of opportunity. In college, I directed a student-run homeless shelter, produced a stand-up comedy show, majored in biophysics, and published cutting-edge neuroscience research. I felt I could sail beyond the horizon.

Yet, I noticed the growing cracks in the vision of America. The promise of an America open to immigrants soured to nativistic anger in the voices of news hosts and the faces of politicians. As I pursued permanent residency, the immigration process became more and more opaque.

At border control, I faced the limbo between foreigner and citizen in the secondary inspection room. At the back of the airport was a foreboding office with harsh lights and peeling linoleum benches. Wringing my hands, I waited for an officer to shout my legal name in mispronounced syllables. In the stony eyes of Customs and Border Protection, my story was reduced to my foreign name, my date of birth, and my Alien Registration Number. Thankfully, I knew that the nine digit number protected me in the foreboding office. The very same office for those without the numbers meant the threat of immigration proceedings and deportation. In these moments, I glimpsed America the unwelcoming, America the afraid, and America the hostile. I felt disappointed.

In my interpretation role in the asylum clinic, I saw hope. I was an immigrant and a physician trainee, but I had not considered what it meant to be an immigrant physician. In an era of nativist anger, the greatest vulnerability lay in those with uncertain immigration statuses and past trauma. I glimpsed a chance to help those seeking refuge, and a chance to find hope in America again.

Upon joining the fledgling asylum clinic, I ran its operations in the start-up phase. At the clinic, asylum seekers had a chance to tell their stories—often for the very first time—and brought the marks of violence inflicted on their bodies. The scars were linear, jagged, whitened, pigmented, raised, punctured, rounded in the shape of cigarette ends, and hairless from rope burns. The wounds came from faceless kicks, blunt clubs, and jagged knives. Some were recent, others decades old. They raced across shins, abdomens, backs, and necks.

The scars stemmed from political torture to anti-LGBTQ+ persecution, to sectarian and ethnic conflict to practices of female genital mutilation to gang and militia activity. In forensic evaluations, the scars on the body

and in the mind became the evidence of personal, yet global tragedies.

In documenting the tragedies, I found unlikely hope. In HEAL, I found a community of medical professionals, trainees, and interpreters—often immigrants and children of immigrants themselves—who advocated for the health rights of asylum seekers. The full circle closed with new Americans aiding future Americans. With their tireless work, the clinic evaluated nearly 200 cases in two years, taking on one of the highest volumes of asylum cases in the U.S.

The best part of my work at HEAL often comes long after the evaluation—as when an attorney e-mail announced that the judge had granted asylum for John, my first client. Every week at the asylum clinic fills with the prologue of new American stories, spoken in all tongues from around the world.

Now it is my turn to help the tempest-tossed. The torch of “Yes we can” is not extinguished, but rather carried on by new Americans. I, as an immigrant and a physician-scientist in training, will heal Americans, new and settled, for a more hopeful America.

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