

## IAN TREMBLAY | *The Illegal And The Refugee - An American Love Story* | Excerpt

It was during one such stop that he spotted something floating on the water about sixty or seventy feet from where he was treading water. He swam over to the object, and was astounded to discover that it was a thick beam of wood about ten feet long which had probably come off a dock somewhere in a storm and that the currents had carried out to sea. He lifted his body onto it, and it supported his weight completely. He was overjoyed, for he understood that this miracle piece of timber would save his life. For fifteen minutes, rested up while hanging onto it, and then he began to paddle with his feet and push the beam forward. There was no way that he was going to let go of that god-sent piece of wood; he figured that his paddling and the currents would eventually lead them both somewhere.

He paddled on for a few hours, and the sun got higher in the sky and hotter, and very quickly he became parched and sunburned. Sometimes he would doze off for a few seconds, but he would always shake his head and force himself to stay awake and keep paddling. At about noon he looked up and he thought he saw something on the horizon. Wondering if it was an illusion, he pushed himself up with his two hands using the beam as leverage. Then he saw it again: a shoreline. It was far away, but he was sure of what he had seen. It gave him new energy and he began to paddle faster. The shoreline slowly became more visible and nearer every time he lifted his head.

After another excruciatingly difficult few hours of paddling and pushing, when he had just about reached the limit of his strength, he finally felt land under his feet. He had been leaning his head on the beam to rest, and when he looked up, he saw a beach in front of him. He stood up hesitantly and began to make his way towards the beach, but fell after only a few steps. He had to crawl the final distance on all fours in the shallow water. He was shaking violently and every muscle in his body hurt him terribly. When he reached the beach, he fell face down in the sand and instantly passed out.

He was out for a few hours—he wasn't sure for how long, but when he came to, he was dehydrated and his lips were cracked and he felt terrible. It was late afternoon and the sun was lower in the sky. He lifted his head. His face was caked with sand, and he sat up and spit the sand out of his mouth and looked around with bewildered eyes. He slowly got up and saw that in front of him and to each side were tall apartment buildings. It was quiet; no one was around. For a few minutes he just stood there, wobbly and confused and unable to process his thoughts clearly. He had no idea where he was and he realized that all he had on was his underwear. He hesitantly put one foot forward and then another. His feet felt heavy, and every movement he made hurt him somewhere. He made his way in the direction of the nearest building and that's when he saw it—a shape that stopped him dead in his tracks, fluttering lightly in the late afternoon breeze. It was an American flag, and to Ernesto it was the most beautiful thing he had seen in his entire life. He just looked at it and smiled, and a tear rolled down one of his cheeks. He knew then that he had made it. He was in America.