

A Long Walk To Georgetown

By Alicea Jones

A young woman leaves Ethiopia for America and finds the journey more brutal than she thought

There is a reason why we don't know the future. If we knew the real cost of triumph before starting out to achieve it, we might run in the opposite direction. Thankfully, we never fully know the price until we're smack dab in the middle of the proving grounds. It's only as we look back that we wipe the sweat from our brow and marvel at how we made it. That's Meddy's story—a young woman whose youthful naiveté brought her from the Horn of Africa to Georgetown.

In 1985, Medhin "Meddy" Tekle began her journey to America on foot, wearing a habesha qemis, the traditional Ethiopian long cotton dress and a shawl. "Blend in," is what she was told. With the 280 birr (about \$200 U.S.) her mother had sewn in the hem of her dress and the identification papers secured for her by the local Catholic church, Meddy set out at dusk, following her paid escorts through wooded and mountainous terrain. By the end of the first night, she collapsed onto a makeshift bed of twigs and eucalyptus leaves. "The furthest I had ever walked was a mile, maybe," she said. They walked eight hours each night through low-lying podocarpus bushes and high standing thickets of 500-year-old African junipers with their long necks and airy bonnets. Night travel allowed them to elude government troops known to canvas the area for escapees. They slept in the sweltering heat of the day.

Born in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, a city in the northwest region of Ethiopia, Meddy was one of nine children. Raised by a loving but strict mother and a quiet but present father, Meddy and her eight siblings were close. They ate together, fought as siblings do and walked to school together. Most children in their village attended school but the future for Ethiopian young adults, especially girls, was bleak. Until they married, girls lived with their parents and didn't work or have a career because there were no jobs. The 1980s was a time of famine, drought and political unrest in Ethiopia with little hope for the future. Attending college was an option only for those who maintained a 4.0 average in high school. Of her eight siblings, only two went to university in Ethiopia.

Birth of a Dream

Meddy had seen picturesque photos of the United States and dreamed about living there. Two of her siblings had already migrated to America. Therefore, when she was seventeen, she decided to do what many people do in oppressed countries: escape.

Getting a passport at that time was near impossible. The only way out of Ethiopia was to escape through Sudan, a border country friendly to Ethiopian refugees. With her parent's blessing, Meddy set out on her grand adventure. "It sounded so easy," she said. You just paid the money and they (the smugglers) would get you to America."

Two weeks of walking had calloused the bottoms of Meddy's feet and torn off the nails of her big toes that now looked like matching leathery baldheads. One night, deep in the cool dark woods, lit only by stars subdued by an omniscient black sky, anti-government rebels intercepted Meddy and her guides.

The rebels whisked Meddy and her smugglers to their camp hidden deep in the forest. There, Meddy joined about 40 other men and women also trying to leave the country. “The rebels would (ask) us every day to join forces with them. They hated the government but did not force us to stay,” she said.

Meddy remained at the rebel camp for a month and when they were sure of safe passage, the rebels loaded her and the other refugees in a truck and drove them Gondar, a city close to the Sudanese border. There were hundreds of tents, spread across a dry, flat expanse, like dusty pyramids. The border guards rationed Meddy a sack of flour, lentils, oil, salt and a can of butter that she later learned, the refugees used to make candles. She ripped the stitches from her hem and hid the 280 birr under her pillow.

Lost and Found

The malaria that had been lurking in her body finally seized Meddy like a stalking wild dog and she laid in a hot stupor for several days. Her mother's admonition occupied moments of coherence; “if you get sick, eat garlic.” Meddy had forgotten to bring garlic.

One evening, a man who was staying in her tent knocked over a gas lamp and the tent caught fire. Meddy remembers being dragged out of the tent but it wasn't until morning, as she peered up from her bed of compacted dry earth, that she realized her money and identification papers, like her feverish body, had been eaten up by the fire.

After four months in the refugee camp, one of Meddy's cousins who had heard about her escape from Ethiopia, located her, finagled a release with the guards and drove Meddy to Khartoum. Even with the few Arabic words she had learned in the refugee camp, it was very different from Amharic, her native language. However, Meddy found work as a maid and with her first paycheck, bought a pair of flip-flops since she had been shoeless since the tent fire.

It had been eight months since Meddy had left home. Worried and needing to know whether she was alive, Meddy's mother sent her son Samuel to search for Meddy. He tracked her to Khartoum where he posted flyers in the district where he learned she could be. A month later, Samuel found Meddy. With an airline ticket secured by the Catholic Church, Meddy landed on American soil on August 2, 1989.

She lived with her sister in Maryland and found a job sweeping floors at Seven Eleven. “I didn't speak a lick of English so all I (did) was nod and smile,” she said. Meddy has worked for Seven Eleven for 22 years and is now franchise owner of the Georgetown store.

Watching Meddy work, one marvels at how this almost-five foot tall, thin-as-a-reed woman keeps up with such a busy operation. She monitors the eighteen-wheelers that fill the underground gas tanks, manages a rotating shift of employees and makes sure that the shelves stay stocked with pick-up-and-go merchandise. Meddy is living the American dream: hard work and business ownership. However, had she known at seventeen in Ethiopia, what it would cost to get to America, would she have still paid the price? Absolutely.