

# REFUGEE?

ESCAPE • REBUILD • ASPIRE

REFUGEES' STORIES OF  
REBUILDING THEIR LIVES  
IN KENYA

WITH FOREWORD FROM  
ERIC WAINAINA

ARTWORK BY LIYOU ZEWIDE    DECEMBER | 2021

EDITED BY: SOPHIE GITONGA • RAY MWIHAKI • JULIE ZOLLMANN • KIM WILSON



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**EDITORS**

**SOPHIE GITONGA | RAY MWIHAKI**

**JULIE ZOLLMANN | KIM WILSON**

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A refugee is someone  
who survived and who  
can create the future.

**Amela Koluder**

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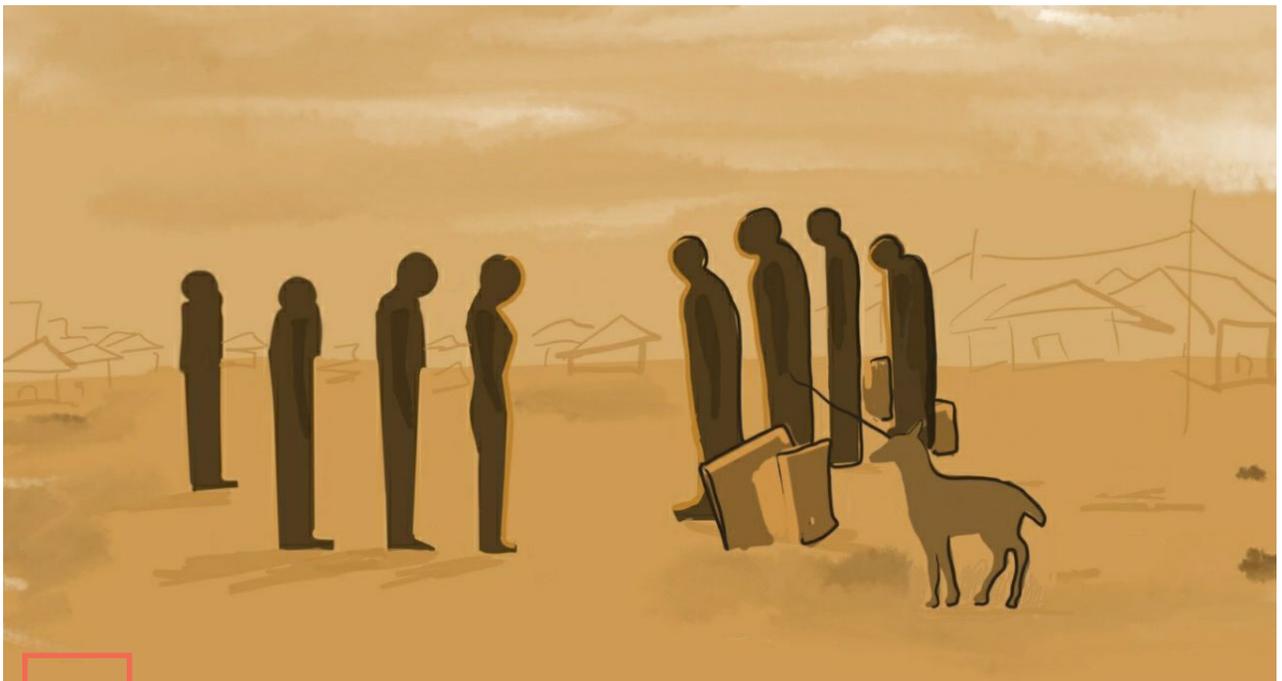
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Essay Contest



# Foreword



**I**t takes great courage to be a refugee.

The people of every single nation in the world are holding on to their way of life amidst changing political tides. You could be sipping a cup of coffee in your favourite restaurant on a tree-lined street in Aleppo or playing football in Mogadishu when suddenly, life as you know it ends. All you need, even in a city symbolizing democracy and freedom like Washington, DC, is for a gang of hardliners to attack the Capitol, and your vision of the most stable democracy comes crashing down before your eyes.

Refugees have helped shape the destinies of great nations around the world, when given the chance to become valuable contributors to their adoptive nations.

Being a Kenyan child of the 70s, I had the fortune of having many Ugandan friends and many Ugandan teachers who, by no choice of their own, found themselves exiled in Kenya owing to political unrest at home. Mr Bukunya's love for music steeped me in a tradition that would form the basis of the career I so enjoy right now. Tewodros and I breakdanced in the 80s and cleaned up on every dance floor. Christopher Kasozi Mukasa became the best friend I'll ever have and lent his middle name to my daughter.

As a student in the US, whenever I felt the pangs of homesickness, all I'd have to do is figure out how to raise the airfare to get home. I never had to dream about a home that I couldn't get to, that wasn't safe for me to be in. Now reflecting on Mr Bukunya's or Chris's struggles, I see how painful it must have been to pine for a land to which they could not safely, much less joyfully, return.

When I visited Kakuma in 2006, my guide explained that—remarkably—refugees had turned this patch of desert into a million-shilling-a-day economy. This, while we enjoyed a sumptuous meal at a restaurant of a family that had had to leave their home in a hurry. I met with musicians who had carried the histories and songs of their homelands only in their hearts, because when a rebel army is bearing down on your village, there is no time to pick up a drum. When you have to choose between carrying your young child on your back or your traditional drum, that really isn't a choice.

In this collection are the stories of others like Christopher, Mr Bukunya, and Tewodros whose courage brought them here, to Kenya. These are stories of those who build their lives anew every day, those who contribute to the million-shilling-a-day economy in Kakuma, and those whose pursuit for freedom has seen them excel in academics. *Refuge?* is a curation of courage, hope, and resilience that we can all learn from.

Be inspired.

**Eric Wainaina**

# Introduction

As of January 2021, more than half a million refugees were living in Kenya, forced from their homes by political violence and its aftermath in Somalia, South Sudan, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Uganda, and Burundi. While Kenya has hosted refugees since its independence, larger flows began in the 1980s, and by the 1990s, the government had begun restricting refugees' socio-economic freedoms.<sup>1</sup>

By 2014, the government had made it a criminal offense for refugees to travel outside of Kakuma and Dadaab refugee camps without permission.<sup>2</sup> Refugees are routinely harassed for their documents, often as they wait for very long periods for those documents to be processed or renewed by Kenyan authorities. While on paper, refugees have the right to work, in practice, work permits are issued extremely sparingly. Even refugees' ability to use banking infrastructure and M-Pesa have been curtailed in punitive reactions to terror attacks, which the government blames on its refugee population.

What does this mean for half a million human beings seeking dignity and self-reliance after being forced from their homes? About 86% of refugees live in two large refugee camps, far from Kenya's population and cultural centres, in remote and arid parts of the country. The average Somali or South Sudanese refugee has been displaced for 26 years, with many residents born into displacement, living their entire lives in the confines of these two camps, struggling to become self-reliant, to build full and dignified lives in a country that is a reluctant, often hostile, host.<sup>3</sup>

As we write this introduction, the Government of Kenya has threatened to close Dadaab and Kakuma camps, expelling all of its refugees. Their presence is being wielded as a foreign policy bludgeon, with the state capable of overlooking the reality that these are human lives. Often completely upended by shifting and confusing policies, the state shows little regard for its human impacts. The very nature of their refugee status, locks them out of formal political representation or any channels through which they could manifest their rights or push for policies that recognize and protect their interests.

Their struggles are often hidden from everyday discourse in Kenya, with refugee lives obscured by geography, language, and exclusion from local politics. Where they do enter public's consciousness, it is often colored by Kenyans' own frustrations with slow development, scarce jobs, and anger and fear in the aftermath of Al Shabaab terror attacks.

Thus, there is little domestic pressure on local authorities to uphold their international commitments to refugee rights and freedoms, little incentive for them to seek enduring and inclusive policies, and little chance for Kenyans to benefit from the diversity, investment, art, and culture that refugees are capable of sharing.

This collection of stories aims to make refugees' realities visible. What is it like to flee one's home? What is it like to be a refugee in Kenya? How does one build a new life in the absence of any place to really call home? How do financial realities create and constrain opportunities?



These are ordinary stories of ordinary refugees faced with extraordinary traumas. They are stories of coping and endurance. They are stories of occasional victories and of losing everything that matters, sometimes overnight. They reveal the precariousness of refugees' lives, subject still to bureaucratic violence, physical violence, and the endless uncertainty that seeking refuge entails.

Given all the uncertainties that refugees face, we have concealed their names and removed certain details from their stories. It's unfortunate that after finally being able to tell their stories, they still feel unsafe to share their names, some for fear of political persecution, others who worry their stories might jeopardize their resettlement prospects.

This collection is for Kenyans and non-Kenyans alike who want to learn more about how seeking refuge in Kenya is experienced. The stories here-in were gathered painstakingly by refugees themselves, some writing their own stories and others recounting their histories to fellow refugees helping them articulate their experiences. These stories come from refugees initially hailing from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, South Sudan, Somalia, Rwanda, Uganda, and Burundi. All of these stories were written during the Covid-19 pandemic. We found these narratives, 31 in total, so compelling that we decided to share them in the form of this collection. We thank the reader for your time in learning about their nightmares and their dreams.

**Julie Zollmann, Researcher**  
**The Fletcher School at Tufts University**

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1. Alexander Betts, Naohiko Omata, and Olivier Sterck, Refugee Economies in Kenya (Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford, February 2018).
  2. Norwegian Refugee Council (Kenya) and International Human Rights Clinic (IHRC) at Harvard Law School, Recognizing Nairobi's Refugees: The Challenges and Significance of Documentation Proving Identity and Status, November 2017.
  3. Sorcha O'Callaghan et al., The Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (ODI, September 2019).





# On the move

*For many of the displaced, finding refuge is not a simple journey from Point A to Point B. Uncertainty, fear, circumstances, and desperation often mean long, seemingly endless journeys through temporary homes, perilous sojourns seeking some place to settle. In these stories, refugees recount lives on the move and tell us about both the hospitality and threats they encountered along their journeys.*

# In search of a better life



*I was born in North Kivu province of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). I grew up with my maternal uncle, not knowing my parents who, according to my uncle, were killed because they were Tutsi.*

Narrated by Rosine, 38, Kakuma

**T**he details of their demise, though, remained scanty. My uncle's wife wasn't too keen on my going to school, insisting that I should help out on the farm, so I only went as far as Class 6 with my education, dropping out when I was 14.

During the same time, I was in a relationship with a boy called Benie. I liked his company but didn't think it was serious until I got pregnant. When my uncle found out, he said I had to marry Benie. I was a grown woman by then and could no longer live in his house.

My uncle's decision left me distraught; I didn't want to get married. We were both too young, Benie was 19 and I just 14. We were thrust into adulthood before we were prepared for it.

My uncle was also upset by the fact that Benie was Hutu; Hutus and Tutsis did not mix. So, there was to be no ceremony to mark our union. Benie's family members responded quietly, no pomp or fanfare as is customary in our weddings. Money was exchanged, and I moved into my husband's two-roomed, semi-permanent house.



*In 2005, fighting broke out in North Kivu, and we had to leave. Together with my in-laws, my husband, son, and I fled towards Rwanda. At the time, I only had \$120 which I carried in my wallet.*

It was a difficult adjustment but somehow, we figured out how to live together. Benie was also a farmer, so he leased an acre of land on which we grew potatoes, beans, and maize. In a bad season, we would harvest about 300kgs each of beans and potatoes and 360kgs of maize, while in a good season, the harvest for each was almost double. We sold our crops in 120kg sacks with beans selling at \$12-\$15, maize selling at \$8-\$10, and potatoes selling at \$5-\$7.

In 2005, fighting broke out in North Kivu, and we had to leave. Together with my in-laws, my husband, son, and I fled towards Rwanda. At the time, I only had \$120 which I carried in my wallet. When we arrived at the transit centre where the refugees were being processed, my in-laws were transferred to a camp in Gihembe while we went to Ngarama. Life changed dramatically for us, so we had to figure out a way to survive because we didn't receive much assistance.

There was a food distribution centre where we bought our food, and my husband and I realized that we could make a little money selling the food to customers and other retailers who operated outside the camp. We started with \$70, buying maize, beans, and cooking oil which we sold for a small profit. We invested the profit into the business, and within a short time, our monthly profit was on average \$36. This was a huge benefit to us because now we could afford additional items like clothes, improve our children's diet by expanding our food options, and

even save about \$6 a month. We made a perfect team, Benie and me.

Benie fell ill in 2014, but at first he wasn't badly off. When his condition worsened, I asked our friends from church to come over and pray for him. We had six children by then, and I began to worry he would die, leaving his children without a father. Our prayers, as fervent as they were, proved ineffective. Benie died, and our world fell apart. It was too sudden. I couldn't reconcile how quickly it happened, so I became convinced that something sinister had taken place. I didn't know why anyone would target my family because we got along well with everyone.

Life in Ngarama became a lot more difficult after Benie died. The children were taunted, because their father was a Hutu. The other children refused to interact with them. Their grades began to slide, so they stopped going to school altogether. I tried talking to them about what they were feeling, but they shut me out. Their collective misery was a huge burden on me, and I also began to worry about their safety. I started thinking about leaving Ngarama and in September 2018, we left Rwanda for Kenya with only \$200 to our name. We traveled via Uganda then continued on to Nairobi.

When we arrived in Nairobi in October 2018, I was suffering from abdominal pain and swelling. We were accommodated at the refugee transit centre where my children were cared for as I spent several weeks recuperating in the hospital. All my medical bills were settled by the refugee agency. After I was discharged from the hospital, we were transferred from Nairobi to the Kakuma refugee receiving centre. We stayed there about a week, then we were assigned two rooms in which we made our home. The rooms were six by three meters with iron sheet roofing. Our rooms weren't much to write home about, but they were a lot better than the tents. There however wasn't

enough food, the rations too small to satiate my large family.

The children struggled with the hunger and the heat, both of which were relentless. My two youngest children were now sick all the time because of malnutrition. I began looking for a job in the camp and with the help of a friend from church, I got one in a restaurant earning \$1.50 per day. This went a long way in improving our diet and the children's health.

My in-laws had resettled in Canada, and in December 2018, I was able to get in touch with my brother in-law there through Facebook. I didn't have a phone so I would borrow a friend's to send messages to him. You often hear of stories of women being abandoned by their in-laws once they are widowed, but that was not the case with me. Francois was sympathetic when he heard about our plight, how things had become difficult after Benie had died. He was kind enough to send me \$250, so I could buy the children clothes for Christmas, a phone for myself, and rebuild one of our houses. I couldn't believe it when I received the money. Finally, there was something for my children to celebrate after a long season of sadness.

This gesture by Francois lifted my spirits: the joy of being able to clothe my children; the freedom of having my own phone and registering an M-Pesa account so that I could receive money directly into it; being able to talk to whom I wanted, when I wanted without having to beg. I didn't know what I could do to show my gratitude. Francois continued to support us when we needed help, occasionally sending me \$100 when the children were sick so I could buy medicine or take them to the hospital.

While their support was invaluable, sending me money was not sustainable; it made much more sense for me to become financially independent.

We talked about what I could do towards achieving independence and agreed that starting a business was the best option. Francois liked my proposal of establishing a bar and restaurant and provided the capital of \$4500.

Around March 2020, I started surveying areas around the trading centre where there was a lot of foot traffic to set up the business. Fortunately, I was able to buy an existing bar and restaurant for \$3000. With the remaining \$1500, I stocked the bar and bought some new barbeque grills. I also hired some staff: a waitress who I pay \$60 per month and a cook who is responsible for making the *nyama choma* (roast meat). I pay him \$3.50 per day. Nyama choma is very popular here, so business has been good.

The older children help out in the restaurant when they are out of school, which has been the case since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. Just like with their father, we make a great team, and I appreciate their willingness to participate in the family business.

I put away \$100 per month as savings in my M-Pesa account, because I don't have a bank account. If I have any extra money after expenses and savings, I plough it back into the business. The main challenge to my business is the bureaucracy which makes the process of acquiring licenses long and expensive. Another challenge is the police who demand a bribe to allow the business to operate. They do not demand it explicitly, but everyone in the camp knows that if you want to be on the good side with the police then you have to pay about \$50 to the head of the community police for 'peace of mind'.

My children are much happier here in Kakuma. They are doing well in school and making friends. In the longer term, I hope we shall be resettled in another country where my children can have a better life.



# Starting over



*I've had to move a lot in my life, the security of home always eluding me. Even now in Kakuma, it's not a place one would wish to stay forever.*

Narrated by Imani, 25, Kakuma

**I** am from Rutshuru, a town in North Kivu province in the east of Democratic Republic of Congo. I lived there with my older brother and parents. Our life was comfortable: we lived within the trading centre in a three-roomed stone house that my father had built before he was married.

It was a typical house with a living room, kitchen, and bedroom for my parents while my brother and I shared the boys' quarters, adjacent to the main house. Building a stone house was affordable because the stones were readily sourced from the surrounding mountains. My father was a teacher and

raised dairy cattle on the side. He had an enviable herd: 40 Friesian cows and 70 of the local variety. He made frequent trips to the farm which was six hours from where we lived, and once a month I would go with him. My mother was a trader, buying *vitenge* (printed fabric) from Butembo and selling them to customers in Uganda.

Many children dropped out of school to work and make money. This was not unusual, and we even had a saying for it, 'ntamwana wigana inoti', a belief that if a child encountered money early in life, that was the end of education. For that reason, my own handling of money was limited. But money wasn't the only thing that kept children away from school; political instability fueled wars which led to school closures and disruption of our lives. Those who could afford it sent their children away to Kisoro in Uganda, so they could stay in school, which was what my parents did in 2002, sending me to boarding school when I was in Class 3. The adjustment was difficult; I struggled with loneliness and being in unfamiliar territory. I realized then that, although I was young, I would have to grow up very fast and be responsible for myself.

The wars were constant. Sometimes during the holidays, I'd stay in school with a few other students who couldn't go home for one reason or the other. We worked odd jobs like tidying the compound or tending the school farm in exchange for meals, accommodation, and incentives that went towards our tuition.

During the school term, I looked forward to seeing my family on visiting days. One day my family did not come. I had been waiting a while before I met up with a neighbour from my village whose child attended the same school and received devastating news. My village was attacked by rebels, and in the ensuing violence, my father was killed, my mother and brother displaced, and our

family home destroyed. I was distraught and felt helpless with no idea what would happen to me. I had no way of getting in touch with my mother and wasn't sure where she was.

After my father's death, I went to live with my maternal aunt and her two children. I was 17 years old. She was a single mother and took on the responsibility of clothing, feeding, and educating us on her single income. Like my mother, she was a trader, operating a general store in Bunagana trading centre. She bought goods from Goma and dry grains and cereals from Uganda. The cereal business was good, helping her turn a small profit. It was seasonal, so when there were no cereals to sell, she fell back on her regular merchandise.

She was an industrious woman, constantly reminding me about the value of hard work and that life was difficult. I knew that from my own life experiences and could see the challenges she ran up against in her business. The poor road network increased her costs as did the constant insecurity caused by the intermittent wars. We also grappled with the high cost of health care because of poor living conditions and a high disease burden. When the schools closed for the holidays, I worked in my aunt's shop, running errands, doing deliveries to her customers who sometimes tipped me, and learning basic accounting and record keeping. My older cousin and I also volunteered at a wholesale shop where we worked as shop attendants, managed logistics, and did inventory. Sometimes I was paid a stipend of \$21, and I would save my earnings in a sturdy, wooden savings box that I built.

Money was tight so we only got new clothes around Christmas time. For a long time, I had only one pair of shoes and a pair of sandals. My aunt would take me to the huge market in Goma to help buy supplies to restock her shop.



*After my father's death, I went to live with my maternal aunt and her two children. I was 17 years old. She was a single mother and took on the responsibility of clothing, feeding, and educating us on her single income. She was an industrious woman, constantly reminding me about the value of hard work and that life was difficult.*

One day while there, I saw a stack of black leather shoes. I ran my fingers on the stitching, turned them over, studied the soles, and tried them on. They were the kind of shoes that teachers wore, the kind of shoes that I just had to have, and for \$15, I finally could. Having money and the ability to buy what I wanted felt good, so I bought something else to go with the shoes: a long-sleeved, white collared shirt for \$12. People who dressed in white clothes looked smart. My aunt was impressed, proud that I did something for myself. I used my savings to buy some school supplies at the beginning of the school term with my aunt supplementing with pocket money of \$40 to \$80. After high school, my aunt gave me a cow and a bull from her small herd at home. In my culture, a young man receives a bull and a cow to mark his transition into adulthood.

In February 2014, our lives were thrown into disarray once again when our village was attacked by rebels. This attack was ethnically instigated with the rebels destroying homes and livelihoods in their rampage. My aunt had to abandon all her businesses including her cattle farm. Again as before, we had to flee to safety, and in the commotion, I was separated from my aunt and cousins. I lost my family again. I ran towards Kisoro where I spent the night. That morning, I saw some

of my neighbours, but there was no sign of my aunt or cousins. I had \$200 in my pocket, which was money I made from the sale of my bull, and I used this to travel from Kisoro to Nairobi where I was housed in a transit centre for refugees for several weeks. Later, we were transferred to Kakuma Refugee Camp in Turkana.

At Kakuma, I lived in the reception centre for 10 days while the UNHCR sorted my paperwork. I was assigned to share housing with two other men: a Congolese and a Burundian. The space was small, a three by three meter room; you don't get a lot of privacy. I was starting over again in a new place with no family or friends. Two months into my stay at the camp, I attended the funeral of a fellow Congolese only to run into my uncle, a man I hadn't seen in four years. You can imagine my surprise when he told me that my mother was also in the same camp. After all these years of wondering, of hoping, feeding that hope like adding wood to a dying fire to keep it going, she was alive and she was here! I made plans to visit them the next day.

Seeing my mother filled an emptiness I had carried for a long time. We asked the UNHCR to move me into the same compound as my mother and my extended family.

Being with my mother and uncle's family was wonderful, but life wasn't necessarily better. My brother, my maternal aunt, and cousins were still missing, and we struggled financially. Provisions at the camp were limited to food items, and I was responsible for buying mother's medication to treat her chronic back pain. She needed additional food to meet her special dietary requirements, and we needed money for any personal items. I desperately needed a job. My academic credentials from Uganda, however, did not qualify me for any jobs in the camp, and I was advised to take up additional courses to upgrade my skills.

*I hold onto my dreams and try to take advantage of every opportunity that crosses my path. I want to own an IT consultancy and hire young people within the local area. I also want to leave Kakuma and go to America.*

In 2015, I enrolled in an advanced diploma course in ICT with Don Bosco Vocational College and later, a certificate course in engineering with Purdue University. I got a job with an NGO as a warehouse assistant earning \$83 per month. With the encouragement of a colleague, I joined a *chama*, a micro-savings group used to pool and invest savings, where I contributed \$36 per month. When we started, there were five of us in the group, and we later grew to eight. Each month we come together, and one member receives that month's total contribution (\$258). It has been very beneficial to the members as a way to boost incomes and invest in other areas.

Without the *chama*, it would be difficult to get by on just my salary. The way the system is set up is that wages are harmonized within the UNHCR and organisations that partner with UNHCR, so even if I changed jobs or worked in a different department, I would still earn the same. When it was my turn to collect the savings pot, I bought a smartphone. With a smartphone, I could send emails, catch up on news, do research, and search for jobs, saving me long trips to the cyber café.

Through WhatsApp, I heard about another opportunity as a contract research assistant with a British university. That earned me \$719. With that and money from the *chama*,

I saved up \$1200, and bought a small piece of land located within the market area of the camp. I put up a semi-permanent structure, partitioned into two rooms which I rent out for \$40 each per month. I use this money to take care of my mother. In November 2019, I started a business through a friend who had an M-Pesa (mobile money) agency. I used some of my rental income, money earned from the *chama*, and another stint with the university.

Unfortunately in February 2020, I was swindled out of \$461 by fraudsters claiming to work for the local telecom company who were calling to sort out a technical issue. That loss hit me pretty hard, and I stopped the M-Pesa business.

When the Covid-19 pandemic hit in Kenya in March 2020, my job as a shelter monitor with one of the local NGOs was put on hold. I had also received a scholarship through UNHCR to advance my skills in ICT and was taking an online course offered by Google to become an IT technician. That stopped too. One of my rental units is also vacant, so my rental income has been halved. By July, the *chama* savings scheme also stopped because most members were no longer able to make contributions.

In life, you have dreams, make plans, and try your best. I have no way of going back to my village. With no news coming from there, I don't even know if it still exists. So I hold on to my dreams and try to take advantage of every opportunity that crosses my path. I want to own an IT consultancy and hire young people from the local area. I also want to leave Kakuma and go to America. I've seen what America can offer: more opportunities and a good life, which is all I've ever wanted.



# A dream deferred



*I was born a year after the collapse of the Somali government.  
I grew up in Gedo Province with my parents and six siblings.  
The country was in turmoil, with territories divided along  
tribal lines and militias in constant battle for control.*

Narrated by Zuhura, 28, Nairobi & Kakuma

**B**efore the upheaval, my father was a successful broker buying cattle from the pastoralists and selling them at a higher price in the market. His work was, however, subject to the vagaries of weather.

During droughts, the pastoralists would lose a lot of animals or move away from the area in search of pasture. They would be gone for several months at a time, and my father would have no work. Other times when the season was good, he would fall prey to cattle rustlers who would rob him of all his money. My mother was a housewife who spent her days doing chores and looking

after the children. Our education happened in fits and starts because our father couldn't afford to send us all to school at the same time. I attended madrasa for Islamic studies and some elementary schooling where I learned math and language. When I was 11 years old, I was circumcised. It is a rite of passage in my culture for all young girls coming of age.

There's a strong belief that circumcision suppresses women's sexual desire therefore curtailing premarital sex so much so that men will not marry a woman who is not circumcised. Now there is a lot more awareness about the negative impacts of

FGM and the long-term effects on women's reproductive health. People like my parents are slowly changing, having open discussions and rejecting the practice. My parents are now strong advocates in ensuring that their granddaughters are not subjected to FGM, despite the social ramifications. My experience was terrible, and it took me a month to fully recover. Though the physical wounds have healed, I still carry psychological scars.

During the war, the Islamic Courts Union came to power after the fall of the government to fill the legal and political vacuum. However, benevolent leaders they were not. They would raid cattle, kill civilians, and rape women, in the name of restoring control. The Ethiopian military would sometimes intervene but overall the situation did not really improve.

My father retired in 2007 and went to live with one of my sisters and her family. My mother did the same and moved in with another sister. In 2009, the sister I was living with fled to Kakuma, and I joined her two months later. My father and siblings helped raise \$330 to cater for my travel expenses. My father continued to support me financially until 2015 when he died following an illness. The details of what happened were scarce, but the news of his death was devastating. I had always been close to him, and his support was invaluable. There was an opportunity to join school in the camp, but without foundational courses, I did not qualify for admission. I felt humiliated. Without much else to do, I would while the hours away doing chores. I wanted to do something more with myself, but there were few opportunities for someone who spoke neither English nor Kiswahili. Sometimes my sister would let me work in her grocery shop. I was wholly dependent on my sister for all my personal needs. On the weekends, I would take Kiswahili language classes while also receiving remedial education

from my niece. Between that and working in the shop, my language skills improved, and I started to gain confidence.

At the beginning of 2017, my brother-in-law reached out to me and asked if I would be interested in moving to South Sudan to set up a café. The offer appealed to me, so after talking to my sister, we agreed that I should accept it. He sent me \$200 to cover my travel expenses, and I traveled by road from Kakuma to Lokichoggio and finally Juba. The café was small but located in a good part of town with lots of surrounding businesses. It was up to me to market the café to these potential customers. I didn't know the first thing about running a café let alone how to market one. I worried about not having the right words to say. When I finally settled into it, the business grew rapidly, and we were turning profit. I kept the money in a personal safe, wary of the banks because we always seemed to be on the brink of a recession, and the value of the local currency was depreciating fast.

That same year, I met a man, and we got married. Both my professional and personal life were going well, although I missed my sister. After my father, she was the closest person in the world to me. I talked to my husband about going to Kakuma to visit her, whether he would manage the business while I was away. His idea was that I should relocate permanently to Kakuma and set up our home there, because the cost of living in Juba was high. He wasn't up to running the café, so I spoke to my brother-in-law and with his permission, we decided to sell it and set up a grocery store which was more in line with my husband's interests. This sounded good to me so after selling the café, I packed up and made the move. It was wonderful being with my sister and her children. My husband would send me \$200 a month to cover my living expenses, so I wasn't a burden to my sister until I was able to establish my own home.



*My experience of FGM was terrible and it took me a month to fully recover. Though the physical wounds have healed, I still carry psychological scars.*

My husband would visit frequently, and every once in a while, I would go to Juba. The back and forth became cumbersome after a while, so once again we talked about me moving back to Juba. In mid-2018, I was back in Juba after selling the furniture and things I couldn't carry. My husband's grocery store was flourishing, and he had big plans for expansion which got me very excited. We even talked about starting a family. But first, we put our energies into the business. I had money left over from the sale of my furniture and loaned it to him so he could re-stock the shop. I didn't feel the need to work because he was taking care of everything.

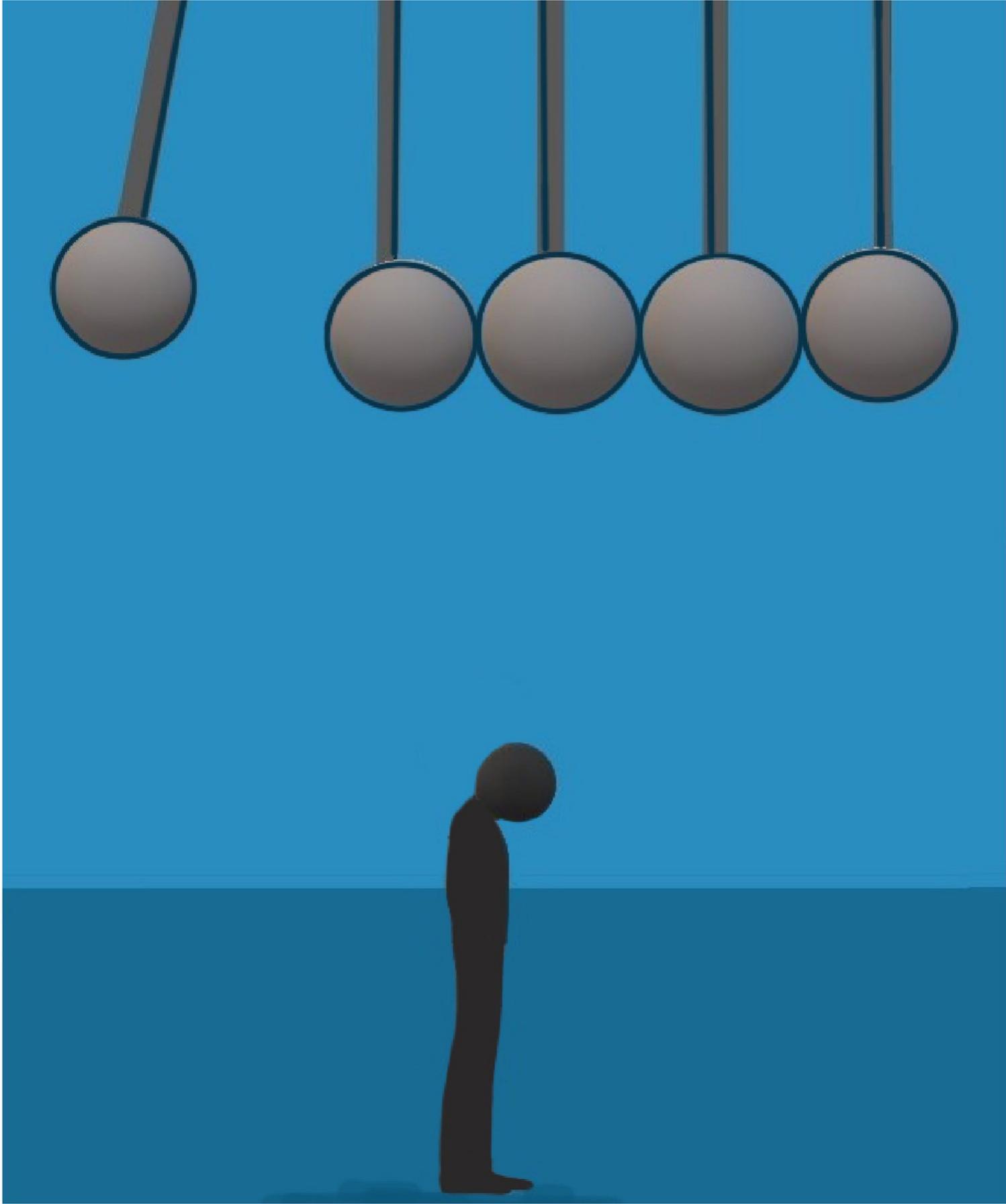
Things took a bizarre turn when he didn't return home from work one day. This was in early 2019. His phone was off, and every attempt to reach him was met with silence. This went on for several days, and I feared the worst. I went to his shop and was shocked to learn that his stock and assets were being seized due to unpaid loans. I didn't know if he was hiding from his creditors or if harm had come to him.

Without his income, I started to dip into my savings. Meanwhile, I continued looking for my husband, but he seemed to have disappeared. With my savings dwindling and after two months of unsuccessful searching, I decided I was better off in Kakuma with my sister. With the help of my relatives in Juba, I packed up my life and moved yet again. I was back to where I began: without an income and depending on my sister. I worried about my husband. I kept calling his phone, each time hoping he would answer, and I would

hear his voice. Where was he, and why had he left me?

My answer came three months after his disappearance when I was reliably informed that he had moved to Ethiopia, where he was now married to someone else. I was astounded. I asked for his contact details, and when I got them, I called him. I hesitated at first, what was I going to say? What would he say? My emotions pulled me in all directions; I was angry and wanted an explanation. When he answered the phone, I confronted him, and when he realized who was calling, he hang up the phone, then refused to take my calls. Finally I sent him a message to inform him that I wanted a divorce. He responded to that message with a refusal to my request. I didn't understand what he was playing at; he didn't want to be with me yet he didn't want to let me go. I wasn't going to hang onto to him. I went to the Kadhi court to plead my case, and after six months, I was granted my divorce. I was happy to be finally free of him, but the anger simmered. He robbed me of all the plans we had made, plans to have a happy family and successful life, things that were impossible to have in war-torn Somalia.

I lived with my sister for another two months then moved to Nairobi for a new start. My sister gave me \$60 to travel to Nairobi, and I moved in with my cousins. The timing of my move was not ideal, happening right at the onset of the pandemic. Jobs dried up fast, and I have not been able to find any work. I also don't have any money to start a business, which is something I would have done by now. The confidence I had before is slowly waning. Other refugees have been resettled in other countries, and I hear stories of how they are thriving there. Unfortunately, my applications for resettlement have not been successful. But life must go on, I can't stay bitter forever. I'm optimistic that things will improve and my goal right now is to raise some capital and start a business, because I know I would excel.





# Still alive

*Things were good when I was a child in Rwanda. My mother remarried when I was young, so I grew up in my grandparents' middle-class home. They had a big farm with crops and livestock. There was so much nutritious food and milk that I grew very quickly. My teachers used to even joke that with my height I could be the father of the other students. It used to make me cry back then to stick out, but looking back, I know I was lucky. My father was a chief and teacher in the village. I was his tenth and youngest child and the first of five for my mother.*

Narrated by Paul, 40, Nairobi & Mombasa

**E**verything was good for me until the violence of 1994. Two of my uncles had gone to Burundi to encourage refugees there to come home. When my uncles didn't come back home, we started to worry. Then we heard their bodies were found outside of a school near the border, on the Rwanda side. I knew I had to leave. I grabbed a 30kg bag of groundnuts from my grandparents' storeroom to take with me, hoping I could sell them in the camp across the border in Burundi and survive for some time. I sold the groundnuts for about \$5, which only lasted a few days. But then we got word that the camp was to be bombed. We found someone willing to help us cross to Tanzania, but we needed \$2 each for the trip, and we didn't have it.

A friend and I decided we would secretly cross back into Rwanda. The land near the border was fertile, and we could harvest some cassava to sell and get enough money to pay for our journey to Tanzania. It was a risky plan. This area was being patrolled 24/7 by the Rwandan military. We walked the three hours to the border and snuck across just after nightfall, around 7 pm. While we were doing our harvesting, we saw a military truck heading toward the river with the lights off. Throughout the night we heard the cries of people being attacked by the military for doing like us, harvesting from these fields close to the border. We were terrified at daybreak and hid, unsure of what to do.

Then, we started seeing others making their way back to the river with their own sacks of harvested food and decided to try our luck. As we made our way down to the river, we saw a man standing with a blood-soaked machete and froze, terrified. He told us to hurry down to the river. We didn't ask questions and kept running, unsure of what or whom he had killed. At the river, there were no boats, but there were fishermen on the other bank. As we surveyed the situation, we saw two men in uniforms with guns running our way. With no other choice, we jumped into the river. Fishermen were shouting, trying to coach us across: "Don't lift your legs, just drag them in the water!" I finally reached a boat, climbed in, and hid in the hull. I was holding tightly to my harvest. It was my ticket out of the camp.

Once we sold our goods, my friend and I left that camp for Tanzania having paid our \$2 fee. I was leaving my aunt behind. I didn't have enough to finance her journey or even leave her some pocket money. A week later, that camp was bombed and destroyed.

The genocide took everyone I loved. Within a few months, I lost my parents, many aunts and uncles, and most of my siblings. My grandparents were not killed, but they died within the year. They were already old, and it was so much stress.

In Tanzania, we first stopped at a UNHCR reception centre. I was hearing horrible things about the camp in Tanzania, and while waiting to be moved, I decided to see if I could find work in that town. I found a family who agreed to pay me \$2 per month to take care of their cattle. I did that for about eight months, until I decided to go ahead to the camp where I could at least go to school.

I settled in the camp with my new friends, three Burundians I met along the way. We hustled to make ends-meet selling beans,

rice, and maize. It wasn't much, but it sustained me.

At 16, I became incredibly sick, shrinking from 67 to 38 kilos and suffering from diarrhea. A doctor joked that I must have gotten HIV, though I knew it was impossible since I was still a virgin. The camp hospital couldn't figure out what was wrong and sent me to a German-run hospital in another camp. There were so many tests you would not believe, and finally they discovered I had tuberculosis, but without the usual coughing symptoms. They gave me a prescription for medication and special foods, but I was so weak that I couldn't walk or even take myself to the washroom. There was no one to take care of me back at my camp, so I asked the hospital to help me find transport to another camp, where I heard my brother was staying. There was no local transport, so one day they agreed to let me ride with the ambulance driver who would drop me after he took the hospital's corpses for burial. They loaded up the dead bodies with me on top. After the burial, the driver helped me look for my brother, and we found him after a couple of hours.

My brother was working for an NGO that ran a local hospital. He arranged for me to stay at the hospital and get therapy every day at the rehab centre next door. The staff were all so kind to me. What I remember most is a woman who came to the hospital with her son who was about my age. Realizing that I was an orphan and alone, she decided to look after me like her own child. She fed me, showered me, helped me to the washroom, and took me out into the sun. But after two days her son—in the bed opposite my own—died. She disappeared and I was an orphan again.

After several months, I was strong enough to leave. I knew I had to go back to my own camp. I wasn't registered here and couldn't



get most services. Plus, all my friends were in the other camp, probably thinking I had died. My brother and I hadn't been close. He wasn't reason enough to stay.

I carried some vegetables with me from the camp to see if I could make a living selling them in the camp. I had found something unique. These veggies are prized by Rwandans and Burundians, but no one else was selling them. The trouble was it was a seven to eight hour walk between the two camps, and refugees were not allowed to be traveling. I had to risk it for survival, making two or three trips per week. These long walks helped me fully regain my strength. Soon I was strong and making money. Things looked much more hopeful.

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The calm did not last. In December, the Tanzanian government announced a forced repatriation of refugees, and the refugee leaders declared that they would not go back. They started a mass movement almost overnight, all of us walking towards Kenya. The Tanzanian military came out in force. There were heavily armed vehicles and helicopters meant to intimidate us. No one condemned this. They just echoed the line that all these people—almost half a million of us—were genocidaires planning an invasion of Rwanda. Many people died along the way. It was horrific to see wild animals devouring human remains. After a week of walking, we were surrounded by the military near the border of Rwanda at Rusomo. When my group reached Benako, I decided to part and try to find my way towards my former camp. I ran through the forest, and when I reached the camp, I hid myself among the Burundian community, because at some point though I was Rwandan, I'd been registered as a Burundian and had a Burundian ration card. The friends I stayed with knew my identity, but still protected me. Things calmed down after about a month, and Rwandan refugees were reinstated.

A few months later, everyone in our camp was relocated, and that's when I started going to school again. I entered into Form 1, the first year of high school. I had to support myself at the same time, so I would borrow a bicycle to run as a taxi after school and on weekends, making about \$0.40 per day.

I started longing for a supernatural force to take over my life. I had a neighbour who invited me to his church. When I thought about the worth of my life and the fact that I was still alive, I realized God had been gracious with me. I surrendered and became a born-again Christian.

As I turned 18, I developed an urge for a change. I learned that there was a French curriculum school run by Burundian refugees in Kenya and made up my mind to go. I started saving more from my bicycle taxi and saved up \$30 for a guide and bus fare to get to Nairobi. It took us three days to reach Nairobi, and when I asked my guide for directions to the Adventist church, he refused. He said his work was done, and I was to sort myself out from there.

So I started asking around. I knew God's people couldn't turn me away. The first person I asked for help actually took me to the Ministry of Defense! The soldiers were shocked to see me and locked the gate. But even before I could explain myself, some well-dressed man asked where I was going and offered to help. He asked me if I was coming from Kisii (Western Kenya). I wasn't sure why he was asking, so I said yes. By that time my Kiswahili was good enough to blend in thanks to all those years in Tanzania. He walked me all the way to the church gate. The pastor agreed to ask the church board for support and gave me directions to the school and \$8 to buy food. Back then, in 1999, it was enough money to last about two weeks.

At the school I found some familiar faces, including some Burundian young men who I'd known back in the camp. These friends hosted me for a time until a church elder and women's ministry leader began to look out for me. They treated me like family, making sure my needs were covered. The church board also eventually helped pay for fees, which were \$35 per term. I also set up a small kiosk selling water, soft drinks, and snacks to other students. I got about \$70 per month from this, which I used on the rent (\$20) for my one room house, food, and other expenses.

I finally finished school in 2006 and started applying for French teaching jobs. I got

several clients as a French tutor and was charging about \$2-5 per session, which was bringing me \$70-200 per month.

With this work happening, I needed a bank account. I didn't have a full ID at that point, so I went to Refugee Affairs and asked for a letter to the bank manager giving me permission to open an account. They gave me the letter, and I added my ID details later. It is much harder to get a bank account now.

As I was earning, I moved to a better neighborhood, near Kilimani, where I started paying \$40-60 per month. I started a side hustle ordering from Congo batches of clothing costing \$500 each, then selling them at office buildings. I could earn about \$250 in profit from each batch. But, after the terrorist attacks in Nairobi security checks at offices had become more routine, and this became harder to do. I did a one-year training in interpretation and translation in 2008, and that helped me get some new jobs doing translation for companies and conferences.

This income was really good, and that made me think it might be possible to go to university. The fees were \$1500 per semester, but I thought I might be able to afford them. I saw a light on the horizon and felt like maybe there was a reason I had survived all those dark times. I applied for a programme in community development in 2009. I paid my first term fees with income from a translation job that had brought in \$3000. But the second semester, I couldn't pay all the fees. I asked for help at the Financial Aid office and tried to be patient. I missed a whole year of classes, but then, out of the blue, I was notified that an anonymous donor paid my fees and arranged work study plus a stipend of \$30 per month. I studied and helped out in the library and with administrative work until graduation in 2015.



I went back to my part-time contracts doing interpretation and translation. The pay can range from \$500-2000 per gig. Most of the work was for interpretation at conferences, and all of that stopped with Covid-19. I tend to live on debt and pay it off as soon as I get a job. I've tried some other things, too, like food delivery and even a bakery.

Once I was in Mombasa interpreting for a conference, and the more I looked at the place, the more it seemed I could start a business there. There were some other refugees from Burundi and Rwanda, and we were thinking we could start a bakery making bread with Rwandan technology. I put in \$2000, and others put in about \$5000 for this project. At first, things were good. We were the only ones selling this kind of product. But with time, the workers started their own bakeries and trained people to do what we did. We started facing challenges and brought in a new manager. But, the new manager put the business into debt to our Somali suppliers. I've been in Mombasa since April<sup>4</sup> trying to work out a solution.

It's not official, but I've now had a Kenyan partner for ten years, and we have two kids. It's a long time to be apart. My partner isn't working, so through this pandemic, things have been really difficult. There is no translation work, and I have to pay rent in two cities until I resolve the bakery's debts.

Ideally, I would earn a living from community development work. That's my training from the university. Some friends and I have started a CBO in Nairobi meant to empower refugees. We want people to be restored and to be made happy again. We've been trying to partner with other organisations to get some more programmes up and running for urban refugees, including training other CBOs to become more professional. At the moment, I'm just a volunteer, but we hope we'll be able to get enough funding to cover administrative costs.

There has to be a reason I'm alive, a reason God has led me to this place and given me these gifts. I think this work could be the reason I survived.

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<sup>4</sup> It's now September 2020.

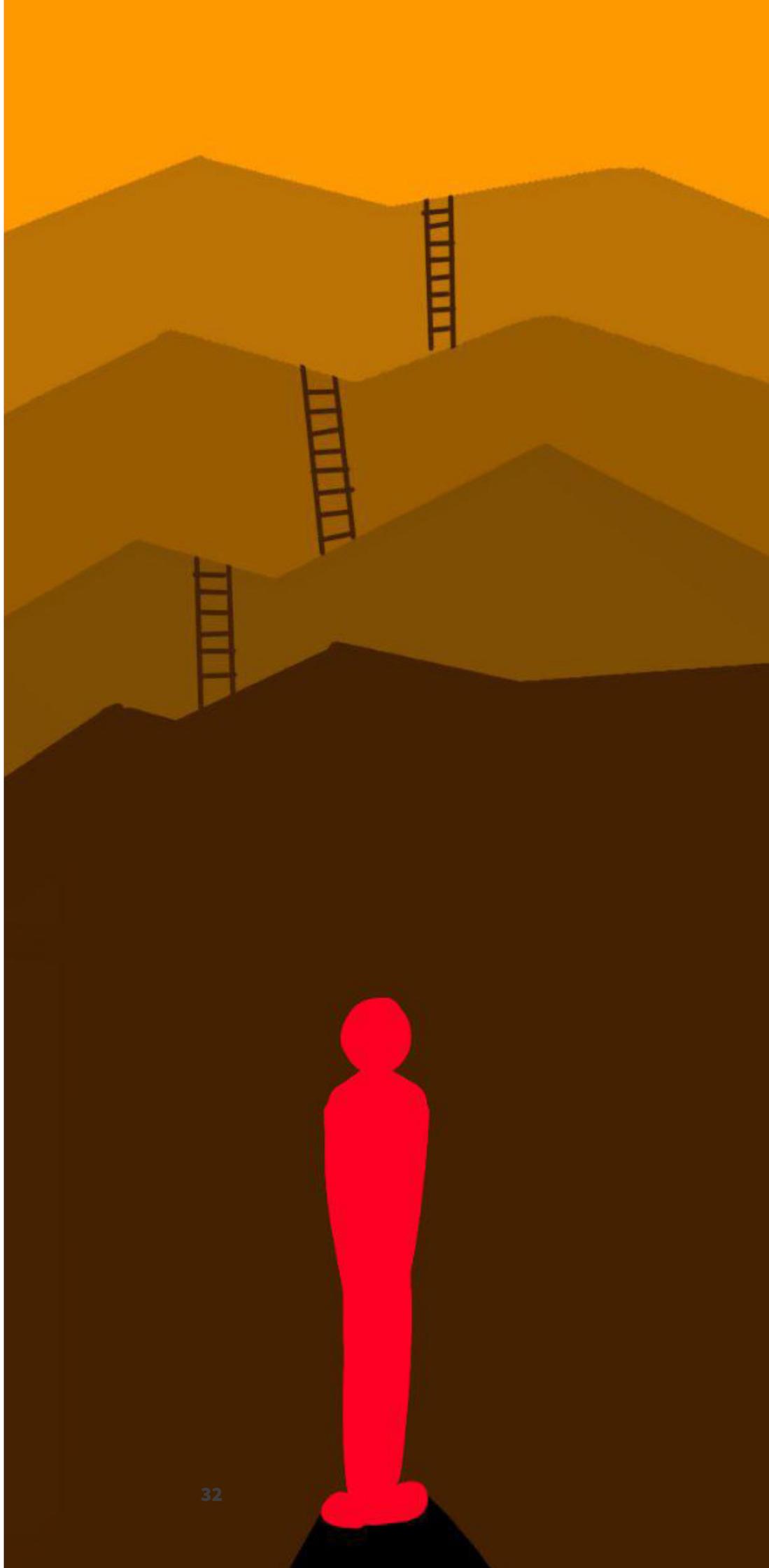
# Adrift



*When people are pushed from their homes by violence, very often they lose not just the physical place but also the people they considered home. When violence is sudden and family members lost, individuals are separated from their loved ones. Without the same phones, without the same phone numbers, without the same contacts back home, this loss can endure for decades.*



*Refugees can be unaware whether their family members are even still alive. When building their new lives in displacement, they are often forced to do so without their normal family support structures. Many mourn these ambiguous losses silently, and a very lucky few find lost family in Kenya's sprawling camps.*



# Forever alone?

*You see, I have skills, so I am able to do something to get money, but I cannot because I am a refugee. When I have proper work documents, I will be a big person, but for now, I can say I'm average. There have been some good times, but everything is uncertain.*

Narrated by Amos, 24, Nairobi

**T**his year, with Covid has been one of the toughest. I try to remind myself to just be grateful to be alive after all that I've been through. I never knew my father. He died when I was very young. So, growing up it was just me, mum, and my older brother. I used to sleep with my mother in the same room. One night she shook me awake at around 3 am. She was struggling to breathe. "I'm going to heaven now," she said. "Go wake your brother." Within days, all the aunties and uncles swooped in, not to take care of us, but to claim the family properties. When the dust settled, it was just me and my brother, alone. My brother was older, and I can't remember us ever just having a conversation. He was always too busy. He was into politics. It's like we didn't really know each other.

I didn't know it was possible to feel even more alone, but things soon got even worse. When I was still very young, my doctor told me, "I want to give you drugs which will help you to maintain your energy and allow you to continue playing football."

I liked to play football, so I took those drugs without much thought. But as time went on, I started getting hints something was going on. I met someone my same age who once said to me, “God has really done us wrong.” I asked him why. “Because he allowed this.” I thought, what is this? I was quiet. Then, when I was in Class 6, I was getting better at reading French. I took that paper from inside the medicine, and I started to read what that medicine was for. That is how I confirmed I have HIV. I was born with HIV, and my mother, my brother, they never told me themselves.

You would think things could not get worse. But then, even the little connection I had to a place and to a family was cut. I came home from school one day in 2015 to learn that my brother had fled the country. He didn’t leave any message for me, but that night, a man knocked at the door. He had known my brother and told me he would also help me escape. I didn’t know if I could trust him. He was Hutu, unlike me. Not knowing what else to do, I took a leap of faith and went with the man trying to sneak me out of town. But as we traveled, we were intercepted by the militia and held while they awaited orders on whether or not to kill us. For some reason, they let us leave and we hurried to the Rwanda border.

The guide had money for us to hide in a room for a few days. He kept trying to call my brother, but couldn’t reach him. We were running out of money. The guide said he would go for a few days to look for money. He said I wouldn’t be safe in the refugee camp, where people could hunt me down. We would make another plan when he got back.

But he didn’t come back. Three days passed, then four, then five. I was terrified, alone, out of money. I decided I needed to ask for help.

I watched the people on the street and looked for someone who looked kind, who looked like she might be in my tribe. When I found someone, I approached her and told her my situation. She helped me get ideas for how I could reach Kenya or Kampala. She seemed to think Kenya was safer, farther away from the militia. She gave me about KSh 5000 (~\$50) for bus fare and found a lift for me to the Uganda border.

Crossing the Rwandan border is hard, but if you are young like me and you have a strong heart, you will be okay. A strong heart comes from surviving problems, because you realize there is no other way. Either you live or you die. The border guards in Rwanda are strict and suspicious of older people, but if you are young, crossing is not hard. I got out of the car, and the driver told me to go and don’t look back. I passed over.

I made my way to Kampala and caught a bus to Busia and again to Nairobi. I still had some money left, so I walked into a small restaurant and ordered chips. I had never had them in my entire life. It was an amazing meal! I made it. I would be safe. I would live! But I also had nowhere to go. I slept outside the Simba Coach office, and the next day I decided to try and find someone else from Burundi to whom I could open up and ask for help. I listened for people speaking my language. The first Burundian I met took me in and helped me get a job as a security guard earning KSh 6,000 per month. It still wasn’t easy. The men I was living with were into drugs. Their life was not organized. Some days we would eat, some days, nothing.

In time, I decided to look for my spirit at church. There I met some other refugees and started to tell them a little about my life. One of my friends from church directed me to a hospital to continue my anti-retrovirals. The hospital also organized for me to go back to school and do a course in ICT.

*Crossing the border of Rwanda is hard, but if you are young like me and you have a strong heart, you will be okay. A strong heart comes from surviving problems, because you realize there is no other way. Either you live or you die.*

I was grateful to learn a skill that could help me build my life. After my attachment, the company where I was working offered me a job. I applied for a work permit, but after a year of waiting to hear back from immigration, the company rescinded their offer.

I was so disappointed. I had to do something to earn enough money to move out of that house and live alone. I took the little money I had and started to sell SIM cards for Airtel in the day and sell meatballs in the evenings. I needed both businesses to get by, but it was tough to balance. I didn't have a fridge, so I had to keep the meat at a friend's place, and spent a lot of time going back and forth. Then one day, I bought stock, and when I opened it, I could tell it was spoiled. I had to throw it all away. I gave up. I also tried trading forex, but that also failed. I didn't have enough capital to make it work.

Then I heard there was a better market for SIM cards in Kitale. I went there, and sales were so good! I could make \$400 in a month. But one day, I got approached by police and arrested for not having a travel document. I honestly didn't know I was not allowed to leave Nairobi as a refugee. I had no idea what to do in court. I was so scared! I just kept saying, "Yes."

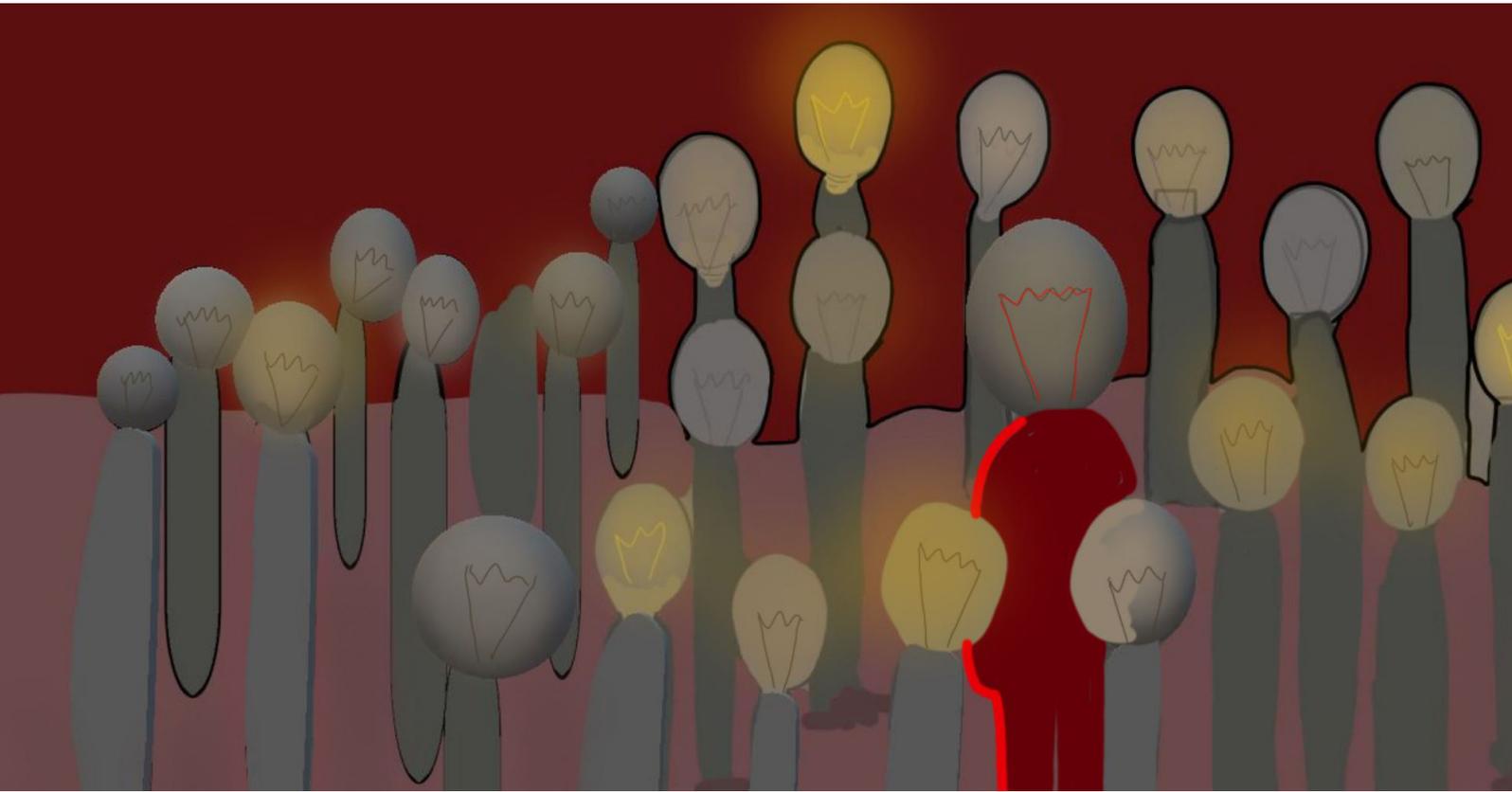
They decided my punishment was \$200 or prison for six months. I panicked. I didn't

have the money at that moment, so I went to prison. About a month later, I got my commissions from the sales of the Airtel lines. I paid \$170, and they let me go. But officially, I was still in prison, so they held my ID card. Even now, it's in Kitale.

I returned to Nairobi broke. I again tried my strategy of being open with my problems, and an NGO helped me get \$200 to start a business. I asked my pastor for advice on what kind of business to do. He introduced me to a businessman who could teach me "the secret" of trading in second hand shoes. I learned from him for a while, but then he took \$160 to buy stock, and the shoes never came. He says they are stuck at the port, but I don't know. Just like that, my chance at a new business failed. Life in Nairobi is like trading forex: one day you have, the next it's gone.

Worst of all, I am still alone. I have a few friends, but I don't tell them about my life. I sometimes talk to relatives back home, but if I say I miss them, it's a lie. They never helped me, never cared for me. I have learned that when I open up and speak, sometimes people will understand me. But with my relatives, I don't believe they will help me. It's painful to see my aunties, they have cars, they have big houses, even their dogs eat. But me, I sleep without eating. So to communicate with such people long distance, from my situation, it is hard, very hard.

All I want is to be stable. Maybe in five years, I will have a wife. That is my wish, and I will work on it. Maybe I will buy a car if the government will give me license. I don't know if I will buy a car, but that is my wish. I am trying to work on it. If it will be it will be.



# Walk a mile (in my shoes)

*Life comes at you fast. It is what you do in the face of adversity that will determine how you get on with it. Everything was fine when I left my home in Congo for school in Uganda. That my life would be so roundly turned upside down is an idea that would never have occurred to me.*

Narrated by Zawadi, 23, Kakuma

**L**ife was good, things were going well, I was getting my education, and it all seemed set. When I returned to our village and found our house vandalized and everything stolen, including my father's motorbike, I knew everything had changed. My father was a businessman who owned a general merchandise shop which he ran together with my mother. My

father's shop was our main source of income and supported all our needs, including school fees. My parents' house, built out of bricks and love and roofed with red iron sheets, was in shambles. Everything I had ever known was lying in a heap. I really cannot explain the feeling you have when you realise that everything you have taken for granted is no more.

In 2011 I was a 23-year-old Congolese woman and in my final year of high school in Uganda. In December, after my final year exams, I called my father to come to pick me from school. I couldn't reach him, nor my mother. I remember finding that quite odd. I couldn't go home as I did not know what was happening there. Fortunately, with the help of my French teacher, the school let me stay in the hostels from December to May. During this time, I made myself useful by volunteering to organize books and doing general cleaning. My friends were the other workers at school, and the school administration was kind enough to give me a weekly stipend which I used to buy necessities to help me through.

My French teacher had an idea. He would call my father's friend, a man named Bosco who I knew, and request him to come fetch me from school. After a couple of days, Bosco arrived and thanks to him and my French teacher, I got the funds I needed to return home. The trip to my village in South Kivu took three days which was when I discovered the vandalized, burgled house. I went to my father's shop in town and found that it too had been vandalized and looted. I was struck by a feeling of deep sorrow, and I started crying right there on the street.

Two good Samaritans, businessmen in the town, saw me and tried to comfort me. I asked them what happened to the shop and to our home, and they told me how the Mai-Mai, a rebel group, had attacked the town and how my family had fled before the violence. I was at a loss to know what to do until I remembered there was a family friend, a man named Mr Kataranya, who lived in Bukavu. I decided to make my way to Bukavu, a three-hour drive that cost \$10. I got there in the evening and headed straight to Mr Kataranya's home where I found his children. We were old friends, and I was warmly welcomed. They sympathised with my plight and were glad to see me. Later

that evening, Mr Kataranya came home. He, too, was very happy to see me, and he told me that all his efforts to contact my father had been in vain. He thought maybe our parents had gone to Uganda after several Mai-Mai rebel attacks in South Kivu, but there was no way to be sure because of the lack of communication.

In a surprising twist of fate, the following morning, Pastor Jean, who was also a friend of my father's, found me at Mr Kataranya's house. Pastor Jean was attending a Christian conference in Bukavu. He too had been looking for my father to inform him about 2012's scholarship opportunities at Annamalai University in South India where the pastor's daughter was studying. Pastor Jean registered my name, and I was called for the entry test, which I passed. I was given an admission letter to study for a Master's of Science degree in Integrated Engineering (MSc IT) for six years in India, which I thought was fantastic.

I was supposed to pay for the student visa and air ticket myself. Mr Kataranya and Pastor Jean helped me to sell what was left of my dad's shop and the homestead to raise the money. We got \$800 for the lot. Mr Kataranya and Pastor Jean were kind enough to each pitch in \$200 so I could have a total of \$1200. I headed to Kampala to apply for the visa, book the air ticket and do my shopping. On 26th May 2012, I travelled to South India with \$130 in my pocket. I was welcomed by Clementine, Pastor Jean's daughter. It was back to the books again.

While at university, I joined Clementine in a fellowship choir in church. In time, we started going out on outreach programs to evangelize. In July 2012, there was a three-day evangelical conference in Bangalore in South India where, during our free time, we toured the city and checked out the supermarkets and interesting boutiques. On our final day, we went by a ladies' boutique

*I survive on Bamba Chakula  
("Get Your Food" cash  
transfers) and food rations,  
mostly.*

where I bought some fashionable heels and ladies' underwear for 3,000 rupees (about \$55). These were to test the market back at university and I was lucky enough to sell them for a profit of 2,800 rupees (about \$51). From this initial sale, I built up a network, and the money I made helped keep me in school.

I received a call from Pastor Jean one day. He said, "Zawadi, I have spoken to your father." I was over the moon. He also told me he had given my father my Indian phone number. Indeed, after two days, my father called me, and how we cried over the phone! He told me that he and the family fled to Lusaka, Zambia as refugees and that in 2013 they were resettled in Sweden.

After six years at university, in May 2018, I attained my Masters of Science degree and returned to Bukavu, DR Congo. I first stayed at Mr Kataranya's while studying the business opportunities available in the small town. After two weeks, I moved to a rented room that cost me \$15 a month. With only \$500 from my father, I started a small business selling ladies' shoes. I decided on the business, because I was familiar with it, and there was demand. Finding a job was hard, because companies wanted me to 'volunteer' or work on probation for the first three months. This was impossible, as I wondered how I would survive that long without pay while also trying to run my small business.

I wanted a salaried position so that I could continue my business as a side hustle. It was

not easy at first because I was new to the business but, with the help of with the help of one of Mr Kataranya's daughters, I got supply connections in Goma in North Kivu. After a month, I was able to make \$150-180 a month, after all my expenditures including my \$20 monthly rent for my temporary street kiosk. The business was growing step by step. My hustle continued to flourish until December 2019 when, because of conflict and insecurity in Bukavu, I decided to flee to Nairobi via Tanzania.

On arrival, I was transferred to the reception centre in Kakuma Refugee Camp. I have spent about nine months here in Zone 3. A Burundian girl and I were given a three-by-six meter single-room house which we later partitioned so that each of us now has a private room. Through regular attendance at fellowships and youth meetings at our church I have made some new friends from the faraway provinces of Congo and Burundi.

Here, I survive on Bamba Chakula ("Get Your Food" cash transfers) and food rations, mostly. I have had some problems with medical bills, because the free hospitals in the camp do not offer timely care or have the correct drugs. Sometimes, when I am running low on food, my father will send me \$100 through World Remit to my M-Pesa account.

Recently, I applied for a job to teach ICT in a community organisation. Fortunately, I got shortlisted, and I am waiting for the interviews. I spend most of my time at home, listening to my radio and reading novels. Sometimes, my church friends come by to visit me. In the future, when I get more money, I want to own a stationery shop and start a web development consultancy firm here in Kakuma. Otherwise, I hope to one day join my family in Sweden. This is my best wish.



# *hopeful* The merchant

*I was born in 1983 in a town in North Kivu in the Democratic Republic of Congo. I'm the second of six children: one girl and five boys. My parents were farmers. We had huge tracts of land for agriculture, 300 cows, goats, and sheep.*

Narrated by Abdi, 37, Nairobi

**M**y parents named me Abdi. Growing up, life revolved around school and the farm, herding cattle with my siblings, playing hide-and-seek with them, and just being alive. Most of my life has been spent in Congo. Except for the four years I spent in Rwanda, seeking refuge in 2007-2011, during one wave of war. I went to school in Congo, got married there, began teaching there, and even had my

two children there. I never lacked anything at home. We still had cattle and agricultural land by the time fighting broke out again in 2014 between the government forces and the APCRS (Alliance Patriotique pour un Congo Libre et Souverain- Patriotic Alliance for Free and Sovereign Congo). In April 2015, the war reached its peak, and we had to run towards peace. Unmarked routes were found, and we ran through them.

My wife held onto our firstborn child and I, our second born who was three years old at the time. We got separated. My wife and firstborn fled through Burundi and into Addis Ababa due to high insecurity in Burundi. Running most of the way, I fled through Uganda with my last-born. With no money, food, or clothes, we endured a one-day walk from Masisi to Bunagana border and on to the Gisoro border. We meet angels along our journeys, and on mine, a good samaritan paid for our trip to Kampala where we had a relative.

Many of those we began the journey with fled into different countries. Some of my relatives fled to Rwanda and now live in the Kiziba refugee camp. We have not communicated since.

In Kampala, we rested, staying with a relative for three days before embarking on the journey to Nairobi. As they bid us goodbye at the bus station, my relative gave me \$200. Forty dollars was the bus fare from there to Nairobi. The \$160 that was left, I kept aside to help me start a business in Kenya.

We arrived in Nairobi early the next morning and went to the UNHCR office in Westlands to report as asylum seekers. That was in June 2015. We got temporary documents that allowed us to stay in the country as refugees. Later, I was issued with the Kenya Proof of Registration document that I use today. It allows me to move around the country and register a business.

With a child to fend for, I started a mandazi bakery with the \$160 left over from my relative's donation. I had four employees, was supplying shops, and had some wholesale orders. Unfortunately, the business died after a year. Some of my sales people would not bring back the money they made, and the competition was so steep, I had to close the bakery.

One thing I have learnt in this life is, you've got to know how to adjust and adjust quickly. No one knows what will happen tomorrow, but being ready to adapt and move on will see you through tomorrow and the day after. Seeing that my business was failing, I went out in search of a teaching job. In January 2016, I started working at a private school in Kayole. I was the Computer Skills teacher for a year and made \$60 a month. When the contract was terminated, I took on another job as a security guard at a supermarket. Every month, for a little over a year, I made \$75.

Having learnt that there was a shortage of English teachers in Ethiopia, I decided to travel there in February 2019. The trip would be the first time I saw my wife and firstborn in years! I could not travel with my last-born since procuring travel documents for him would be too expensive. I left him with a neighbour where he could keep going to school uninterrupted. He was 7 years old.

I had learnt English in Rwanda when I sought asylum there. It put me at an advantage when I went back to Congo where English teachers were few. Since I had been in Kenya a while, I was confident in my mastery of the language and knew that I stood a really good chance at landing a job.

My wife and child were elated to see me alive. My child was 14 years old. I last saw them when they were barely twelve. We had dinner, laughed, cried, and shared stories. We were almost complete, but there was no complete family without my last-born.

At the beauty salon where my wife worked, she heard about schools that were hiring and shared the information with me. I also went out daily looking for a school. In that week, I was offered a job at a school in Addis. The pay was as good as the rumours: \$390 per month. However, since I did not have

*My wife and firstborn child fled through Burundi and into Addis Ababa. Running most of the way, I fled through Uganda with my last-born.*

papers allowing me to live in Addis as a legal immigrant, the job did not last long. I had made several attempts to register as an urban refugee, but I was unsuccessful. I was told to go to Sherkole Refugee Camp. I truly could not go there and be further separated from my family. So, in October 2019, we shared tearful goodbyes, and I came back to Nairobi to be with my last-born who was turning eight years old.

While in Addis Ababa, I had saved \$1300 to invest. I chose three businesses to invest in: hawking *kitenge* fabric, stationery, small electronics, and mobile accessories; a clothing boutique; and a salon for my wife in Addis Ababa. Out of all those businesses, my wife's salon has been the most successful. It brings in \$100 every month while the hawking business brings in \$60, and the boutique \$50 per month.

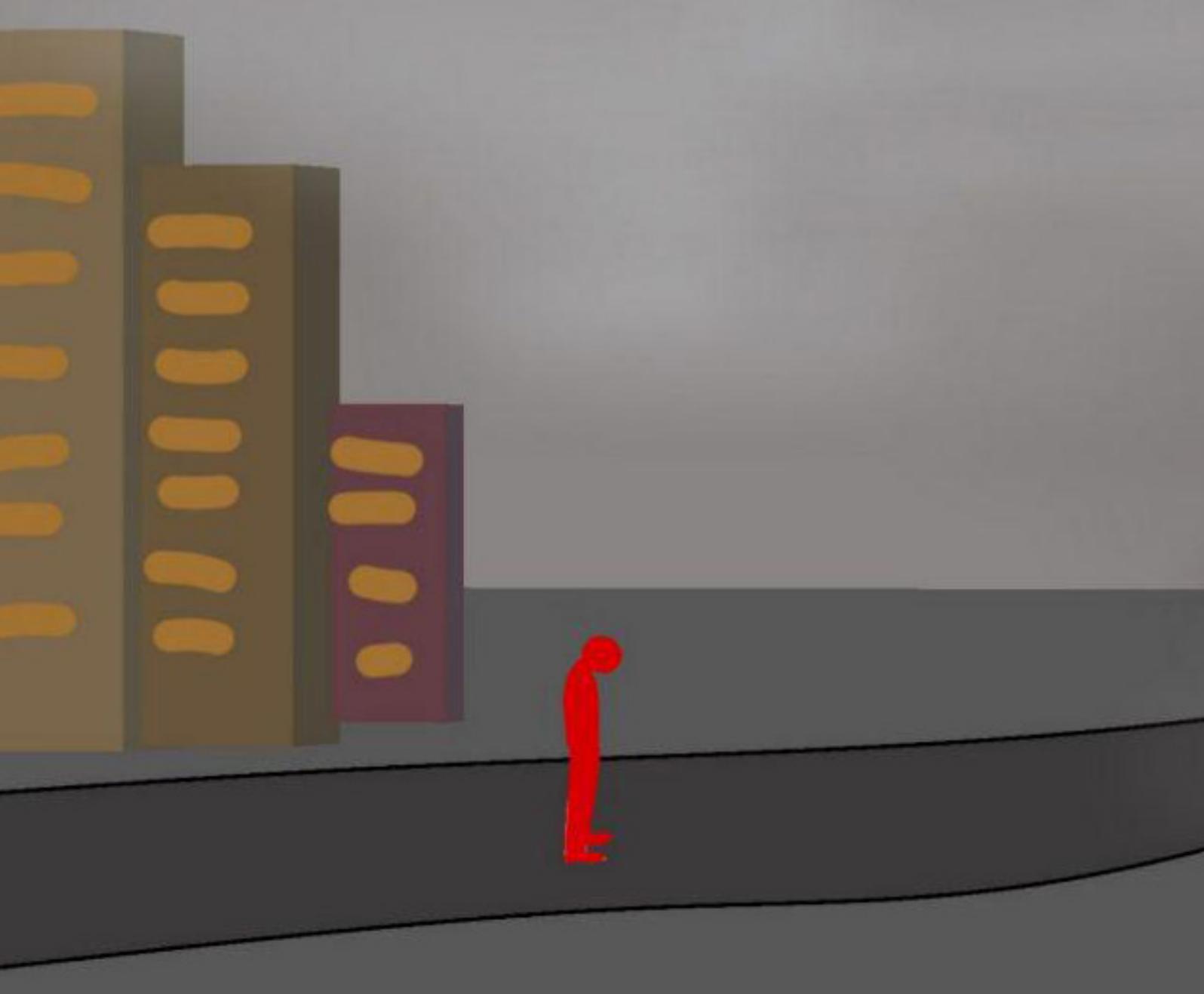
This hawking business is not easy. To make my money, I travel between counties to sell. From Mombasa to Malindi, Kilifi to Nairobi. There is nowhere I will not go provided there are customers. Sadly, some customers refuse to pay when they find out that I am not Kenyan. Others refuse to pay full price, while others take forever to pay. It makes running the business difficult, because when a customer takes a bulk order and refuses to pay on time, I cannot restock, and chances are, I will get into debt. It is almost as though we are forced to negotiate for our humanity.

Being in business has mountains of challenges. Many times, I have been forced to start afresh. I have a child to care for and

a future to hope for, so I cannot stop. I pick up again, rebuild, and push forward. The trickiest part of business to navigate is the wholesale bit. A customer could pick up a whole consignment and at the end of the grace period, say that nothing has sold. It can be crippling. There is also this counterfeit problem that is big in Kenya. Goods come from China, and they are fake. You buy them, and you cannot sell them. There is no warehouse where you can take them, so you are stuck with dead stock. As a refugee, I'm also not clear on the counterfeit laws in Kenya, and I do not know where to complain. I have very little protection for my business. We make do with what we have. Children have to go to school. Life does not stop.

It has been five years since I parted with my wife and child, not by choice, but by circumstance. Unlike many others, I am lucky that I have my son with me. One is better than no family at all, and I will do everything in my power to make their lives comfortable. I was raised comfortably in Congo before the war, and no matter where we live, my family must find peace, stability, and never lack food on the table.

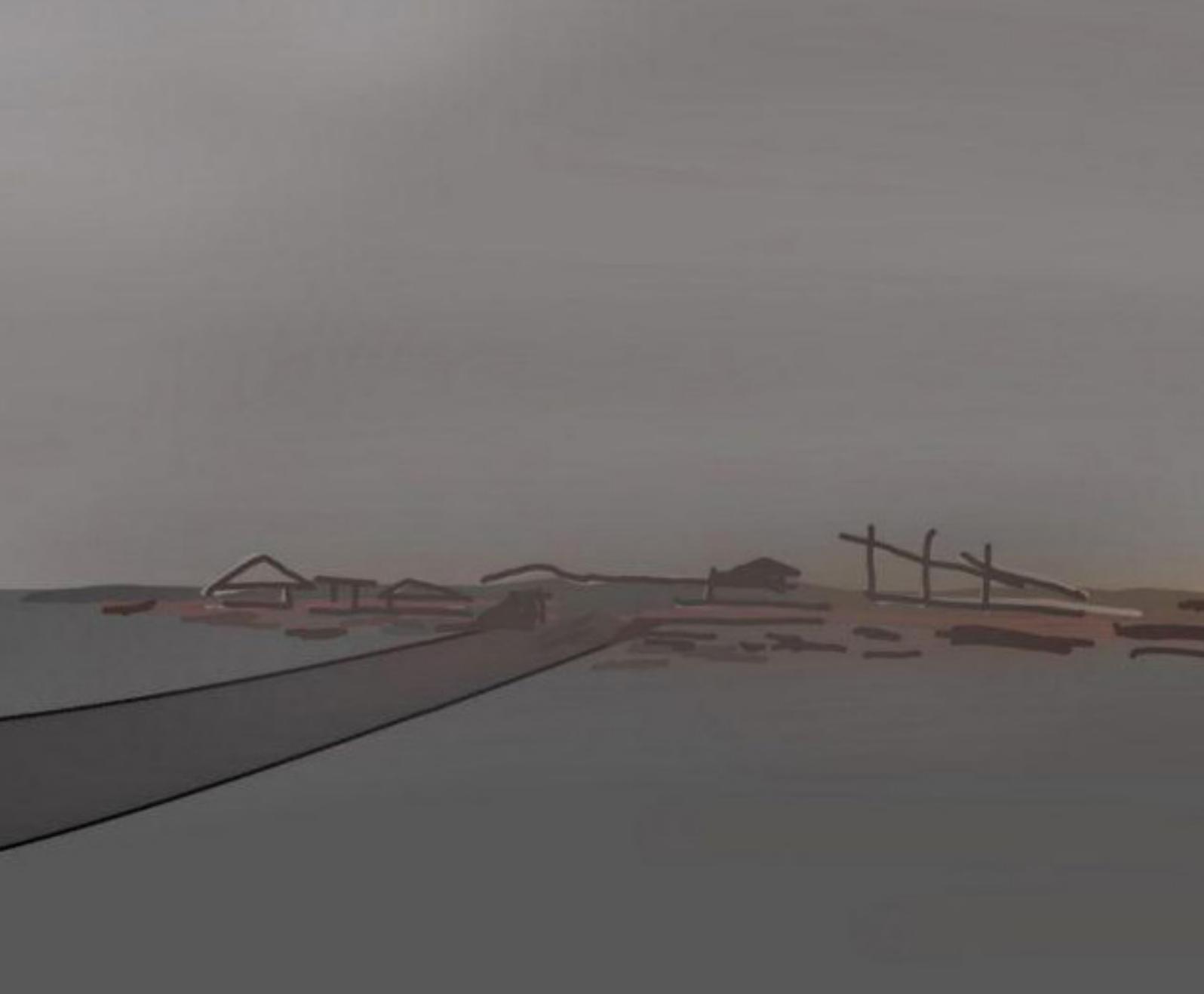
At the moment, I cannot reunite my family, and I don't know how that will happen or where. My wife and firstborn are registered in Ethiopia; my last-born and I are registered here. We have used our own power and might in an attempt to be reunified, and none of those efforts have borne any fruit. At 31, I still do not have a mandate, the UNHCR document that allows a refugee or asylum seeker to get UN protection and the hope of resettlement to a third country. Now, we wait for God and His time. We will probably be resettled to the same third country or go back to Congo to rebuild our lives. For now, we don't know. We live on hope, hope that one day, we will be together once again and lack for nothing.



# Have a healthy outlook

*I was born in North Kivu, Democratic Republic of Congo in 1986. I am the fifth and last born in my family. Growing up, we were well-to-do as we had a lot of livestock and agricultural land. We made our money from selling all sorts of farm produce, which took care of my education all the way to college where I studied catering for two years on a government scholarship before I had to flee my country.*

Narrated by Mukiza, 34, Mombasa



**W**ar was brewing between the Mai-Mai, a rebel group, and the government. There had been skirmishes between the two near where we lived. We hoped that they wouldn't come to our town and that the war would go somewhere else. We waited in fear as reports of rebel activity reached us. They were coming our way. All we could do was hope and wait. And so, we did.

In the middle of the night of May 2006, there was a firefight. The Mai-Mai, who were raiding the Banyamulenge for property and livestock, clashed with government forces. There were fires everywhere and shooting. People were screaming and shouting. The rebels were here. We watched as they made their way towards our village, shooting people at random. A decision was reached in the village: it was time to go. If we stayed to try to protect our property, we would all be killed.

My family and our entire village fled. We left in a hurry, leaving behind all our money, luggage, food, and clothes. After hours of travelling in the dark, I realized that I was alone in the crowd. I had been separated from my family, some of whose whereabouts I still don't know, despite having asked and searched everywhere I thought I might get information. It took me four days from Minembwe to reach Uvira and another two weeks from Bunagana to Busia, a town on the Kenyan border. After crossing into Kenya on foot, I found two of my tribesmen. We found a lorry that was going to Nairobi and asked for a lift.

We had learnt that Nairobi was receiving refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and it took us almost two days to reach Kenya's capital. On arrival, we asked for directions to the refugee offices. We were directed to the Shauri Moyo registration centre where we were received, registered, and given papers. We were to move to Kakuma Refugee Camp, but I couldn't go, because I had developed breathing problems. I decided to stay in Nairobi and found some friends who agreed to accommodate me. They then had to move to Eldoret, leaving me with no place to stay.

After four months in Kenya, I got a job in a hotel kitchen as a chef. It was a good job and I was earning \$120 per month. I worked for three months until I got a liver infection in July 2018 and had to stay in the hospital for a long time. Since my refugee papers were still valid, the UNHCR through Refugee Point (a refugee agency) offset my bills. I don't know how much the bill was, but I am grateful it was taken care of.

The most painful experience of my life was getting sick with no relatives close by to take care of me. Before I developed a liver condition, I had always been close to my family. This time, I was in a lot of pain,

both physically and emotionally. I missed my family, and that made my physical pain worse. I honestly thought I was going to die.

When I went back to work at the hotel, my job had been given to someone else. I stayed for three months without a regular job. I got some casual jobs for a few days a week that made me between \$2.5-4 per day, which I spent on food. I got very lucky, though. One day, I got a call from a bakery in Mombasa. The caller said that they wanted me to work as a packer.

I did not hesitate. I was jobless! I borrowed \$40 for my bus fare from a friend and boarded a bus to Mombasa. The journey from Nairobi to Mombasa on a bus is eight to ten hours. We left Nairobi at night and arrived in the morning. A member of the bakery's staff was waiting for me in Mombasa. He led me to the workplace where I was received and introduced to the other workers and shown the job I would be doing. I was offered \$100 per month as a net salary. The company supplied food and accommodation. I worked there for a few months. I then got a job in a hotel where my pay went up to \$400 per month. This went very well until Covid broke out and closed most hotels.

It was very difficult to survive during the lockdown since I had not saved any money. I was lucky because I managed to find good Kenyan friends who accommodated me in their house and supported me financially. I used the lockdown period as an opportunity to attend training at BF Suma, a US health products network marketing company headquartered in Los Angeles. I learnt about marketing skills relevant to selling the company's products. The training imparted basic knowledge about the products and the marketing skills required to sell them. I took the courses seriously as I really wanted to know how to market their products and how to handle my new customers.

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After the training, I registered as a salesperson. The registration cost me \$43, and it came with the first package of products that I sold to customers, earning a 10%-15% commission on sales. The business was good, and I decided to pursue it further. I was able to sell BF Suma products online and over the phone using my contacts in Kenya, Uganda, DRC, Burundi, and Tanzania. What I do is list the products on WhatsApp, explain their health benefits, and then ask my customers to choose what they want based on their interests and health conditions. After they choose, I send them a quotation, and they pay me through mobile money. After I have confirmed payment, I ship the parcel which is received within a few days.

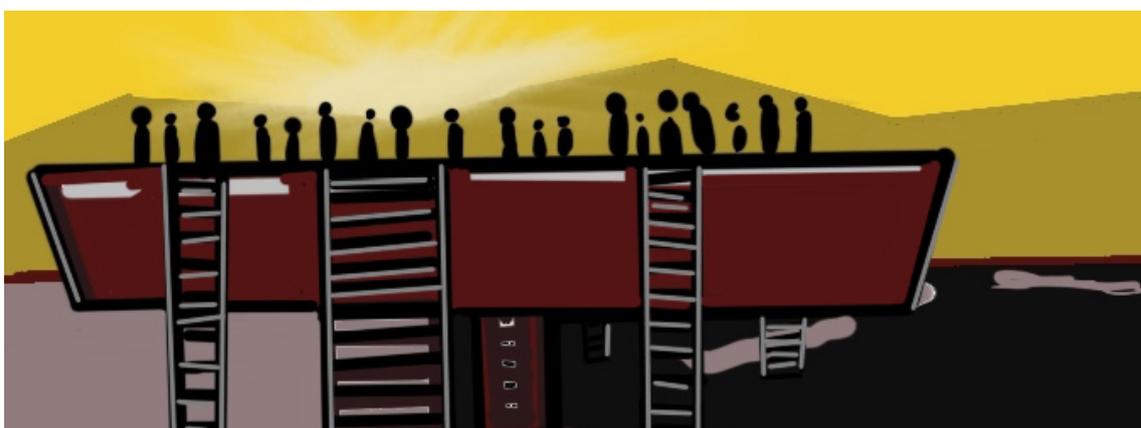
It has been two months since I started selling products for BF Suma. I like the challenge, and I have been able to build up a sizeable customer base. One problem is that these products are more expensive than competing brands. At the moment, my commission stands at \$50-70 per month. I use this money to travel across the country

sensitizing people to the full range of BF Suma products. I'm still working my way up, getting by on the commissions I make.

This amount depends on the number of customers I bring to the company and the number of products they purchase. I have yet to accumulate enough customers to get the ranking I need to be paid a proper monthly salary. However, in case I refer customers who have health conditions to our medics, I receive 50% of the consultation fee they pay. I receive my commission every two weeks, and I think that after five months, things will be well.

I have faced many challenges in this business. Working and trying to do business without legal registration documents can be tricky. You have to find solutions, though. I currently do not have any legal document to stay in Kenya because it expired just before Covid broke out, and I could not apply for another one. The business also has its ups and downs. When people leave my network, my pay goes down.

Convincing customers that the products are genuine is also very hard. They complain about the prices, and as I said, there are cheaper options in the marketplace. Sometimes customers may be willing to buy the products but they can't afford the prices. It takes courage and determination to do this business, but I am confident that with time people will get to know these products and their health benefits. My future is in hands of God. My name is Mukiza, a refugee.



# Doing my best



*You might have heard about the Sudanese civil war that ripped through my homeland, killing 2.5 million of my countrymen. You might have read about us or seen a movie about us. We were famous for a while though we didn't know it. They called us *The Lost Boys of Sudan*.*

Narrated by Achol, 42, Kakuma

**M**y name is Achol, and I was born in 1978 in Bor, South Sudan. I was the oldest of twelve children. My father raised cattle for a living, and my mother was a farmer. I would describe our family life as normal until 1987 when civil war broke out in Sudan. I was ten years old and decided to leave home. You might be asking yourself: why would a boy leave his family behind and set out on his own? But it was something that happened all the time. Young men and

boys were known to leave home in search of opportunities or if there was a crisis. They would travel in packs for security, ranging in age from 7 to 17, and go to the neighbouring towns where they would stay for up to three months before going back home. On the day that I left, I had little inkling of what lay ahead of me.

We numbered in the thousands; some estimates put us at 20,000. We trekked through the wilderness.

All we knew was that we needed to get to Ethiopia. One by one, the boys started to drop off. Dehydration, extreme hunger, and even wild animals preyed upon those who were too weak to escape. Sometimes we ate mud or drank our own urine just to stay alive. It was brutal. I wanted to turn back, go home, but I was already too far out. The days bled into each other; the sun the only sign that a new day had begun.

By the time we got to Ethiopia, we had covered a distance of 1000 miles. In Panyudo, while the animals no longer hunted us, new challenges replaced the old ones. Many more boys succumbed to malaria, yellow fever, and diarrhea. I remember being sick for six months straight. The makeshift hospital had no beds, and there were severe shortages of medicine. We lay on the ground or under the trees waiting for death. Much to my amazement, I survived. Somehow my body found a way to beat whatever was ailing me. Without much food available, the boys had to figure out how to eat. There was a river next to the camp, so we made fishing hooks, then went down to the river each day to catch fish. A fish sold for around three cents which was just enough to buy a meal or a new shirt to replace a worn one. No fish, however, meant no food.

Some days I would sit alone with my thoughts, wondering why life was so cruel. Did my family think of me, or did they assume I was dead? Were they alive or dead? Had I made a mistake in leaving home? But being consumed by hypotheticals was a luxury I didn't have; it all came down to survival. For three months, we fended for ourselves, some days being fruitful, others days not. Then the UNHCR appeared almost like a dream. The aid workers put up a hospital, schools, shelter, and provided food. The security also improved, and for the first time in a long time, I didn't worry about dying.

In 1991, our lives were upended again when Ethiopia experienced its own political crisis, which led to war. The agency workers withdrew, leaving us on our own once again. Fearing for our lives, we left the camp and ran towards home. With the heavy rains pounding the area, it took us a week to get to Pochala in South Sudan. But we were simply wandering in and out of war zones. In one place we stayed six months then fled to another where we stayed five months. When that area was captured, we fled towards Kenya. Many boys were killed in the crossfire and aerial bombardment that specifically targeted us. I didn't know why we were being targeted. We stayed in Lokichoggio for five months then we were transferred to Kakuma in mid-1992. I had become accustomed to the idea that peace was fragile. You couldn't bank on it, because it could disappear just as quickly as you could blow out a candle.

I was now 14 years old but had grown up very quickly. I had experienced so much hardship, but life marched on, and it was up to me to keep up with it. I got into farming out of necessity. I didn't know how to farm, but my desire to do something was stronger than my fear of failure. I talked to the agency officials who ran the camp and was allocated a small plot of land where I planted *sukuma wiki* and okra, which I then sold to camp residents. The food rations that were distributed to the households were not enough to meet their needs, so I had a ready market. With no formal banking system, I built a wooden savings box where I stored my money. I made about \$12 a week, spending \$2, and saving the rest. I also enrolled in school, so during the day I would attend my classes then after, tend to my farm. My farming business was the one good thing that came out of all the darkness I had been through.

*I decided to stay in Kakuma rather than return home. I had made something of my life in the camp and was not ready to abandon it just yet. I had also met a lovely lady, and our plans to marry were moving ahead. My parents and brothers were living in Bor at the time, so I left the work of dowry negotiations to them. They delivered sixty cows to my wife's family thus cementing our union. I finally had the companionship I had desired, no longer the little lost boy of Sudan.*

The other good thing was in 1995 when my family arrived in Kakuma. As happy as I was to be reunited with them, I was saddened to learn that four of my sisters had since died. They had been killed in the civil war in 1991. My family stayed in the camp until 1999, then returned to South Sudan. I stayed behind because I was in school, and finishing that was very important to me. I knew I would miss them, but it was enough to know that they were alive. Farming attracted a lot of entrants and with time became competitive. There was a common well where we sourced our water. Many times when I would go after school, I would find the water had run out. My crops suffered, as did my income, now earning just \$5.60 a week, less than half of what I was earning before. But I had to keep going. This business is what kept me in school, is what gave me purpose. I completed secondary school in 2004 and

went full-time into farming. By then, I had saved \$5000, which I used as capital to set up a shop within the camp. Business was good until 2008 when the repatriation of South Sudanese refugees began. Peace, at last, had come to our homeland. Many of these refugees were my customers, so when they left, the farm and shop folded. A part of me was excited about the future that South Sudan held for us. My countrymen who had fled to all corners of the world were returning to be part of this new country, to help rebuild and restore it.

But I decided to stay in Kakuma rather than return home. I had made something of my life in the camp and was not ready to abandon it just yet. I had also met a lovely lady, and our plans to marry were moving ahead. My parents and brothers were living in Bor at the time, so I left the work of dowry negotiations to them. They delivered sixty cows to my wife's family thus cementing our union. I finally had the companionship I had desired, no longer the little lost boy of Sudan.

I sometimes wondered if I should go home, but like all the times before, peace didn't last. By 2013, the unity government was unraveling. My father was killed that year as violence erupted again. I was relieved to be safe in the camp with my wife.

I enrolled in a course in pharmacy that was offered by the IRC. It was a six-month course which kept me busy and engaged my mind. Later in 2015, I saw a job advertisement for a South Sudanese interpreter to work with the UNHCR. I applied for the position and got it. Now, five years on, I'm still working as an interpreter and am the proud father of three children. I earn \$60 a month, which is not a lot of money, but we make it work.

At 41 years of age, I have been living as a refugee for 29 years. Kakuma is my home. Though life in the camp is chockful of



challenges, at least there is peace. Here, my children who are in Class 5, 3, and 1 can go school which is much more than I had when I was their age. I worry, though, about their future: how will they be able to advance themselves academically when I don't make a lot of money? There are not many opportunities for professional growth here in the camp. Unless I get into some other business, I have to contend with my meagre salary for now. I don't have a bank account, so I use my M-Pesa account to buy food and general supplies. When I first learned to use it, I felt how incredibly empowering technology could be. I thought back to my wooden savings box and how much life had changed since then.

The schools have closed now because of the pandemic, so my children are at home with their mother. They enjoy going to school, and the boredom at home is wearing on them.

If they were in South Sudan, perhaps they would visit their grandmother or cousins like children often do. They don't have a good opinion of their homeland, a fact that saddens me. I wonder how much South Sudan has changed since I was last there as a boy. I talk to my mother and brothers every chance I get, though not as frequently as I would like. I cling on to life as hard as I can though there are many times I have wanted to give up. I made it somehow, and as long as there is life in me, then I shall do my best to live it.

# going

# Just keep



*I'm not going to lie; things were never easy. I was the third of nine siblings in a rural area in the far North of Uganda, near the border with South Sudan.*

Narrated by Judith, 20, Kakuma

**W**e had a big farm of about 700m<sup>2</sup>, with trees of mango, papaya, and orange as well as annual harvests of beans, sorghum, and millet. My father, his brother, and my mother all worked together on the farm. They would sell some of the produce to pay school fees, but as I grew older, there usually wasn't enough money for all of us to study. After primary school, my parents told me I would have to wait to continue. I stayed home waiting for two years until an aunt was able to help with fees to finish high school.

While I was studying, things at home became tense. My father's brother died in 2008. A few years later, an uncle started claiming that my father should not control the farm. Instead, he said he was the rightful heir of my paternal grandfather who died even before I was born. The farm was all we had. My father put all of his resources into the legal case against his uncle. By 2018, when I was 18, things were really bad. We were hardly eating anymore, and my uncle was threatening all of us. Only three of my siblings were still able to study.

My mother worried about me. She told me I had a grandfather in Kenya, in Kakuma camp, and that I should go there and look for him. She gave me about \$40 to make my way there. I traveled for seven days with only that money and a backpack. I crossed the border on a motorbike and kept asking people to point me towards Kakuma. When I got to the camp, a kind woman took me in for three days while I searched for my grandfather. Once I found him, I registered with the UN and moved in with my grandfather's family.

But nothing was easy. I had never met this grandfather before. While he said I could stay, I was definitely not welcome. My grandfather had two wives and 12 children. I stayed with the Turkana wife, who worked as a cook at a nearby boarding school.

My grandfather is now about 75 and is too old to work. The house is crowded, since the two of them have five daughters and one son, and we all stay together. The son is 28 years old and makes me so uncomfortable. I can tell that none of them want me around, but the son is truly abusive. He is so rude, forcing me to wash his clothes and constantly talking about me behind my back. But what can I do? There is nowhere to go forward. It is not possible to go back.

My family back home does not have a mobile phone, so since I left I haven't been able to speak with them at all. That might be the worst of all. Everything I loved, I lost completely, and here, I am alone. I am lucky to have made a couple of friends with girls from South Sudan.

At least here, there is a little hope. I always wanted to work in the medical field, and I've been able to do an IRC training to become a lab technician. About a year after I finished, I landed a job as a lab technician with IRC. It pays \$50 per month. It's not much, but it helps me to save. I give the family \$20, use \$10 for my own spending needs, and leave the rest in my Equity Bank account to keep it safe. My grandfather has been helping me with fees to take some other courses, too, such as nutrition and sports facilitation. Most of the jobs here are working for NGOs, so you have to have the right knowledge. But the learning has been on hold because of Covid.

I feel like I can't plan too far ahead. We cannot know tomorrow. I am so glad I still have my job, even during the pandemic. But if it were up to me, I would further sharpen my skills as a lab tech. Maybe I could even be a renowned lab tech in Kakuma.

Now that I have saved, I can pay for extra courses when they start again. In the meantime, I just keep going. That's the only option.



# Somewhere to belong



*My family lived in North Kivu province in the Democratic Republic of Congo. My three siblings and I enjoyed a happy childhood with our parents who worked hard to ensure a comfortable life for all of us. We owned huge tracts of fertile land growing all kinds of food crops as well as raising cattle. Meat was a staple diet for the Banyamulenge, which is the community I belong to. Many families owned huge herds. In 1994, when I was six years old, my life changed forever.*

Narrated by Mboneza, 31, Mombasa

**W**hen the genocide broke out in neighbouring Rwanda in 1994, the Banyamulenge, who are ethnic Tutsis, also became targets of armed militias. In North Kivu, we were viewed as outsiders who took opportunities away from the indigenous communities and therefore had to be eliminated. In that same year, the Mai-Mai militia attacked our villages, killing many, and forcing survivors to flee before taking over their lands. We had no prior warning on the day we were attacked. My father, cousins, aunts, and grandparents were killed. I remember the screams, the fear written on my mother's face. "Run! Run as fast as you can!" She shouted to us.

I didn't know where to run to. There was a huge crowd of people fleeing for their lives, and I was swept away by it. I became separated from my mother and siblings, never to see them again.

All around me I could hear children crying. I tried to fight back my own tears, but it was no use. I was afraid of what would happen to me. Who would look out for me? Were the Mai-Mai going to come after us? The adults hardly spoke as we ran. It seemed they were consumed by worry. From Bunagana, we made our way to Kampala, then Jinja. We made camp wherever we could, staying a few days in an area doing manual jobs for the locals in exchange for

food or money. By this time, I had connected with a few young people from my village, and we stuck with each other. We talked about seeking asylum in Kenya even though we didn't know what the process entailed. Many of the Ugandans we encountered were sympathetic towards us having seen a constant stream of Congolese refugees passing through their towns over the years, and they offered us food and water. We were, however, easy targets for thugs who robbed us frequently or worse, raped the women.

A month after we fled our home, our large group arrived at the Kenyan border in Busia. We immediately announced where we were from and our intention to seek asylum in Kenya. It was as if the Kenyans had been expecting us, because we were registered immediately then informed that we would be transferred to Nairobi. By the third day, the anxiety was palpable. We were still holed up in Busia, and there was no clear indication of when we would be transferred to Nairobi. I joined a group of boys who banded together and decided secretly to head for Nairobi on our own. It was a grueling journey that took three weeks. By the time we arrived, our legs were swollen. Because a group of seven young boys was likely to draw a lot of unwanted attention, we split up and went our separate ways. We were swallowed up by the city. I would never see those boys again.

I walked around aimlessly with no real plans or idea of what I'd do next. At some point, I found myself in Gikomba, one of the largest open-air markets in the city. There was a group of young boys huddled up together who looked like they were the same age as me, so I sidled up to join them. When they noticed me, they asked who I was and what I wanted. I didn't answer, I didn't understand Kiswahili and even that I couldn't tell them. The next minute they were on top of me. I covered my head to protect myself from the kicks and punches. They left me lying on the ground, moaning from the pain. I stood and limped off to the sidewalk.

The beatings went on for a few more days as I tried to join them again and again. Something in me told me that my ticket to survival was with these boys. Finally, they accepted me. When I learned that they robbed people, especially women who couldn't fight back, or begged for food that was being discarded from restaurants, it was hard to accept that this was going to be my life too, a far cry from where I had come from. At night we slept by the Nairobi River under plastic sheeting. It was cold, and there was always the risk of being rounded up by the police or being attacked by older boys.

I lived on the streets for about eleven years, surviving on begging, stealing, or selling waste plastic bottles to recyclers. I would see children my age going back and forth from school, which saddened me, because I felt trapped in my situation. I thought about my siblings from time and time, wondering if they were doing better or worse than me.

One day, a stranger came up to me and offered me a different life. I don't know what he saw in me. There were many boys and young men like me in a similar situation, and he could have approached any of them. He told me he had a farm in Nyeri where I could work as his caretaker. The idea of working on a farm brought back memories of my years on my family farm. I didn't hesitate, even though I didn't know where Nyeri was or whether this man's intentions were good.

When I got to Nyeri, it was like he said. There were animals to feed, water, and generally look after. He didn't pay me but provided room, board and everything else that I needed. It was more than I had had in a long time. I would never again return to the streets if I could help it. I lived on the farm for two years then moved in with another family doing the same kind of work of tending to the farm or animals. After three years, I was able to secure a paying job earning \$30 a month. I moved back to Nairobi in 2010 with the idea of starting a business.

*Despite the hardship I had been through living in the streets, I was going to take my chances in Nairobi. For better or for worse, it had become my home.*

Before I could go into business, I needed to sort out my legal status. I went to the Refugee Affairs Secretariat office in Shauri Moyo, was interviewed, then issued with a temporary document to allow for transfer to Kakuma refugee camp in Turkana. I had no intention of going to Kakuma. I had heard enough stories about the place to know that life was difficult there. Despite the hardship I had been through living in the streets, I was going to take my chances in Nairobi. For better or for worse, it had become my home. After my temporary documents expired, I knew I would get in trouble with the police if I was arrested, so I went the police station and reported that I had lost my documents. I now show the police abstract when I'm asked for identification.

With \$60 from my savings, I started a powdered detergent distribution business. It was a modest enterprise bringing in \$35 in profits per month, but I was happy. A year into the business, I had saved up \$400. I didn't have official identification documents, so neither a bank or M-Pesa account was an option. Instead I kept money in the house so it would be safe from robbers or the police.

One day, when I came home from the market, my roommate was not there. The radio and mattress we shared were also missing. My gut told me that something was wrong. I quickly went to check the place where I hid my money and it was all gone. I knew then that he had taken it because he was the only person who knew where my

hiding place was. I was devastated. During the year that we had lived together, he gave no indication that he was untrustworthy. He was like a beloved brother to me. His disappearance brought on a new challenge as well. Without his contribution, I was now solely responsible for the rent, and there was a great danger that I would end up on the streets again.

I had to act fast. I went to the wholesale shop where I bought the detergent and asked for a credit facility to allow me to procure the soap and pay later. I got stock worth \$15 and made a down payment of \$10 with the balance to be paid once I had sold my stock. In the meantime, I slept on the floor in my apartment, and it was a month before I was able to buy a mattress for \$25. As soon as I was able, I stopped selling detergents and switched to hawking shoes in Nairobi's streets. The returns were better with monthly profits of about \$50. After six months of this, I switched to selling mobile phone accessories which brought me \$70 a month. Soon, a lot more people were selling mobile phone accessories and my profit margins began to shrink. I continued working and saving money even as I started looking for something else. I talked to a few people within the refugee community, asking if anyone knew about any opportunities, and in a few weeks I received a call about a job opening in a bakery. The job was in Mombasa, and the business was run by a Congolese man who had arrived in Kenya as a refugee years before I did. I was assured that no prior experience was necessary and I would learn everything on the job, so I moved to Mombasa.

My days would start very early in the morning and go into the late afternoon, but I enjoyed my work. I earned \$70 a month, gaining a lot of experience along the way. After a year of working and saving money, I felt ready to try my hand at running my own bakery. I was

*We live in Mombasa, and, like me, my wife's legal documents have also expired. We are waiting for the government to lift the movement restrictions put in place to contain the Covid pandemic so we can travel to Nairobi to renew our documents. Once that happens, we plan to apply for resettlement in Australia. My life is a lot better now, with my work, I'm able to pay rent, buy food and take care of my wife.*

confident that I had the right skills and motivation to succeed but unfortunately, that was not enough. I didn't have the right packaging for my products, and the customers didn't come. I ran out of money and closed the business. Though I was disappointed in the outcome, I took it in stride. I had no regrets about getting into the business. I knew there would be challenges, but the experience gained was invaluable.

A few months into my unemployment, a friend of mine who knew that I was looking for a job connected me with another bakery that was looking for someone to train their workers. With my past experience, I was a perfect fit so I took on the job, earning \$4 per day to train employees on all aspects of baking. This was in June of 2016. Six months later, in January 2017, I moved to another bakery earning \$5 per day.

I was in Nairobi for a friend's wedding in June 2017 when I met a lovely lady who was also a refugee from Congo. I got to talking to

her and learned that we came from the same area in North Kivu. After the wedding, we kept in touch, and our friendship developed into a relationship. In 2020, we decided to move in together. We didn't have enough money for a wedding ceremony and with no family members, we had a small ceremony with a handful of friends. I wish I could have asked my wife's father for his blessing as is tradition. I wish my father and uncles could have escorted me to her house as I went to pay dowry. I wish my mother and aunties would have been there to ululate as we exchanged our vows.

We live in Mombasa, and, like me, my wife's legal documents have also expired. We are waiting for the government to lift the movement restrictions put in place to contain the Covid pandemic so we can travel to Nairobi to renew our documents. Once that happens, we plan to apply for resettlement in Australia. My life is a lot better now. With my work, I'm able to pay rent, buy food, and take care of my wife. My experiences, though deeply traumatizing, helped me develop a fearless spirit at an early age. I still think about my family; it's hard not to. If my mother and siblings are alive, I pray that they are thriving. I hope they are not in a refugee camp. Thankfully, with my wife by my side, I'm no longer alone.



*I was born in Mogadishu, the youngest child in a family of nine. I have few memories of Mogadishu, having lived there for only a short time. What I know of that life is what I've been told. My mother is a high school graduate who worked with the postal service, and my father was a driver. He never went to school, but his lack of education was not an impediment. He went on to start a restaurant business and was able to support us and the extended family.*

Narrated by Hassan, 34,  
Kakuma

**Adversity  
makes you  
stronger**

**W**hen the war broke out, my mother, sisters, and I fled to Kenya, leaving my father and older brother behind.

I later learned that it was not safe for men to escape with women because the armed rebels had set up several check points along the route where they forced fleeing civilians to identify what tribe they were from. If you told the truth, there was a high probability that you would be killed, which is what happened to many men and boys. The surviving women and girls, having no form of protection, making the journey alone, were often robbed, raped, and sometimes killed. Life where we stopped near the border was harrowing; the refugees faced extreme hunger and disease with many dying.

Months later, some went back to Somalia while my family relocated to another town along the Kenya-Somali border. Most of the families in the area were desperately poor, living in small traditional houses like they used to back in Somalia. Having been thrust into the role of provider, my mother set up a *miis* (small shop); selling groceries as a means of supporting the family. Sometimes mother's store would run out of stock, and she would have to close for weeks or several months on end. My wonderful uncles did what they could to help get the shop running again or ensure that we had food. We didn't go to school; we couldn't afford it. Reciting the Quran became the extent of my education.

I was not more than eight years old when my mother fell ill. She needed to go back to Mogadishu for treatment. Because she couldn't take us with her, my siblings were dispatched to various relatives who lived close by. Being the youngest, we talked about going to Mogadishu together or going to live with my father, who by the way, I hadn't seen in years. I decided to go and live with my father. I didn't know then, that as I said goodbye to my mother, that would be

the last time I'd be seeing her. Maybe if I had gone with her, my life would have turned out differently. My mother's friends took charge of me, and together we travelled to Mandera where my father and brother had settled. Arriving in Mandera, I didn't know what to expect. My father was still working as a driver, and he had a new family. He didn't have enough money to send us to school, so I continued studying the Quran.

Later, two of my older sisters joined us, and together with my older brother, we moved in with my grandmother. To take care of the family, my grandmother reared and sold chickens and goats as well as selling clothes. Others started pitching in as well. My brother learned tailoring from my aunts and uncles who ran the business. My aunt apprenticed at a pharmacy before getting a job in a local pharmacy. Another uncle sold second-hand clothes. Our lives began to improve with all these income streams, guaranteeing us at least two meals a day, tuition at an informal school, and more Quran lessons. We all lived together in the same compound with my grandmother, the matriarch, holding us all together. With all this family around me, I didn't miss my parents that much.

As we grew older, my siblings enrolled in a formal school, and I stayed back at the informal school while training to become a tailor. I was able to pay my tuition once I started making some money working as a tailor. My siblings often talked about our mother, wondering where she was. My older sister saved up enough money from her job as a tutor that she could travel to Somalia in search of her. My sister was gone a long time, and there was no word from her, so my brother went to Somalia to look for her, too. He found out that she had gotten married and had been unable to locate our mother. He returned just as my other sister was making her own plans for marriage.

*Up until 2011, when I was finishing high school, I'd see my uncle's attacker around the camp. He was always trying to intimidate or threaten me because of the way I had helped my uncle report the case to the police.*

After a few months, I left the tailoring job to work in a restaurant, then left that to work as a poster man. The work involved using the radio to broadcast messages from people who were looking for their relatives in hopes of reunification. How much I made depended on my employer's generosity. I was earning between 50 cents to \$1 per day while working as a poster man, which was about the same when I worked in tailoring and the restaurant. I took pleasure in my work; it took me to places I'd never been, and I met new people all the time. Then, of course, there was the added bonus of being part of a family's reunification story. Those happy endings renewed my own hope that the same would happen for me, and I would be with my mother again. Every once in a while, messages would come through from women who had the same name as my mother. I wondered if they were her, although I was afraid to ask them if they had a son and whether that son was me.

One day a woman got in touch with me via email who I believed was my mother, but later, after a lot of correspondence between us, it turned out that she wasn't. My heart broke. The first time I heard from my mother was through a recorded message she made and passed on to someone who was traveling back from Somalia. I could hardly believe it. We started exchanging emails and continue to do so once in a while.

I developed an interest in computers, and through a friend, I started volunteering at a cyber-café even as I continued my job at

the radio station. I worked as a secretary of sorts, helping elderly customers who were not computer savvy write documents. I still had an interest in going to school but also needed to continue working. I was earning between 50 cents and \$2 at the cyber-café and sometimes a little more in tips. I talked to my employer about letting me work part time and when he said no to that, I asked for a raise, a request he also declined. With that, I left the job at the cyber-café, going back to my job as a poster man while enrolled in informal school. Our town was however prone to attacks and the rising insecurity drove people away. I went back to the restaurant where I often worked late into the evening. For over seven months, I saved up \$7, keeping my expenses to a minimum by making sure I ate at the restaurant. I also helped my father financially from time to time.

Around mid-2006, I used my savings to travel to Dadaab, where I connected with my uncle who was working as a block leader at the camp. There I enrolled in school. My uncle was well respected within the refugee community because of his advocacy work. However, his work ruffled feathers to the extent that on one occasion, he was viciously attacked and badly injured.

We reported the matter to the police, and the case was moved to court with my uncle being awarded about \$10,000 in damages which the perpetrator was required to pay. The men however decided to resolve the matter out of court through the customary Somali system, and I don't know what the outcome was. Up until 2011, when I was finishing high school, I'd see my uncle's attacker around the camp. He was always trying to intimidate or threaten me because of the way I had helped my uncle report the case to the police. Because of threats to his safety, my uncle didn't stay much longer after that, moving his family to Kakuma. I stayed on to finish school, then got a job



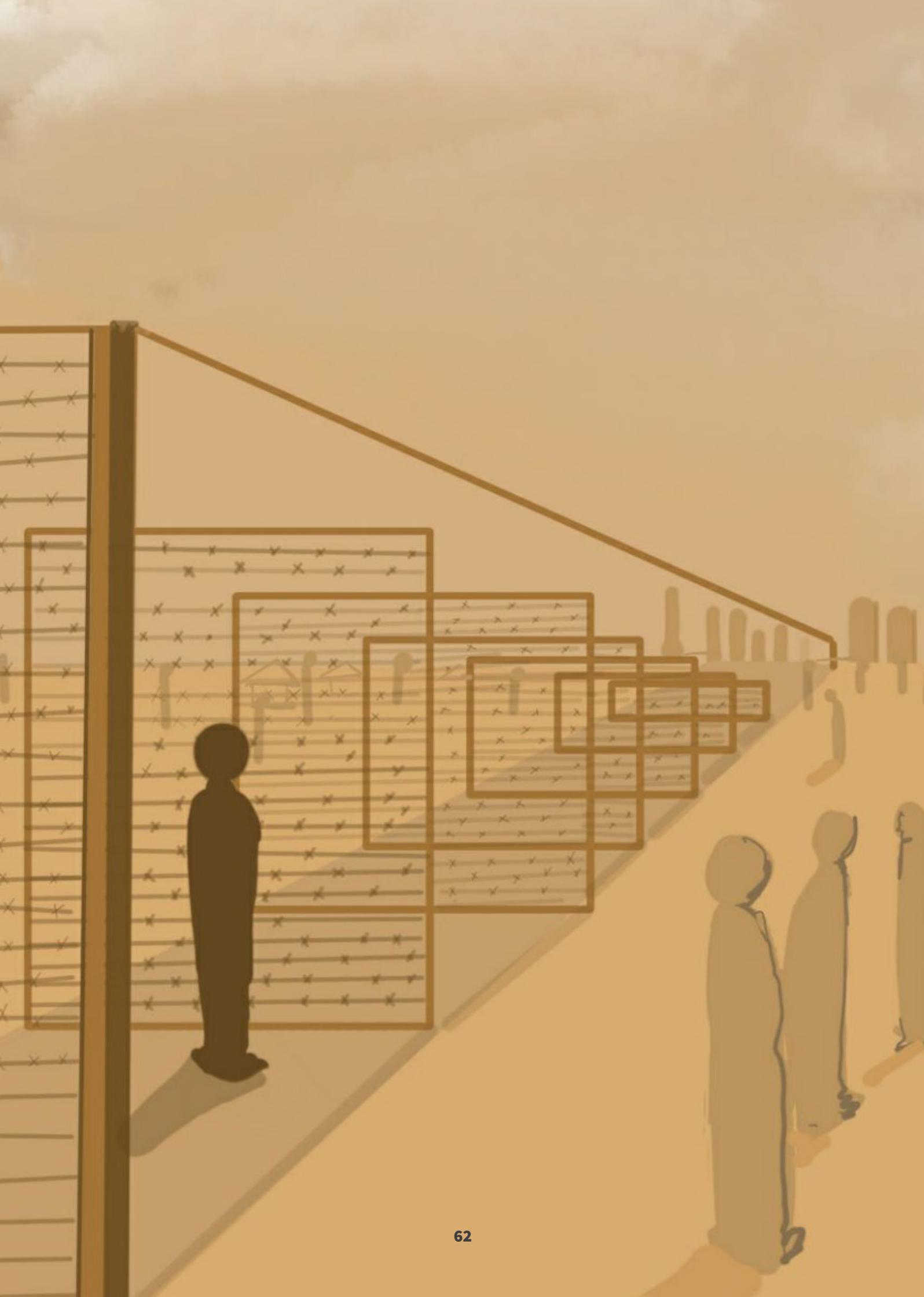
earning \$55 per month. I worked for about seven months and was able to save \$150. I made plans to move to Kakuma but first I took a detour to Nairobi in search of a better job.

I spent about a year in Nairobi working as a shopkeeper, earning \$60 a month when I started to between \$140 and \$170 by the end of that first year. I lived with friends, paying my share of the rent and utilities. During that time, I was thinking about enrolling in evening classes so I could improve my computer skills and also take driving lessons. With good work and good pay, things were looking up for me until my refugee status documents and my work permit expired. I toyed with the idea of staying in Nairobi and continuing to work covertly, but it was risky. If arrested, I could be sent to Dadaab or deported to Somalia. The only things waiting for me in Dadaab were poverty and insecurity. It was a difficult decision, but when you are a refugee there's a constant reminder of how little power you have. Kakuma was my best bet because at least my uncle was there, so I would be with family. It was several months before I got a job, but when I finally did, I worked for an aid agency earning \$40 a month which later increased to \$55. I supplemented my income by working for another agency for about six months earning \$30 a month.

Later, I dropped one of the jobs and enrolled into a training institute to become an English language trainer. I then teamed up with my cousin to offer free language classes in the community. I worked with several organisations on short-term jobs where I received pay that barely covered my expenses, and sometimes my brother would send me some money to see me

through the month. In general, the jobs with research organisations paid better, but they were short term contracts often lasting three weeks at a time. In one organisation I made \$110 working as an interpreter and another \$40 for eleven days working as research a assistant. I also put in an application to be resettled in the United States, but the process was put on hold. The incoming Trump Administration was making drastic changes to the US Immigration Policy that among other things affected refugee admissions and resettlement. I travelled to Nairobi because I was unwell, staying with friends for nine months during my treatment while also trying to regularize my refugee status documents. Unable to renew my paperwork, I returned to Kakuma in December 2019.

A friend and I started an initiative with three program areas: an adult literacy program, a weekly podcast raising awareness on Covid-19, and community health and development. We are raising awareness of the challenges experienced by vulnerable groups within the refugee community like women, girls, and persons living with disabilities. We are also highlighting the impact of Covid on refugees. We still have a lot of work ahead, including building support and attaining community buy-in. The position is voluntary, so I'm looking for a job. I want to support my family even though employment opportunities for refugees are scarce. I'm living with my uncle and cousin who offer both emotional and financial support, even with their limited resources. As for my mother, she was living in Yemen, but the protracted civil war there forced her to move to Egypt. I don't know if or when I'll be able to see her again.





# Degrees of freedom

*The young people of Kakuma have been sold a story. You may be born here. You may never leave. But there is one possible way you might escape this confinement of your dreams, this confinement of your geography: education. A handful of the brightest academic stars just might get a chance to study outside the camp, in Nairobi or even in Canada. With the stakes incredibly high, young people pour themselves into their books and wait to be told their fate. Will they score one of the very few seats in a scholarship programme or be married off, sentenced to a life of endless encampment with no professional opportunities, where dreams shrivel and dry beneath the hot Kakuma sun?*





# The journeys of life will take me far

*I am a Somali teenager from Mogadishu, the capital city of Somalia. I am the third child in a family of eight children — six girls and two boys. My family and I have been blessed. Father worked for a government-owned company. They paid him well enough for him to care for us and some of our relatives. In our culture, this is a blessing. Our house was always full of people, food, laughter, and movement. We all went to school, girls and boys alike.*

Narrated by Nasra, 19, Kakuma

“Education is the key to a bright future.” This is always said for boys, but for girls, it’s an issue that is hotly debated. My father’s friends tried to convince him to pull us out of school. “It’s a waste of money!” They would say, “You’re paying for one...two...three- six girls’ fees! Imagine what you could do with that money!”

“My daughters belong in school just like everyone else.” Father would say, firmly.

Yet, when we performed poorly in school, he would echo his friends saying, “You’re wasting money!”

Though we always had plenty, I never wanted to waste money, so I studied hard as did all my sisters.

I was born at a time when Somalia had no functional central government. The military ousted the dictatorship in 1991, and we’ve seen no peace since then. What we have seen is strife and discrimination and uncertainty.

Under the veil of this uncertainty, the Islamic Revolutionary Militants began their fight with the ruling party in 2006, threatening to kill any citizen working with the government in any form. Father still worked for the government, and this new declaration put us



*My parents and grandmother packed all eight of us children and five of my cousins, who had lost their mother in a car accident years before, and left. The rest of our relatives went back to their village.*

at risk. He was the sole breadwinner in our big family that included our grandmothers, cousins, and other relatives. It was not going to be easy to leave his job. He consulted his friends and agonized for days. My paternal grandmother pleaded with him to stop going to work. The threats kept mounting, and we were always in fear. Still, he went to work, and we had food on the table.

I wouldn't be writing this had everything stayed the same. Father received a letter. It was long. It spoke of the great suffering the militants would visit upon our family. In it, they promised to abduct us, the children. Again, father ignored it and went in to work.

The militia men came to our house the next day while my father was at work. Searching for him, they turned over every piece of furniture and knocked their way through all the doors. When they did not find him, they took away my cousin.

Our house was always full and loud, but this time the sounds that echoed were not of joy, but of despair. Not knowing if my cousin would come back to us alive or whether father would even make it home was unbearable. The militia men had left a message for my father: Present yourself to us and save your nephew's life. Your life for his.

As soon as he heard, he went to the militia camp, showed his government ID, and was

let in. They did not keep their word. They arrested father and threw him into the same cell as my cousin. They spent a week there.

They were beaten and tortured and denied food every day till our tribal elders went to fetch them with bags full of ransom money. Father would not work for the government again.

As his savings dwindled, food became scarce, and my grandmother and mother had to prioritize necessities over everything else. I was only six years old when we were all pulled out of school. Abundance was a thing of the past. My father was broke, and for the first time in my life, it was our family that needed assistance. A call was made by my grandmother to my aunt in the United States. She sent us a few hundred dollars for us to begin our journey from Mogadishu to Nairobi.

My parents and grandmother packed all eight of us children and five of my cousins, who had lost their mother in a car accident years before, and left. The rest of our relatives went back to their village. We travelled from Afgoye to Dhobley to Liboi to Garissa and finally to Nairobi in a van, paying about \$800 for the journey. We separated from my father in Dhobley after we heard that there were militants forcing men to join their group. He went back to Mogadishu and left us to continue the journey alone.

We arrived in Nairobi and rented a house. Rent was \$200 per month. My aunt in America paid for it. It was an apartment with two bedrooms and a living room. It was way too small for us, but we stayed there for five months, only living on the money from my aunt. There are many money transfer services in the city so it was not hard to get the money.

We applied for US visas in 2007, sponsored by my aunt. My grandmother and my cousins

applied separately and were approved. Our family's application fell through. I was happy for my grandmother and cousins and sad for our family. They left in 2008. We saw them off at the airport and returned to our little house.

It was difficult for my aunt to support two families—one in the US and us in Kenya—so my mother started selling tea in the market to pay for food and other necessities. My aunt still paid our rent. It was difficult, and my mother wanted us to live better. She hoped we would get relocated. We made our way to Kakuma refugee camp in July 2008 on a bus that charged \$20 per person. It took us 24 long hours to get to Kakuma. A family friend welcomed us to live with her. She told us about the camp, where to go for help, the opportunities and so on. We stayed with her till the UNHCR recognized us as refugees. We got Bamba Chakula, the food ration card, and a two-roomed house made of iron sheets.

Life is not as expensive in the camp as it was in Nairobi. My two siblings and I were enrolled at a nearby primary school run by the UN. My mother did not have to pay fees. She set up a small sweets business at the market. Our father finally joined us in 2009. He was given a different ration card from us, and no matter how hard we tried to have him added to our manifest, we did not succeed. Father started to help my mother out at the shop. The shop hardly grew. Most times, they made losses. They had to close down the shop.

Our hope for relocation was dwindling with every passing day. My family's situation worsened. My aunt had stopped sending us money years ago.

"You have to do well in school. You're our hope." My mother would say.

We were totally dependent on the UN rations. Father couldn't get a job. He

couldn't speak English or Kiswahili and most jobs at the camp require a basic understanding of the two, unlike in Somalia where the national language is Somali.

While we did not have much, we did get an education. I was the third-best student at the camp in the KCPE exams and got a scholarship to Turkana Girls' High School. It was a Catholic school that made no allowances for headscarves. To my father, going to that school and wearing no scarf was akin to neglecting my religion.

I took his advice. My sister and I went to a Canadian boarding school instead determined to do well enough to get scholarships for tertiary education.

There were times when we would come home for the holidays, excited for the home-cooked meals we would find waiting for us. Instead, we found that there was no food save for the porridge we got from the UN. Holidays were for studying and helping our younger siblings with school work. When it was time to go back to school, we did not get milk or dates or pocket money to buy cake like the other students. My parents couldn't afford it, so we relied on school meals. There were young teachers in school who had done well and had gotten World University Service of Canada (WUSC) scholarships that took the best students to Canada. I wanted to be like them.

I sat my KCSE<sup>5</sup> exams in 2018 and went back to the camp where I began tutoring my friends in the community. I earned \$5 per subject. I taught math, biology, and chemistry and made about \$90 at the end of the month. I was so pleased with myself at the end of that first month that I spent all my money on food and new clothes for my siblings.

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<sup>5</sup> Kenyan Certificate of Secondary Education



*My parents couldn't afford it, so we relied on school meals. There were young teachers in school who had done well and had gotten WUSC scholarships that took the best students to Canada. I wanted to be like them.*

When the results came, I had scored a B+ and was the top girl in the camp. My sisters had scored a C. Our parents were pleased.

In January 2019, a friend sent me an advertisement for a teaching job. I had been tutoring in the camp, so I did not have to think too hard about it. I applied and was called for an interview. I got the job and began teaching girls at a remedial centre during holidays and on Saturdays. It paid \$60 a month. I opened an account with KCB to receive the money. I also got a job at a private school where I taught during the week. They paid me \$70 per month. One of my sisters got a job at NCKK which paid \$70. Cumulatively, we made \$300 when we put together my sister's income and the \$100 we started to get from UN. Our family's situation began to improve at last.

In March 2019, the WUSC scholarship was advertised. I had been waiting for this for quite some time. I got the forms from Windle International Organization, completed and submitted them in 10 days. I was shortlisted for a pre-TOEFL exam. I was one of the 88 students shortlisted out of 177 candidates. In June 2019, I sat the oral exam where we were expected to speak on our family situations and give our reasons for seeking the scholarship. On 11th November, the list was out. I was among the 45 selected

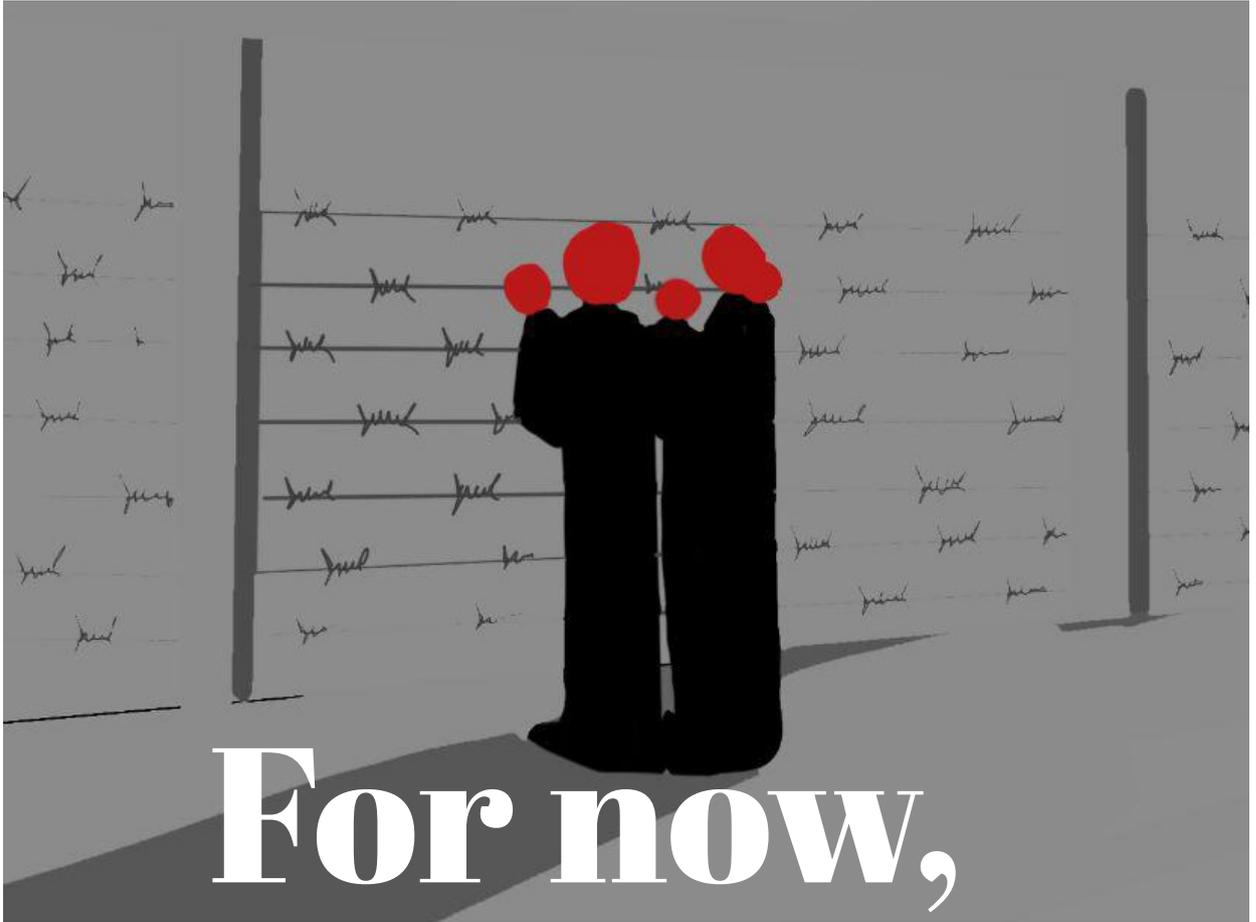
candidates. The Windle Organization prepared us for the TOEFL exams. I took the test and passed. I was to travel in August 2020, but because of Covid restrictions, our departure was pushed to December 2021.

I lost my teaching job in February 2020. The Windle organisation could no longer finance the project. I did not look for another job. Instead, I went from house to house looking for children to tutor. It took me a month to get pupils. I now make \$100 per month. It's harder to make money, and I get very tired. Due to the financial situation in the camp, many families are unable to pay the tuition fees on time. It got even more strained because of Covid. My sister also lost her job, and our cumulative earnings went down from \$300 to \$200. This meant fewer clothes are bought for my siblings, and every cent has to be budgeted for by my mother. Most of the money goes to buy sugar, rice, milk, cooking oil, and soap.

My elder sister went to Nairobi to live with a relative. She works at a salon as a make-up artist. She gets \$5 a day and helps the family out from time to time.

I look forward to leaving in December. It will be my first time on an aeroplane. The WUSC scholarship will cover tuition, accommodation, meals, and airfare. In the meantime, I am preparing for school by taking online calculus classes. I want to study Computer Science through the PhD level and become a professional programmer working for Google or Microsoft. Through my story and my successes, I would like to motivate refugees everywhere that no matter what our journeys have been, we can all reach our desired levels of success.

I have travelled quite a bit in misery and I will travel even further in joy.



# For now, we wait

*I was born into a large family; my mother was the second of four wives, and I was the fourth of her nine children. We all lived in Mogadishu where my father held various jobs. When I was two years old, my parents thought it would be good for me to go and live with my grandmother in the countryside. Their rationale was that living in the countryside would expose me to new experiences and prepare me for the world. I don't know if it's possible for a two-year-old to have that level of awareness of their surroundings or the world they live in, but since I had no say, I went off to live with my grandmother.*

Narrated by Asman, 24, Kakuma



**M**y grandmother's family was nomadic, never settling in any one place for too long which meant that I didn't go to school. When I was five, I returned to the city to live with my parents and enrolled in madrasa.

Meanwhile, my father was in the transport business. He owned a truck which he used to ferry goods across the country. The money he made was barely enough to support his large family. He was, after all, responsible for housing, utilities, healthcare, education, and everything else in between. The government at that time did not provide any type of social services.

My mother, being mindful of the immense pressure her husband was under, decided to talk to him about starting her own business. With his financial support, she opened a store selling food stuffs and milk. This worked out very well, and for a while, our family was thriving, that is until disaster hit; my father was robbed of his truck and lost his livelihood. He had to turn to his brother who lived in the UK who, to sustain us, would wire him a monthly remittance. My mother's business continued uninterrupted allowing us to keep our heads above water.

Father then got this idea to venture into fishing, and in 2002, moved to Hobyo, a coastal town. He started out small, with a few fishing boats, then grew the business steadily as his profits increased. As the business flourished, so did our family. Some of us children were able to go to school for the first time. Life was good again.

At the beginning of 2006, just as he was basking in the success of his business, a storm hit the coast, and my father lost most of his boats. He couldn't secure a loan from the bank to replace the boats, and his

savings was not enough to buy new ones. He returned home a broken man, reaching out to his brother once again for help. I saw what the loss did to him, and I wished there was something I could do to lift his spirits. Mother kept on with her business. Father's setback was but a bump in the road, and she ensured that we had a roof over our heads and food on the table.

Around the same time, a loose network of Islamic courts known as the Islamic Courts Union (ICU),<sup>6</sup> gained control of Mogadishu from a group of warlords who had been running the city. The skirmishes between the ICU and the locals turned the city into a dangerous place. While we were not in harm's way, mother was forced to close her store. We had to leave the area to find a safer place to stay. Without any source of income, we children dropped out of school. Towards the end of the year, the international community stepped in, sending military intervention to support the transitional Somali government. Government forces with the help of regional governments were able to defeat the ICU and take back control of most of the city. But the ICU was not completely gone and continued to fight into mid-2007.

Staying in Mogadishu became untenable, and we moved into a camp on the city outskirts. We received some assistance from humanitarian organisations that were supporting internally displaced persons with food aid, basic healthcare, and some shelter. The support, however, was irregular and infrequent. Fortunately, my father landed a job as a driver for a private company, and my mother started another grocery business in the market.

Things looked up again. The children, me included, were back in school. Father's job

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<sup>6</sup> The Islamic Court Union began operating in 2000 to address the lawlessness that followed the fall of the government in 1991.

often took him to the city, and one day as he was coming home, he got into an accident which left him badly injured. Unable to continue with work, mother once again took the helm keeping us afloat.

At the beginning of 2008, the remnants of ICU had regrouped and rebranded into Al Shabaab, targeting government premises, officials, affiliates, and any individuals associated with the government in any way.

As it turned out, the company my father worked for was a private contractor who provided services to the government, so my father, concerned about his safety, resigned from his job. Once he recovered from his injuries, he stood for elections as camp leader and won. He supervised the distribution of aid to the camp residents, receiving a small stipend for his role.

Things with Al Shabaab continued to escalate. They started recruiting young men into their ranks while also targeting aid organisations and foreign NGOs. Because he worked for the aid agencies, my father worried about his sons' and his security and started making plans to move us to Kenya. He sought financial assistance from his relatives, sold anything we couldn't carry, including my mother's business assets, and in March 2008, sent his first three wives and their children to Dadaab.

Whatever he paid for our transportation was not enough to get us to Dadaab so for two weeks, we were stranded in Doble, along the Kenya-Somali border. We lived with the locals who were friendly and generous as we waited for father to send assistance. In the camp, life was a mixed bag. Education and healthcare were free. We were allocated a small residential plot, and received food rations twice a month. We enrolled in the camp schools but struggled with the language.

The main languages of instruction and communication were English and Kiswahili. Unable to fully integrate because of the language barrier, we dropped out of school in the second year. During our time in Dadaab, we didn't hear from father nor did we get any financial assistance from him.

To support us, mother got a job working as a salesperson in a store. We later learned that in May 2009, father had fled to Kakuma with the rest of the family, so in August 2009, we moved to Kakuma to join him. Father had a hard time securing a job in the camp because he faced the same predicament as us not being able to speak the local languages. Nor could he find work outside the camp because of restrictions that prevented our movement outside the camp. So again, mother stepped up. She secured a \$300 loan from a relative and opened up yet another shop selling foodstuffs.

With great effort, we got back into school, and in November 2014, I did well enough in the primary national exams to secure a place in secondary school. In the middle of my success, father fell ill, having to travel to Nairobi for treatment. He was diagnosed with septicaemia which later became systemic and in May 2016, he died. As a family, we didn't have a chance to attend his funeral in Nairobi, because as refugees, we could not get the permission we needed as refugees to leave the camp.

My father's first wife who had been with him during his treatment and subsequent death was the only one who got the chance to say goodbye. Losing him has left an emptiness that is difficult to fill. His medical bill of \$2500 was paid off with the help of relatives. Mother too fell ill, struggling with her illness for much of 2017 and spending \$700 on treatment. Her business slowed significantly during her illness, but after she recovered, she was able to resuscitate it with financial support from her close relatives.



*At the start of 2020, I was counting the days until September. But plans were upended by unexpected events: the Covid pandemic turned everything on its head. The trip to Canada was aborted with no news of when we would be able to go.*



Despite these setbacks in my family, I focused on my studies, graduating in November of 2018 as the best student in the camp and the region. I applied for a scholarship program through the World University Service of Canada (WUSC) which supports refugee students with educational opportunities in Canada. I was thrilled when I was notified that my application was successful.

I would be joining university in September 2020. Right out of secondary school myself, I got a job with an international organisation working as a secondary school teacher earning \$70 a month.

By then I had a bank account and would receive my salary through direct deposit. I never used mobile money (M-Pesa) services. Due to my refugee status, I was ineligible. My refugee documents, which were the only forms of identification I had, did not meet the application requirements. I used most of my salary to support my family. My teaching job lasted six months, from January to July 2019 and at the end of my contract, I started offering private tuition classes for secondary

school students. I taught math, biology, and chemistry earning about \$100 a month. At the start of 2020, I was counting the days until September. But my best laid plans were upended by unexpected events: the Covid-19 pandemic turned everything on its head. The trip to Canada was aborted with no news of when we would be able to go. The tuition job also dried up as did my mother's business. With movement restrictions and reduced income, she's has seen fewer and fewer customers with each new day. We now rely on the KSh 500 monthly food voucher which all camp residents receive.

So, for now we wait. We lean on each other for support as we always have, looking forward to each day, hoping that each new sunrise brings with it better news and that our fortunes will improve. We have lost so much as a family, and I can't help but wonder what lies ahead. I know going to Canada will change things, that education will open so many doors for me and for my family. My mother has sacrificed so much of herself to do what she could for her children. Without her, we wouldn't have made it.



# ONE WAY OUT

*I was born in a small town in Gedo Province, Southern Somalia. I am the second of eleven siblings. When I was growing up, my father had a university degree and a good job with a big American non-governmental organisation, which delivered humanitarian assistance in the region. My mother ran a grocery shop in the town. Life was good. Until it wasn't.*

Narrated by Calaso, 22, Kakuma



**T**he Islamist militants operating in the region began targeting aid organisations like the one my father worked for. They were merciless. One day, members of the militia caught up with my father and assaulted him. He had been identified as an aid organisation employee, and the incident left him with an injured left arm. As a result, the NGO closed its mission in the region as they could not guarantee their staff's security. My father had to hide his injuries and his movements as he sought treatment for fear of being traced again and kidnapped or worse – killed.

I'll never forget the day the militia came to our house looking for my father. They harassed my mother and threatened to shoot her dead if she didn't tell them where he was. They threatened to chop his head off if they found him. My siblings and I cried and

begged them not to harm my mother. They eventually left after realising my mother was not going to tell them anything. She also really didn't know.

This incident still lingers in my mind a decade later. Afterwards, my father lost his job and had to play hide and seek with the militia since they didn't stop threatening him. They would send him emails calling him a *kaffir*, a non-believer.

We all feared for my father because we knew the militia would execute him as they had some of his co-workers. My mother encouraged him to seek asylum in Kenya. After recovering from his injuries, he travelled to Nairobi, Kenya in March 2009. From there, he moved to Kakuma Refugee Camp and registered himself as a refugee.

*With the proceeds from the fundraising, we embarked on the long journey from Southern Somalia to Kakuma. It took nearly three weeks by bus, almost nonstop, to the camp itself. The total amount we had for the journey was \$2000 and we spent \$1500 on the way. We thought the remaining \$500 would sustain us for a few weeks as we adapted to the new environment.*

With my father's flight, all the financial responsibilities of the family were heaped upon my mother. She was rarely opening her business at the time for fear of being targeted by the militants, so providing for the family became a big problem. On top of that, none of us could attend school as there were no fees, and the insecurity in the area made it dangerous to move around.

After three months, my father managed to get a call through to us and instructed us to make ready for our move to Kakuma. We had to sell all our assets—real estate and the shop commodities—in order to finance the journey. Unfortunately, the amount came up short. My mother, ever resourceful, turned to our local community's leadership for financial assistance.

The community's response was a traditional fundraising method called the *Qaaraan*. Here, close relatives are expected to contribute an amount representative of their financial ability. If a family fails to remit their contribution, they are stigmatised for failing a social role and face challenges when their turn for this aid comes round.

With the proceeds from the fundraising, we embarked on the long journey from Southern Somalia to Kakuma. It took nearly three weeks by bus, almost nonstop, to the camp itself. The total amount we had for the journey was \$2000 and we spent \$1500 on the way. We thought the remaining \$500 would sustain us for a few weeks as we adapted to the new environment.

We arrived at the camp in June 2009. My father met us, and with his help, we applied for and received refugee status from UNHCR and the Kenyan government. We settled in a small plot that was formerly owned by a close relative who was resettled in Europe. We started to adjust to life in the camp where almost every service—education, healthcare and water—was free except for electricity. You had to source your own. Some people had installed solar panels and others used diesel generators, but we couldn't afford any of these.

The other challenges we faced were the language barrier and the harsh regional climate. It almost never rains, which makes the place dusty, and temperatures are often scorching. There has also been a deterioration of security at the camp. Armed thugs, suspected to be from the local community, assault the refugees at night and rob them. They rape and loot. We can only hope they don't ever come for us.

By the time we arrived, my father was working hard to start a grocery shop to supplement the monthly food ration we received from the UNHCR. Before the shop, he had tried to apply for refugee jobs in the camp, but his certificates were not accredited in Kenya, and he couldn't communicate in Kiswahili.

My siblings and I enrolled in UNHCR sponsored schools where, since our Somali certificates were not valid, we had to sit for assessment tests to determine what classes



we would be placed in. Almost all of us were set back two classes from where we were in Somalia. I started primary school in July 2009 and finished in November 2014. I got a B in KCPE, the final national primary school exams.

The following year, I joined secondary school at an all-girls' boarding school in the camp. I finished high school in November of 2018 and got a C+ in the KCSE exams. My grades qualified for the Morneau McCain scholarship that would have taken me to Canada for school. Unfortunately, I didn't make the selection. I felt like a failure. This had been my best chance to change my life and that of my family. There was pressure to get married, as my parents thought there was nothing else for me to pursue. I was lucky to have an education, at least this much of it. Other girls my age were already married and raising children. I didn't want that. I wanted better.

I have been waiting to apply for the scholarship again. Unfortunately, Covid interrupted everything, and the scholarships were not advertised. I was able to get a job at Windle International Kenya as a weekend class remedial teacher. My monthly salary was \$65. However, after six months, the contract expired, and I have been jobless since then.

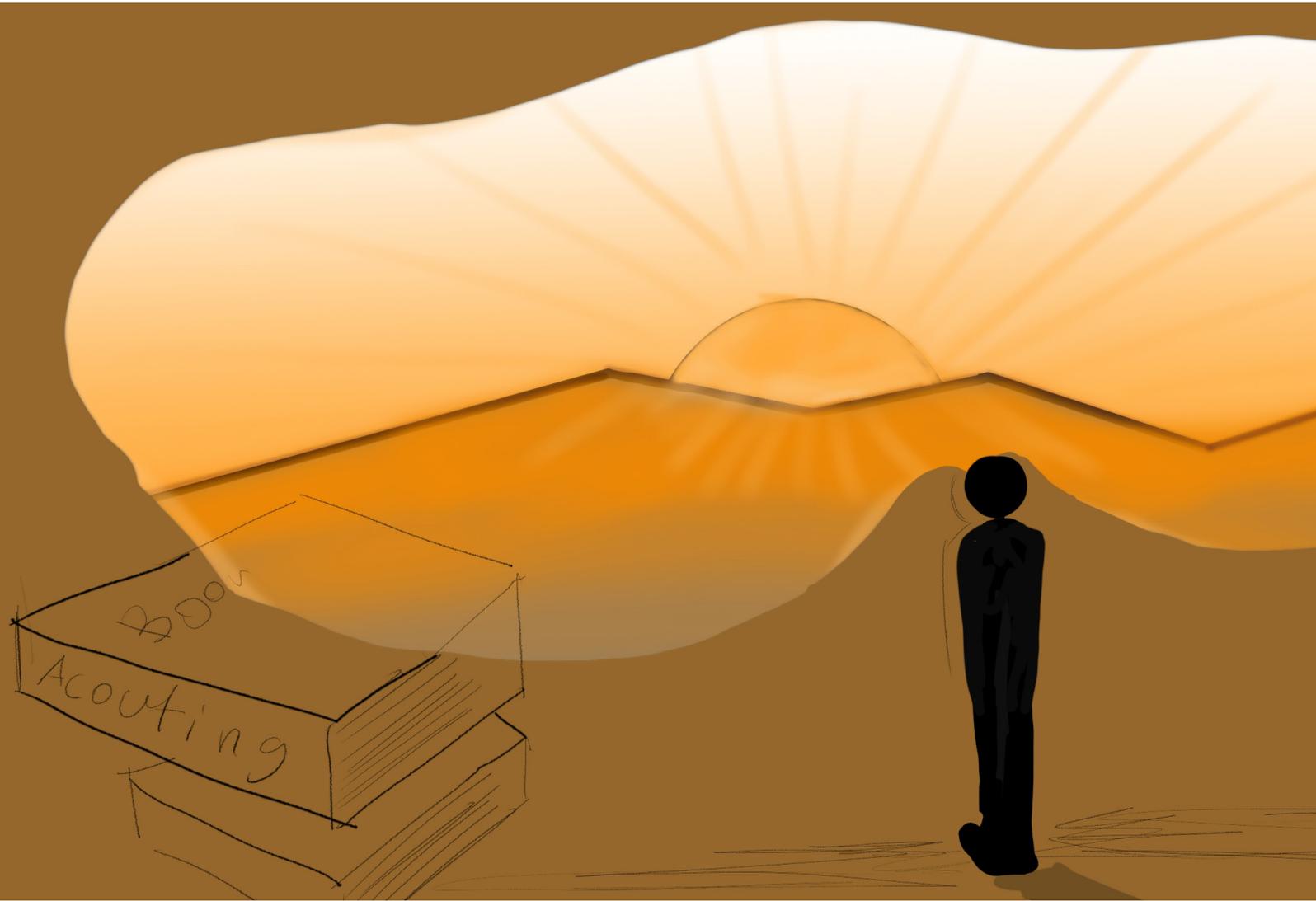
My father's small shop failed in 2011. He simply wasn't making any money in the camp's lean economy. He decided to move to Juba in South Sudan to find more opportunity. So, once again, mum had to step in to support the family. She sought our relatives who lived abroad and was able to get enough funds from them to join a merry-go-round group (locally called *Ayuuto*). It is a group of people who meet periodically and contribute an agreed amount of money at every meeting. At the end of the meeting, the total is credited to one of the members of the group. This continues until the last member

receives their contribution. After securing a payout of \$500, my mother opened a small kiosk where she sold vegetables. It wasn't very successful, and we had to supplement our income with Bamba Chakula where each family member gets \$5 a month for food from UNHCR.

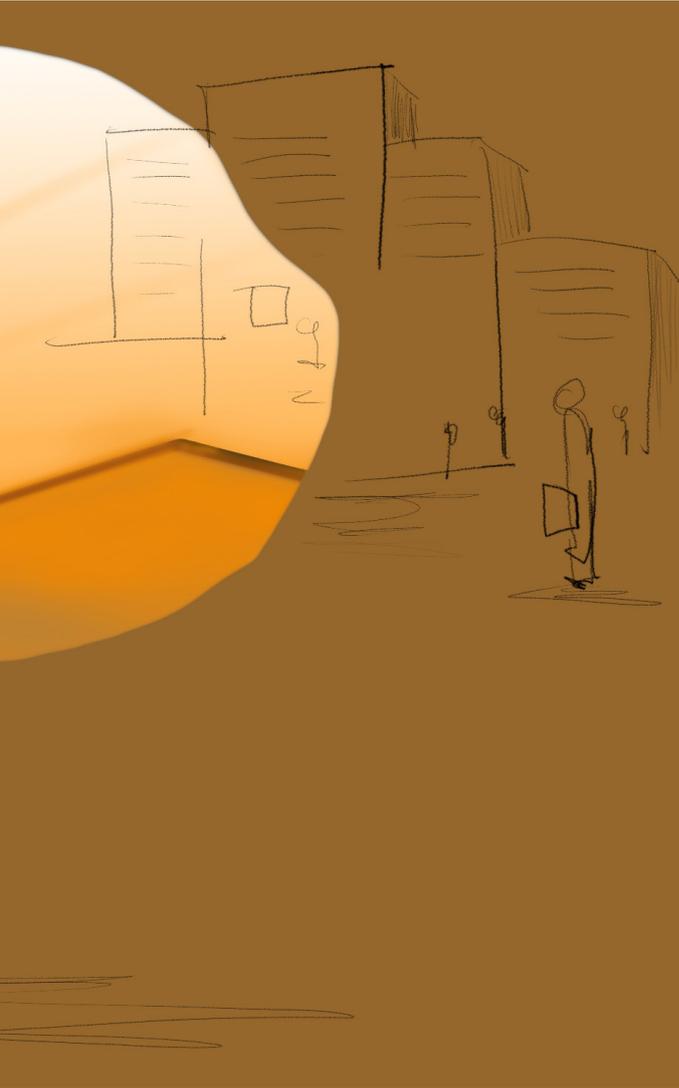
Since my father moved to South Sudan, he rarely communicates with my mother. The last time they spoke, he was still trying to find a job. Despite the challenges my father's facing, he manages to send us \$200 every month through M-Pesa. A refugee can use their documents to open a bank account, but lately it is almost impossible to open an M-Pesa account since it requires a national identification card which we, as refugees, do not have.

I have plans of my own. I would like to open an online pharmacy to cater to refugees at the camp. However, that means getting qualified as a pharmacist, which I cannot afford at this time. I am also planning to go back to Somalia once it's safe to do so. There are no tertiary education programs in the camp. After high school, the options are to either get a scholarship in Kenya or abroad. Without these opportunities, the options are quite limited. For instance, in our family, four of us have finished high school, and I am the only one who got anywhere close to a scholarship. My younger brother sits idle, and my mother gets stressed because she worries he might be taking drugs.

My plan to sort everything out is reapplying for the scholarship. I want to see my name on it, Calaso Abdullah, because I know I have the grades. I want to save my other siblings from facing the same challenges I did.



# Back to the motherland



*I was born in Mogadishu in 1997 during a period of anarchy, the fourth in a family of seven siblings. My father is polygamous. Of his three wives, my mother was the first. My father has 21 children all told. I never enrolled in a secular school in Somalia, but I began attending Islamic religious classes (madrassa) when I was four. We had Sabbath on Thursdays and Fridays but we rarely played outside. It was not safe.*

Narrated by Aziz, 24, Nairobi

Since my father was polygamous, he could barely support his families. As result, my mother had to find ways to supplement his support. She, however, did not help him support the other wives. All her income was for us.

Though she never had a formal education, my mother was a born businesswoman. She first started selling *khat*<sup>7</sup> but soon after shifted to selling second-hand clothes and shoes. She made enough money to cover our education, health care, utilities, and other basic needs without support from my father. As banking services did not exist, she

invested in gold for long-term savings and made all her business transactions in cash.

My father, for his part, was educated and worked in the local foreign currency exchange market. He would divide his earnings between his other two wives who were not making any, and on the rare occasions when he made surplus income, he would give some money to my mother. He hardly saved.

Life was relatively good until 2006 when a movement called Islamic Court Union (locally called Mahakeem) started an

<sup>7</sup> A plant whose leaves are chewed as a stimulant.

offensive to take control of Mogadishu. The city became a battleground as vicious firefights broke out between ICU forces and the local administration's forces.

We—our entire extended family—had to relocate to a town on the outskirts of Mogadishu. The travel expenses cost my father about \$120, and we lived there until the ICU movement was defeated by a coalition of African Union peacekeeping forces and the Somali army. We moved back to our home in Mogadishu where my mother tried to restart her business, but unsuccessfully. She occasionally commuted to the famous open market called Bakaara in central Mogadishu to try her luck there. She used her savings to good effect during this time. Meanwhile, my father was hardly going to work and none of us was going to school. We did not have money for the fees.

At the beginning of 2007, remnants of ICU forces launched an offensive against AMISOM peacekeepers and the Somali National Army. One morning, as my classmates and I were on break from madrassa classes, we were assaulted by the ICU rebels. They shot at us, but no one was harmed. We were all traumatized. I was very lucky that the bullets did not hit me, but they did leave holes in my clothing. That incident changed everything. We were all grounded at home, and no one could go to school or madrassa. My mother could also not go to work because she had to stay with us, which meant that all the financial responsibilities were back on my father. My aunt and uncle would send us \$200 a month from abroad to compensate for my mother's lack of income. I could not receive proper therapy for my trauma from the shooting, and I suffered nightmares and insomnia.

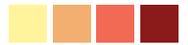
The conflict was intensifying. There were street fights and shelling every day. Artillery was even aimed at residential areas.

*We lived near the road where the military convoys used to pass when entering and exiting the capital. The terrorists would plant roadside bombs targeting the convoys, and then the military would target those living close to the road.*

Due to the conflict, we had to move back to the town where we had previously fled. We found help from humanitarian organisations who provided housing materials, food, domestic utensils, and water. We lived there peacefully for about six months. In that time, I gradually recovered from the trauma. We still couldn't attend school since we could not afford the fees. My mother re-established her business in our new residence, but it was never the same because of the high transportation costs and few customers.

Meanwhile, my father had gotten his job back despite the risk. He had also moved all his other wives to the town. In the meantime, the conflict was advancing towards us. We lived near the road where the military convoys used to pass when entering and exiting the capital. The terrorists would plant roadside bombs targeting the convoys, and then the military would target those living close to the road. They thought we were responsible for the bombs. Sometimes children would play with the bombs and die in explosions. I remember two teenagers who died at the market after a roadside bomb that they were playing with exploded.

In November 2007, my mother decided to move to Dadaab, a refugee camp in Northeastern Kenya. Both my parents contributed funds for the journey, and we



left in a minivan. Along the route in the south, we passed several of anonymous militia and some ICU remnants to whom we paid 'movement fees'. After five days we arrived in Doobley, a town near the Kenya–Somalia border. We stayed there for two days and then proceeded to the refugee camp.

On arrival, we sought refugee status from UNHCR and the government of Kenya. After more than two months, we were registered as refugees. We still got support from my uncle and aunt who would send \$200 at the end of every month through Dahabshiil money transfer agency. After registration, we were able to access refugee services like education, healthcare, shelter, and monthly food rations. I enrolled in a primary school for the first time. I faced challenges with the language barrier and the harsh temperatures of the desert camp.

My mother could not be employed since she was uneducated with no qualifications. She couldn't start a business since she didn't speak Kiswahili, the common language in the camp. She also couldn't obtain the right documents to open and run a business. We had to rely on the monthly stipend from my aunt and uncle and the food from UNHCR.

UNHCR was trying to reduce congestion at the Dadaab Refugee Camp, and they would transfer refugees who voluntarily applied to Kakuma Refugee Camp in Northwestern Kenya. In August 2008, we were transferred to Kakuma. Upon arrival, we were given a plot of land and construction materials to build our new home. I resumed my primary school education, and my mother started a small restaurant. She received \$300 from my aunt to start the business which generated enough money to support the family and make us financially independent. She was also able to save in her M-Pesa account.

In November 2014, I completed my primary education in a camp school where I scored

a B in the national exams. I enrolled in a camp secondary school the following year. Attending camp school is challenging, because both human and material resources are not enough, and there is a lot of congestion. Despite these challenges, I successfully completed secondary school in November 2018, scoring a C in the national exams. During this time, my mother had enough savings to shift her business to selling clothes. She opened a retail garment shop with stock from Nairobi.

After finishing high school, I couldn't find a job or a university or college placement. As I sought a scholarship for my tertiary studies, I helped in my mum's business. Luckily, after five months of searching, my uncle sponsored a placement at Mount Kenya University in Nairobi where I am working towards a Diploma in Business Administration. I receive \$400 for fees from my uncle in the US every semester. I have opened a bank account through which I receive the money and an M-Pesa account which I rarely use.

I attend my classes on a university campus in Nairobi, where I live with my sister. Two of my other sisters excelled in their high school exams and secured a German sponsored university scholarship for the undergraduate refugees (DAFI scholarship). They are now studying medicine and engineering. Currently, my mother still runs her own business in the camp. Since we left home, my father has seen a lot of changes in his life. He stopped working in the currency exchange and was elected as Member of State Assembly in Central Somalia.

My future plans are to finish my studies, majoring in accounting. I intend to go back to Somalia to seek employment. I cannot get a job in Kenya as this requires citizenship which I don't have and can't get.

# *Life in the Camp, A Better School*

On the first arrival day, everything seems to be dark

The sun brilliant and high temperature from morning to night, lack of trees almost absent, houses near from each other, very difficult to adapt, This is the beauty of the common beauty of life and life's experiences, the camp a place to stay and learn how life is all about

In the morning, here are all awake, men and women dressed in simple clothes

Because the high temperature does not allow you to fully cover yourself

From different tribes, different skin colors, different nationalities

Here they are in the row looking for the ration, here they are discussing, here they are exchanging ideas

How beautiful it is to form a unit in the difference...It is this unity that we are aiming for, collaboration and solidarity, and now the camp will be a school where to learn to live it despite the difference!

Now the camp will shine with a good light that makes you forget all the difficulties and problems of the past and the present.

And the camp, a better school of life?



Where the poor and the rich all line up, where they sleep in the house built with the same materials, where they draw from the same source of water, this camp that teaches us to be equal and arrogance does not have room!

The camp that teaches us to look for money, to fight to survive, which pushes us to think more...

Well then, life in the refugee camp, a necessary evil?

The camp, a good peaceful home to be

The camp, our Morals and psychology Teacher

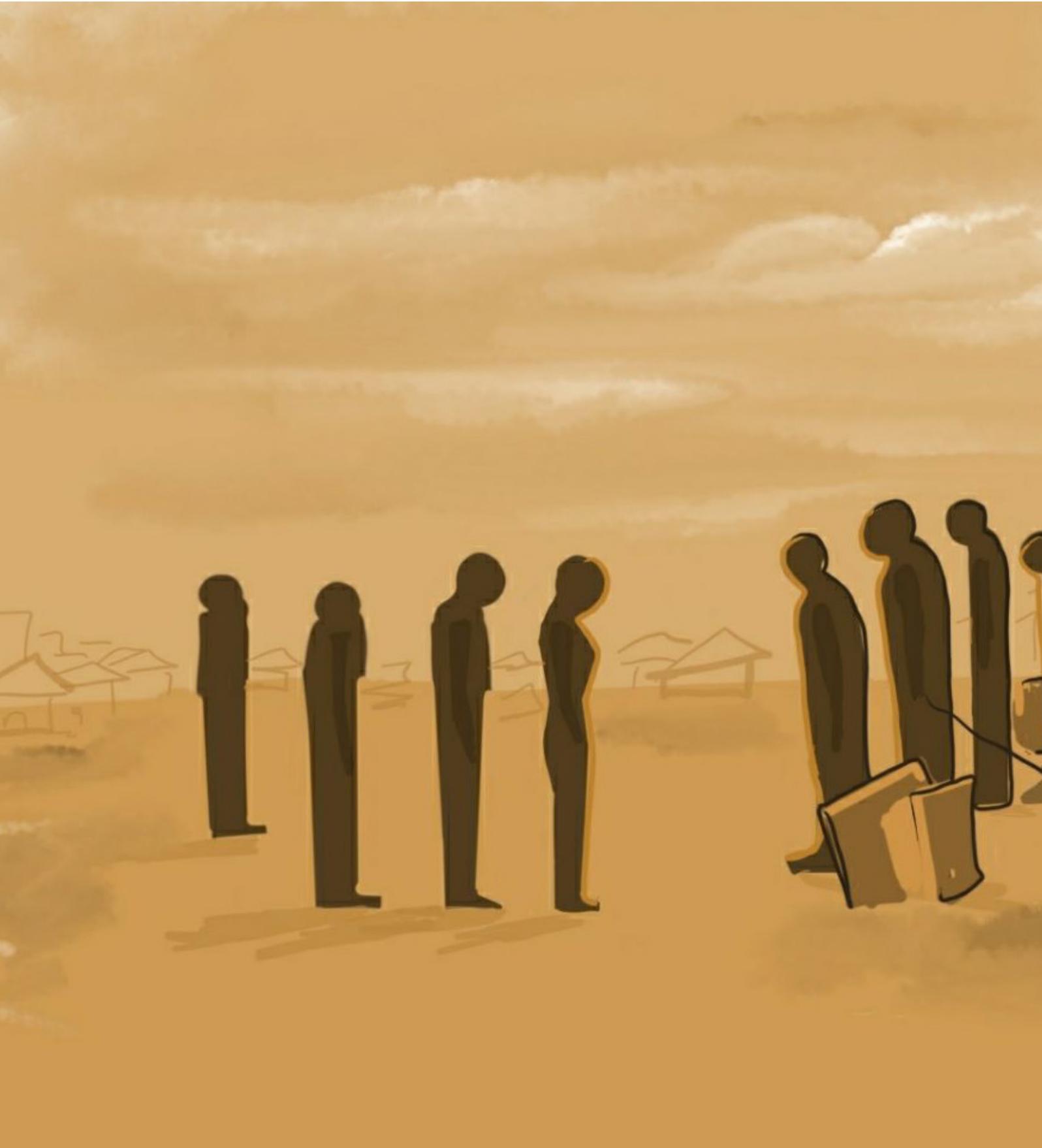
The camp, our Teacher and facilitator

The camp, our teacher of togetherness

The camp, our teacher and brings cultural differences learnings

The camp, our Good democracy experience Teacher

**By Muranga Kudanda, Kakuma, Winner of the FIND Poetry Contest**





# Hitched to a dream

*Faced with tremendous difficulties, refugee families open their minds to marriage as a possible answer to their problems. Marriage offers the prospect of new family resources from dowry payments. It means a girl leaving home, where she might be better cared for, meaning one less mouth to feed at home. For some refugee women, a partnership with a Kenyan promises to bridge exclusions, providing access to a world where she is barred from traversing otherwise. Where does marriage present promise and where does it instead portend peril?*





# Gone before the burning



*So much of what we knew was war. It interrupted our education and shaped our lives. My father hoped that I would leave South Sudan. He always wanted me to go to Kenya to study. But I was stubborn. My friends were going to fight, and fighting seemed far more important than school. I joined the SPLM (Sudan People's Liberation Movement) when I was about 22. I was stationed in Jonglei State. The salary was decent, but you never knew when it would come. It might take three months, it might take six.*

Narrated by John, 35, Kakuma

**W**hile I was stationed in Jonglei, I was seeing a woman, and when she got pregnant, her family was very angry with me. I am Dinka. She was Nuer. They insisted we get married, and I was willing, but they demanded 30 cows as the bride price. There was no way I could do that. I hadn't even been paid for the previous four months. Her family members began threatening to kill me, so I secretly fled to Juba, looking for an escape and a new start.

There, a friend suggested I start a trading business in New Kush. The idea was to import

goods from Lokichogio in Kenya and sell them in New Kush. How would I get the money to start? I remembered my father always wanting me to go study in Kenya. I went to him and told him I was ready to go. Could he help me with some money? He gave me four bulls, which I sold for \$4000. Instead of going to Kenya, though, I went off to New Kush and found a place for the business. I then went to Kenya and found a supplier. He told me the secret to success was selling Coca-Cola, which is loved by the South Sudanese.

Sure enough, thanks to Coca-Cola, my business grew and grew. By 2013, I was finally

stable and was ready to get married to another woman I had met in the area. But then the tensions came again. Salva Kiir, the President of South Sudan, dismissed his cabinet, including Vice President Riek Machar. I knew exactly what it meant. Soon, there were rumors of opposition forces nearby burning, looting, and killing, mostly targeting Dinka like me.

I knew I had to get out. I had \$4000 in my Equity Bank account and \$1500 in cash. I gathered the cash and slept with a friend where I would be safe, while I waited to flee the next day. That very same day, the opposition forces came, looted all of my stock, and burned the business to the ground.

I was able to hire a motorbike to take me all the way to Nadapal to a Red Cross station, where I met with other refugees. We waited for three days until a lorry came to take us to Kakuma.

At the Kakuma reception centre, we were given sleeping mats, cooking pans, one 20-litre jerrycan for water, and a ration card. For some reason, they allocated me a plot in Kakuma 4 which was primarily home to Nuer refugees, not Dinka. Given what I had just escaped, I knew this would not be safe. I went to an area where Dinka are the majority and bought myself a plot with a house for \$800, using some of the cash I had carried from home.

It took me a while to decide how to earn a living in the camp. I decided to try the boda boda business. I took \$1150 of my savings and bought a brand new motorbike from one of the wholesalers in the camp. At first, things were good. I could earn about \$10 per day. But, it seemed like more and more people were joining the business, since it was one of the few things men could do to earn money.

*That very same day, the opposition forces came, looted all of my stock, and burned the business to the ground.*

Soon, revenues were dropping to the point where to get even \$8 required a lot of luck! In October 2018, I got pneumonia, and I decided to get another motorbike, hire two riders, and just collect bike rental money from them. Each week, they give me \$25 each. It's meant to be \$5 per day for the bike, with the weekends for them to keep all of their earnings. They also have families to feed, you know. This is all going well, except the original bike is getting old. I joined a savings club with some Congolese and Burundian neighbours to save up for a new bike. Each week, all ten of us give \$30 to one of the members. On my turn, I'll get \$270.

I haven't been in touch with the woman I wanted to marry in New Kush. If I find her, I'll tell her to come to Kenya. But it's been seven years. Maybe she has moved on.

For now, I stay alone, but I have a woman who cooks for me. She's a single mother of three kids. I give her \$50 every two weeks for food and another \$50 per month just for her own needs.

If I am lucky, I will be resettled to another country. I have a friend in Australia who is trying to help me arrange for private resettlement there. But it's not easy. One has to be a mandated refugee and have \$6000 in their bank account. Maybe I'll get there some day.



# I was told that I was someone's wife

*It was before my mother died. I was living with her, my uncle, and my three younger brothers in South Sudan, helping my mother run a small grocery business. One day my mother and uncle came to tell me that there was a man in the USA who wanted to marry me. He had already sent money, a “booking fee” for a wife, like a down payment on a cow or a car. The very next day, his relatives came for a big party. Just like that, without a word from me, I was told I was someone's wife.*

Narrated by Destiny, 26, Kakuma

**E**ven now, eight years later, we still have not met. I know his name is John. I know he lives in the USA. I know he was one of the Lost Boys, of the first South Sudanese to arrive in Kakuma way back in 1992. I have his photo, and we chat every day on WhatsApp, except for the times I don't have enough airtime. But there's still so much I don't know. He tells me he has to go to work early, but I don't even know what he does.

Still, he keeps sending money. In 2014, a couple of years after mom died, he told me to go to Kakuma with my brothers, so I went. He said it would be better for the boys to go to school there, and that from there, we could see about being resettled, going to stay with him. I had \$180 saved up in cash, and John sent another \$400. My friend had a referendum card (an identity document needed to receive remittances), so she could collect the money for us. We boarded a shared car and were dropped at a Red Cross post in Nadapal. John told us to tell them we were fleeing from insecurity, so that's what we said. From there, we boarded a lorry around 6 am and arrived at the camp around 7 pm.

So many things about the camp took me by surprise. First, was the sun. The sun feels twice as hot in Kakuma as in South Sudan. Second, I was shocked to see other brown people, people like Somalis, Burundians, and Congolese. They don't look like us. I know it sounds silly now, but before we arrived at the reception centre, I thought South Sudanese were the only people in the world.

After a week at the reception centre, we were given a ration card and manifest (identity document). We were taken to a tent in Kakuma 3, which was supposed to be

our home. They helped us with some water cans, mats, and cooking pans. That is how we started our life.

After just a few weeks, someone cut through our tent at night and stole our cooking pans. I was so scared and didn't even know where to complain or look for help. I called John. He suggested we move to Kakuma 1, the more developed side of the camp, and he sent us \$200 to find a house. I rented a house from an Ethiopian man for \$25 per month. We even were able to arrange electricity for \$10 per month from a Somali businessman with a generator.

Once we settled in, I started taking English classes for \$3 per month, and the boys all enrolled in primary school, which was free. I would try to save as much as I could from whatever money John sent. I'd keep the notes hidden under my mattress. (So far, I've never had M-Pesa or a bank account.) By January 2016, I saved \$170 and started a business selling *githeri*, a corn and bean stew, and tea in the market, which is a very popular place for both refugees and Turkanas. The business grew quickly. I now even have two other South Sudanese women who work with me, and I pay them \$2 per day. After all of the expenses, I go home every night with \$6 in profit. Plus, we mostly eat from the restaurant, so we spend very little on extra food.

My husband says he is working to get us all resettled in the USA, where we can stay with him. I don't know how long that will take. Can you imagine, in eight years of marriage, I have never even met this man, but for some reason, he has faith all will be well. He continues to help me and my brothers. He says that soon, maybe early next year, he will come to meet me in Nairobi. It hardly even feels real.



# Why are you running?



*Sometimes, when you run away from fear, it follows you. The wind carries the sound of its whispers, “We know why you are here.” It pokes and prods you as you go. It makes proclamations that tear at you, spring you into action, and fling you towards something. It’s everyone’s hope that that something, that destination, is better.*

Narrated by Sarah, 45, Kakuma

**M**y fears have followed me all the way to this camp in Northern Kenya, kilometres away from Chabwet<sup>8</sup> in the equatorial part of South Sudan where my two children and I were born. I was a farmer back home. I grew vegetables and fruit which I sold at the market. My mangoes were always a hit. I made about KSh. 500 every time I sold them. I fed, clothed, and oiled my children with the money.

I was married in South Sudan. He was a soldier who went out to fight for our freedom. The war gobbled him up and left me a widow at 35. But there was more pain to come, including the issue of my brother. I lost so much in my early thirties: a husband, a home, a family. I packed and left all my fears behind. Or so I thought.

“Your brother murdered our son.” They would say.

“He didn’t mean to...” I’d respond, heart clenched in the same hand that held my children’s hands. “They were friends. It was a mistake.”

I know it was. My brother knows it was, but it was by his spear that his best friend died as they did what they loved to do together: hunt. It was an accident.

Ten years later, the whispers of my brother’s friend’s kin follow me.

“Had you been back home, you’d be dead and you know it.” They taunt.

I do know it.

“You know where your brother is. We’ll find out even if it puts you to the grave.” They promise.

I lived with my brother in Chabwet. He helped me care for my land and my children, but it was clear that he had to go into hiding. His best friend’s relatives kept coming to look for him. He kept moving from one town to the next till he finally left South Sudan.

“They will find me. I have to go far away. I will find you, Sarah.”

A life for a life.

When they couldn’t find him, they came for me.

“You know you’re hiding him. Tell us where he is or we’ll finish you and your family.”

The threats kept coming. The fear bubbled over, and I walked away from Chabwet one morning in 2010 with my two children in tow. The journey was not easy. I did not have much money, and the journey to Kapoeta was long and arduous. We walked for five hours before a lorry stopped for us.

<sup>8</sup> The name of the village has been changed.



*I may have given birth  
to a child with a Kenyan,  
but I am still a refugee,  
unable to leave the camp  
even to find my baby's  
father.*

“Madam, where are you going with the children?” The driver asked.

“Kapoeta.” I answered.

“That’s a long way to walk with two small children. What brings you on this journey?”

I recounted the tale of my dead husband, my brother who killed a man, and the threats that ensued. He took pity on us and gave us a ride to the border town. He was on his way from South Sudan to Lokichogio and there was room on his truck. He was a kind man.

We arrived at the Red Cross Transit Centre in Kapoeta at 7 pm on the same day. I do not remember the date of my departure, but I do remember the intense feeling of relief I felt standing in line with other refugees at the centre. We got food, warm clothes, and a safe place to sleep.

My dreams that night were of a country I had never seen and the safety my children and I needed to experience.

We left Kapoeta for Kakuma Refugee Camp first thing the next morning. We were housed at the reception centre at the camp for a week before being placed in the community with a ration card to use when collecting food, utensils, mats, and a tent.

It wasn’t easy living in the camp. Money was hard to come by. We were a family of three living off rations with very little left over for

basic things like lotion or even a change in diet. I had to be crafty. Since we were a bigger family than most, we got a little extra maize, wheat flour, and yellow beans. I would sell about three kilos of it for KSh. 300 which would last about a week or two. With it, I bought fish or meat and whatever else we needed.

It took me a year in the camp to begin my business. I sold water to other refugees, especially women with businesses. I saw some women do it, and they made good enough money. All it took was carrying my jerrican to the community water point, fetching the 200 litres my family was entitled to daily, 20 litres at a time, and selling what we did not need at the refugee market. Each 20 litre jerrican would fetch me KSh. 10. It may sound simple but it was tough. People had their own suppliers and I had to show up consistently to get my own clients. After a month, it got easier. I sold five to ten jerricans a day, making around KSh. 50-100.

I sold water to keep from selling food. It would often not get us through the month even when I did not sell, so the strain was added when I sold the rations. With the money from the water, I bought fruit, vegetables, and meat so we could balance our diets. The water business got better in 2016. The prices went up to KSh. 20 per jerrican, and I could make about KSh. 200 a day. With the increase in income, I could start saving. I saved about KSh. 300 per week. I dug a hole in my house where I kept the money. My eldest daughter was the only other person who knew about it.

I met a man at my neighbour’s place. She sold alcohol there, and this Turkana man was a regular. We became friends and got into a relationship. You could say we were married. Being with a Kenyan man has benefits. They are paid better than refugees. He helped me with the children, gave me

KSh. 3,000 for food and essentials. It was good to have a man in my life again. He made me laugh, and my children's cheeks filled as my belly did. I gave birth to my third child here at the camp in 2018. She is registered as a refugee, so I cannot claim that her father is Kenyan.

It was a good relationship all the same. He connected me with Turkana people in the charcoal business. They would sell me a bag of charcoal for between KSh. 600 to KSh.700. I got a spot on the side of the road where I would sell a small portion for KSh. 20 and KSh. 30. In three days, the bag would be over, and I would make KSh. 1,100 from a bag that cost me KSh. 700. A profit of between KSh. 300-KSh. 400 per bag was not bad at all considering I did not have to haul jerrican after jerrican of water from the community water point. I have held this business since then because customers keep coming.

Charcoal is a hot commodity. I sell up to eight bags of charcoal a month and make a profit of between KSh. 3,000- KSh. 3,500. I can get anything I need now. See, in the beginning, I had to choose between selling some of our food rations and going without pads that month. There really was no choice. I don't have to worry about these things anymore.

When my business became stable, my husband came to me. "I'm going to Lodwar. I'll be back." He said.

"Eh, Sarah, you know John went back to his wife, yes?"

This was the first I had heard of another wife. I assumed it to be community gossip. I dialled his number. It wouldn't go through. I tried again and again and again and again. I sent messages. I would write:

"Our baby misses you. When are you coming back?"

The message would be met with dead silence. I would send another:

"Please send money for our baby."

I may have given birth to a child with a Kenyan, but I am still a refugee, unable to leave the camp even to find my baby's father. I don't know if he made it to Lodwar, if he is well, and if he thinks of our child or me. All I know is I must keep surviving. I will not keep looking for him because he could take my child. He made that threat before, and I would not want to take that risk. Whatever I make from my business supports my family. Every once in a while, maybe twice or thrice in a week, I will spend KSh. 100- KSh. 150 a day, mostly on food. Every month, I shop in bulk. I spend KSh. 2,000- KSh. 2,500 on shopping. My children are at the refugee school at the camp. There are no school fees. I only have to pay for exams. If they pass, they can get better jobs and live a better life.

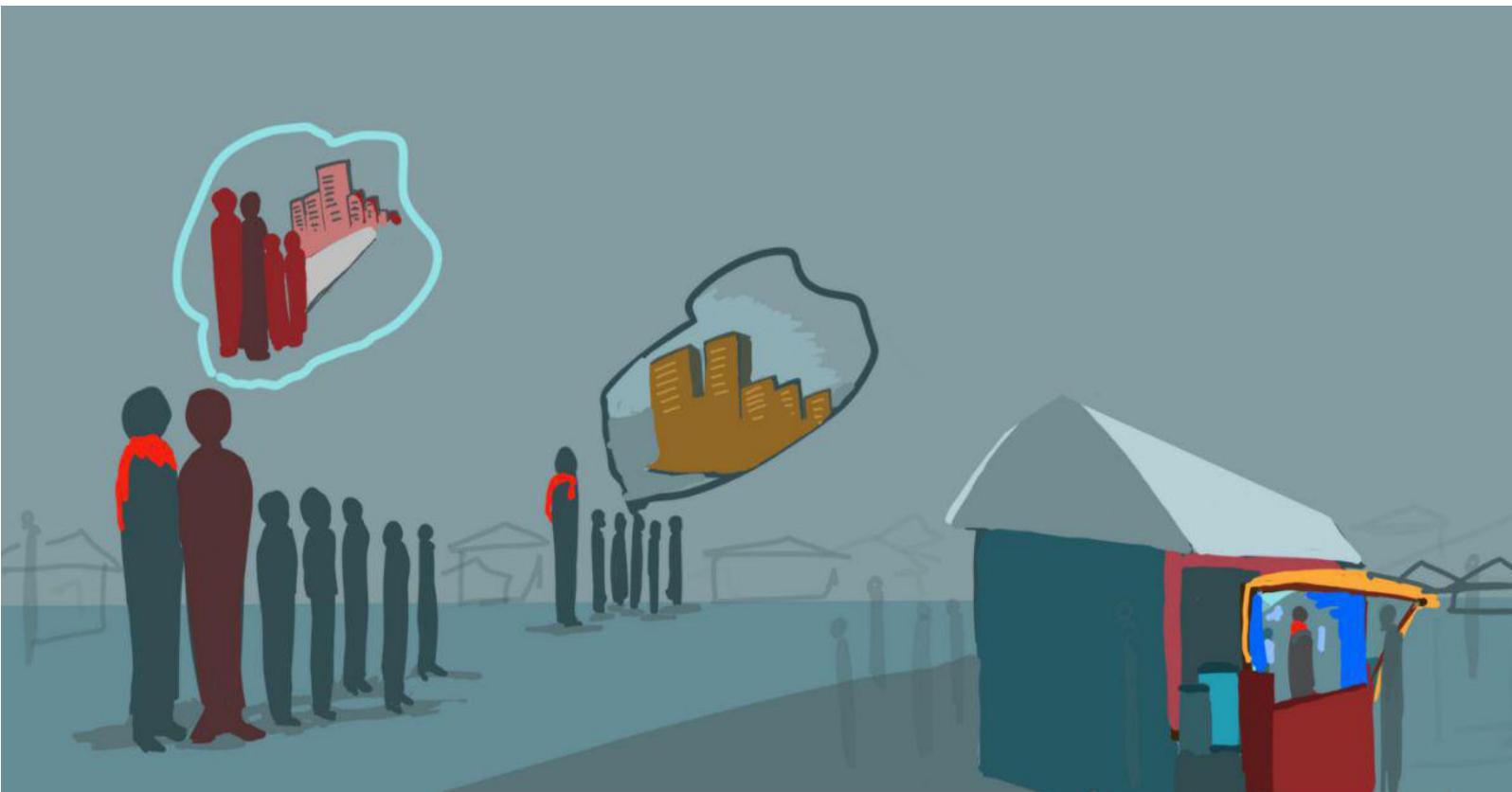
I saw a familiar face one day. It was a man I knew in South Sudan. He had come to Kakuma from Gambela in Ethiopia, to visit his family. He had news about my brother.

"He is safe." He said.

"My brother?" I asked.

"Yes. He is a refugee in Ethiopia."

I must have shed a tear. Apart from my children, my brother is the only family I have, yet we are kilometres away, separated by borders and carrying the fears we thought we were running from and the ones we collected along the way.



# Picking up the pieces

*I was born and raised in the Somali countryside in an area called Budbud. My father owned large herds of cattle and was very wealthy. He had four wives, and my mother was the youngest of the four. It was a forced marriage, and some of his children were even older than her when they married.*

Narrated by Aisha, 51, Kakuma



**M**y parents' marriage was not a happy one: all the women and their children lived in the same compound, and there was animosity among them. My mother was often the target of the other women's scheming. They always found ways to blame her for one thing or the other. My father's response was often to beat her. One day, after a particularly severe beating for something she had not done, mother left my father's home, taking me with her. I was just a baby then. When she got to her parents' home, my grandmother told her that she could not stay, that it would look bad and send the wrong message. So they sent her back to her husband who beat her again.

Mother went on to have three more children in three years. The pregnancies left her frail and malnourished. The older wives were responsible for doling out the food, and they never gave my mother enough. Mother would then skip meals so that there was enough for us children. When I was five years old, there was a smallpox outbreak in the countryside, and mother contracted it. With no medicine and no one to take care of her, mother died.

When my grandmother heard the news, she and my aunt came to our home to bury mother. Afterwards, she returned to her home, and our aunt stayed to look after us. Five years later, my aunt left to get married, thrusting me into the role of parent for my three siblings. That was the beginning of the end of my childhood. My father was hardly involved and generally showed no interest in us. Whether we ate or had clothes was not his concern. We never felt his love for us. The interactions with our step mothers and their children continued to be unpleasant, so we avoided them as much as possible.

After several years, my step mothers became restless with life in the countryside so they talked to my father about moving to the city. He acquiesced, sold half his herd, and

moved the entire family to a big house in Kismayu. This was the mid-1980s. Our house was like a market with constant noise. Father settled into city life easily, selling his remaining livestock and using the money to set up a supermarket business. However because of his advanced age, he wasn't able to manage the business so he put his older sons in charge. The constant interference by the wives, fueled by their mistrust of each other, doomed the business to failure.

Our household income went from \$600 a month to just under \$200, and it wasn't until much later that we found out the reason why. The oldest son was embezzling money from the business and giving it to his mother who one day announced that she was moving back to the village because life in the city was no longer meeting her expectations. Father sold whatever was left of the business and bought a farm, so we could grow our own food.

In 1989, a few skirmishes erupted between the clans but on the whole, there was relative calm. With time, the relations between the clans began to deteriorate with some banding up with the intent of overthrowing the government. In early 1990, a massive explosion ripped through our neighbourhood. Our house was not directly hit but the blast blew out the windows, and there was smoke everywhere.

We ran out of the house thinking we were going to die as the smoke filled our lungs and stung our eyes. It was worse outside. There were bodies lying in the street, bewildered people screaming and running in all directions.

Fathers carried their bloodied children, some missing an arm or a leg. Then there was the popping sound of gunfire. I held on to my sister's hand as tightly as I could as we ran through the chaos looking for our brothers.

*A few months into the marriage, the cracks began to appear. My husband would go away for weeks at a time without telling me where he had gone. When I went looking for him at the shop, there would be an old man working there who wouldn't answer my questions.*

Unable to find them, we changed course, running in the same direction as everyone else. We didn't know where we were going or who we were running from, but we kept going. For several days, we ran then walked when we were too tired to run, then sat when we could no longer walk. At night, we slept out in the open, the threat of wild animals ever present. We ate whatever leaves we could forage.

When we arrived in Dadaab, we were taken in by the UNHCR which had set up a refugee camp. We were given our food ration cards and allocated a small tent for the two of us. We walked throughout the camp looking for our father and brothers but we couldn't find them. We feared that they had been killed. Every two weeks, we would line up for our food, returning home late in the evening because the queues were so long.

The food was limited to four kilos of grains, wheat flour, and two litres of cooking oil. If we wanted anything beyond this list, fruits, vegetables, salt, sugar, then, we had to buy it ourselves. We didn't have money to buy other items, so sometimes we would sell part of our food ration then use the money to buy whatever else we needed including non-food items. There was a shop within the camp that I would visit frequently, and one day I met the owner.

I asked him if I could get some sugar on credit with the promise to pay him later. He agreed without hesitation. A few days later when I saw him again, the most surprising thing happened: he asked me to marry him. His proposal threw me off guard; we didn't know anything about each other only having just met, and, besides, he was ten years older than me. Yet I agreed to his proposal. Maybe it was the fact that he was kind or that we had both lost so much. He lost his entire family in the war and had been fortunate to be able to escape with some money which enabled him to start his business here in the camp. I also had to admit that the fact that he was financially secure was appealing to me. When I told my sister about the proposal, she was happy for me.

My husband built us a modest, two-roomed house, which allowed my sister to live with us. It wasn't my idea that she live with us but his, because otherwise she would be lonely in the camp. I thought that was very kind of him. We could now eat meat whenever we wanted and pick supplies from the shop. But a few months into the marriage, the cracks began to appear. My husband would go away for weeks at a time without telling me where he had gone. When I went looking for him at the shop, there would be an old man working there who wouldn't answer my questions.

This went on for years, and in 1995, I heard rumours that my husband had another family. We of course had our children, so the notion that he had another family was incredulous. When he returned, I confronted him about what I had heard. He didn't deny it but instead responded by beating me badly. He told me to never question him again or he would kick us out of the house. I became afraid of him and took his threats seriously, so I never raised the issue again.



*I applied for resettlement to America. Our request was approved but dropped at the last minute when the agency asked about my husband's whereabouts. I told them the truth, and we were dropped from the process. I followed up with the UN but got no answers.*

By 1997, we had five children: three boys and two girls. The children attended the school in the camp, which was free. They received porridge each day, and school supplies were also provided for free. Unbeknownst to me, my husband was in the process of moving his other family to America. The day he left, he gave me \$500, saying that he would also sell the shop and give me the money, so I could take care of the children. I was devastated, but there was nothing I could do. My sister also got married. Her husband, who was a primary school teacher, made \$80 per month. It was the only income they had since she didn't have a job, but she would give me \$40 a month to take care of the children.

After my sister moved to America and gave her food ration card to her husband, I also applied for resettlement to America. Our request was approved but dropped at the last minute when the agency asked about my husband's whereabouts. I told them the truth, that he was living in America with his other family, and we were dropped from the process. I followed up with the UN but got no answers. Under the advice of other refugees, my family moved to Kakuma in 2003 to restart the application process. I spent \$300 to move to Kakuma and \$150 to build us a house. My sister would send me \$200 every once in a while, which was a big help.

I started the resettlement application process again, but the agency officials told me that the resettlement process was designed to assist those refugees who needed "real" support and that I didn't qualify because my husband was in America. I tried to plead my case, telling them that my husband did not support us, but my application was rejected. I left despondent. I regretted meeting my husband and marrying him. I wished I could go back home, but there was no one and nothing to go back to.

I called my sister with an idea to set up a shop, and she sent me \$500. I stocked the shop with cereals, flour, rice and sugar. All the children continued to study and grow. My three oldest children did very well, excelling in the national exams and qualifying for scholarships sponsored by one of the NGOs to continue with university education in Canada.

I was thrilled for them. In Canada, they got part-time jobs while they studied, sending me \$700 per month, which was more than enough to support me and the other children. I expanded the business as well. I opened two additional shops at different locations and hired workers. My two remaining children didn't do as well as their siblings, so instead of Canada, they went to the University of Nairobi. I'm happy for all my children. They have been able to go further and achieve so much despite the hardships they have experienced. Their future can only be bright. In 2018, the children living in Canada put in an application for immigration for us through the family sponsorship program. If the application is successful then we will join them there. Until then, I continue to run my business.





# Powerless

*Refugees are fleeing from problems they did not create. That alone is a kind of trauma — being stripped of everything familiar with no agency over the matter. Layered on top of that violence, however, is the trauma of direct physical violence in their countries of origin, on their journeys, and even upon reaching Kenya. Some of that is powerful, in-your-face violence. Other times, it is the equally powerful, but more subtle violence of heartless, faceless bureaucracies standing between refugees and their possibilities to live again.*





# From the frying pan into the fire

*Things had gotten bad in Somalia. That's true. The droughts, the inflation, the constant looting, and the violence. All of that forced my mother's tea stall and my father's shop into bankruptcy. We fled to Kakuma, my parents hoping that at least we six kids would continue school there. But, honestly, the camp is a small hell, and there is no end in sight.*

Narrated by Ali, 22, Kakuma

**I**t's such a huge change from the idyllic childhood I remember. My father had a small shop down the street from our house. Selling food and clothing, he brought home about \$500 per month, which paid for all of our needs: rent, school fees, and healthcare. My mom ran a small tea shop to supplement dad's income.

But by 2011, things were falling apart at home. Completely broke, my parents took us to Kakuma. For the first year, we depended 100% on the UN. After about a year, my mother managed to start a small business buying and selling people's unused UN rations. But it was tough going. Not many people had extra rations to spare, and lots of people were trying to earn a living just like my mom. But it helped to have a little cash for things like soap and shampoo, which weren't provided by the UN.

In the camp, it was hard for my dad to start a business. He was used to running shops, but to do that he needed a lot of capital, something we definitely did not have.

He got the idea to serve as a sort of facilitator and advisor to a large number of shops. He helped them link to and manage suppliers, which improved shop sales. From this, he was able to create a salary for himself of about \$200 per month. He saved as much as he could, so he could start his own shop, attached to our house, after about a year.

By then, we had adjusted to some of the unique financial arrangements in Kenya. It took me a while to get used to the denominations of currency. It was hard to keep track of what the money meant. A 10-shilling coin is so small, but it's not useless! I had to learn.

And then there was M-Pesa, this 'soft money' system. We just couldn't imagine paying for things if it wasn't done using physical cash. And there were so many ways you could get the M-Pesa transaction wrong. The whole thing was so strange and scary.

We had never used a bank before, either. For a long time, we would dig holes and bury the



*It's better financially, but it's not as good as when I was young. And our memory of the violence and hatred we've seen in this place will be with us forever, in this little hell, which continues to be our home.*

money inside. Then we found out people in Kakuma often left their savings with a shopkeeper, and we could not believe this. Can you imagine, just trusting your wealth to another person??? People do!

Once my father's shop was going, things got better. But in late 2014, gunmen broke into our home and ordered us all to lay on the ground. My father screamed, and they stabbed him in the belly. He fell to the floor moaning, while they looted his shop completely, ordered my mother to hand over her savings, and then raped two of my sisters, right in front of us. My mother pleaded with them to stop, to just take what they wanted, but to leave the girls alone. I will never forget my sisters' cries. They left with all of our things, all of our money, and my sisters' lives as they knew them.

They survived, but are still in therapy. It wasn't just the rape they had to endure.

People immediately blamed the girls for what happened, even when they were still in the hospital

with my father recovering. After this horrible incident, UN officials came, promising to start the process of resettlement, so we could be safe. It took three years, but we were approved to go to the USA in 2017. But before we left, we were told that America has banned immigrants from Somalia from entering the country. Once one country has approved you for resettlement, no other country can take you again. So that's it. We are stuck in this tiny hell.

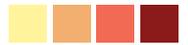
We had no choice but to try and make a living again. Some refugees in our same clan raised money to help my father reopen his shop. I finished secondary school and spent a year working as a private tutor. I'd work from about 4-6 pm and was able to earn about \$60 per month. It was one of the best jobs around, if you ask me. But I also wanted more.

My friends and I hired some other young people to take our tutoring jobs, but for \$40 per month, while we are trying to set up a distribution centre to help local businesses source their goods from around Kenya. At the moment, each of us is getting about \$300 per month from the business, and it's still growing.

It's better financially, but it's not as good as when I was young. And our memory of the violence and hatred we've seen in this place will be with us forever, in this little hell, which continues to be our home.

# Wanted





*I was born into a family of ten in South Kivu in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). My father was a teacher and my mother a farmer. We had a lot of land where we raised cows and grew many crops which we sold in the market. We had a relatively good life but often lived under a cloud of interethnic violence. For years, we the Banyamulenge, have been viewed as outsiders and have had simmering tensions with the Mai-Mai. On many occasions those tensions boiled over into war.*

Narrated by Gloria, 32, Mombasa

**I**n 2016, the Mai-Mai attacked our village, and my mother was among the many who were killed. On Christmas Eve the following year, another attack drove the remaining residents out of the village. I remember the events of that day so clearly: as we ran for safety, I became separated from my father and siblings. I tried calling out their names, but I couldn't find them. I kept on running, not looking behind me, stumbling as I struggled to keep up with those running ahead of me. The adrenaline kept me going although I was scared to death.

When we finally made it to Bunagana along the Ugandan border, I was shocked to see how many of us were there. I looked through the crowd for my family, but I still couldn't find them. I feared the worst. There was no time, though, to sit or think or cry. For all we knew, the Mai-Mai could be following us. I had never been alone like this, and I could feel the anxiety surging through my body. I had no money and only the clothes on my back. I saw this young couple who appeared to be my age, and I decided there and then that I would travel the rest of the journey with them, wherever it led.

We heard that Kenya was receiving refugees and that quickest way to get into Kenya

was through Busia. We didn't know how to get there, so we followed the crowd, asking directions from the people we met along the way. They didn't seem surprised to see us, they had heard about the war in South Kivu and had seen the flow of people escaping the violence. Some good Samaritans even gave us lifts in their vehicles, giving our tired bodies some respite. My heart was uneasy, thoughts of my family were not far from my mind. Had they made it out alive? Were they on their way to Busia too, or had they already arrived? How was I going to find them? The journey to Busia took us a week. When we arrived, we continued on to Nairobi because we were told we could receive refugee support services there. Without any money to pay for the fare, I relied on my traveling companions.

The warm reception we received in Busia was not repeated in Nairobi. We found our way to the UNHCR offices, but when we got there and explained our situation, the security guards turned us away. They told us that we needed to go to the refugee registration centre in Shauri Moyo. We had no idea where Shauri Moyo was or how we would get there. They offered very little information other than saying that we needed to go to the town centre then find our way from there. Getting

to town was only the start. We didn't speak English or Kiswahili so asking for directions was a major challenge. The streets were busy with people moving so fast, their faces focused on their own plans. We would ask one person who would explain to us how to get to the next bus terminus and then have to ask yet another person because we were still hopelessly lost.

When we finally made it to the registration centre, I was ready to stay there forever. There were other Banyamulenge who were also there to register. They had come all the way from Masisi, Ruchuru, and some from my own village. The news from my village was not good. The village had been completely decimated, many had been killed, and the Mai-Mai had driven away our animals. With the help of interpreters, we were able to get our registration documents and were informed that we would be transferred to Kakuma Refugee Camp.

The other refugees whispered to us not to go to Kakuma, warning that the conditions there were extremely difficult. Instead, they offered to shelter us in their homes. The Banyamulenge are known for their generosity towards their fellow kinsmen. We accepted their offers immediately. It seemed better to be with our countrymen here even though we just met than to be flung to a faraway place where we didn't know a soul or what conditions awaited us. The couple I was traveling with went off with another family. We said goodbye to each other as we took steps into the unknown.

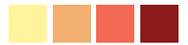
I started looking for work as soon as I settled in with my host family. It was a major adjustment in Kenya; there were so many times I wanted to hide out indoors and not have to face the world. I missed my family, the familiarity of my village, and my social life. The language barrier was a major handicap when navigating the city. I

was lost a lot of the time, and I was sure that everyone could see that I didn't belong. It took me four months to get a job, and my first was in a grocery store. The long hours took a toll on my body, and my feet started to swell from standing for so many hours.

After two months, unable to cope with the pain in my legs, I quit the job and used the money I had earned, which was \$2.50 per day, to set up my own business. I set up a small stand selling fresh vegetables. There was a lot of competition from many vendors selling fresh produce, and the margins were small. After not making a profit for two months, I abandoned the business. I then got a job as a waitress in a restaurant earning \$3.00 per day. Again, as before, I spent many hours on my feet, and the pain returned. The boss was rude, and the work environment toxic. After two weeks, I had reached my limit and left the job.

I stayed home for a while after that, feeling completely dejected by my experiences since coming to Kenya. The one bit of good news during that terrible time was that my family was living in refugee camps in Rwanda and Uganda, but I had no way of contacting them. At least they were alive.

One of my friends came to my rescue when she invited me to join her group of other refugee women who were making and selling beaded jewelry as a way to support themselves. I was happy to be doing something that didn't require me to be on my feet and to be working with a group of people who understood my circumstances. I also enrolled in an English language class with an organisation formed by refugees with a focus on empowering them but later had to drop out because I was desperately short on money and needed to find work. I found a few casual jobs now and then, making about \$3.00 a day while also selling the beaded jewelry.



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In September 2019, I got a job offer to work in a salon in Bomet, a six-hour drive from Nairobi. The salary offer of \$100 per month was good enough for me to go to Bomet even though I didn't know anyone there. I told myself it was going to be a fresh start.

After the first month, I was paid \$80 and \$70 for the next two subsequent months. When I asked why my salary had been cut, the boss told me that this was in fact how much I was going to be earning and not \$100 as promised. This really upset me, and at the end of the third month, I left. The employer had exploited me because I was a refugee. Employers were notorious for renegeing on employment agreements because they knew there were no consequences.

Refugees often have no legal status, so they cannot pursue any legal redress from breaches in employment agreements or contracts. Their lack of money and the language barrier only makes the process much more difficult.

After the disappointment in Bomet, I signed up as a salesperson with one of the local telecommunications companies, selling phone lines for which I got a commission when the customers bought airtime. It was a good enough job with one of the perks being able to travel around the country.

As much as I enjoyed the work and the freedom it gave me, I also had to contend with constant harassment from men I encountered. I even heard stories of refugee women and girls who had been assaulted. So, for safety, I teamed up with two other sales ladies, and we made sure to always travel together.

The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic and the movement restrictions that followed put an end to my travel. Despite the restriction, I was still able to make about \$120-\$170 per month from commissions. In July of 2020, I got married, and my life took a different direction. In my culture, the idea that married women can have a job that requires them to travel frequently and alone is frowned upon, so in August, I stopped selling phone lines. My husband gave me \$100 to start a business, and I now sell dried fish.

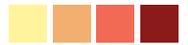
If you ask me, I'd rather be selling phone lines than fish. We live in Mombasa where my husband has a job in a bakery. He works long hours though it's not a permanent position, so he does not have any employment benefits like paid leave or healthcare. He talks about his dreams and plans for our future. I get carried away by his optimism that we shall have a better life, although I keep my own dreams close to my chest. I want to see my family again, but I don't know if that will ever happen. I, too want that better life not as a refugee but as a citizen in a country where we are wanted.



*I loved my life in Ethiopia. I was in love. My husband and I had four perfect children, three girls and one boy. Both of us were working and meeting all of our needs. What more could I want? My husband was a doctor. He used to take night shifts and sometimes went out for fieldwork as well; those extra allowances allowed us to treat ourselves from time to time. I ran my own kiosk and had a boda I hired out that brought in extra money. Together, my husband and I were saving in an equb (chama) to build our own home and finally stop paying rent.*

Narrated by Zara, 32, Nairobi





# If you're uncomfortable, you can go

**T**he harassment started in 2016. My husband had gone to an orientation meeting in Hawassa, and that got him on some kind of list. Soldiers were always on the lookout for my husband. They would arrest him, beat him up, and let him go. It happened several times. Then one day in 2018, while he was working the night shift at the hospital, they came to look for him. He hid. Four of them then came to the house trying to find him there. But he was at work. They were fuming angry, stormed into the house, shouting that my husband was a dead man. When they couldn't find him, they threw me to the floor and raped me while the children cried and begged them to stop.

When they left, everything was unnaturally quiet. Nothing was moving. None of us said a word for what seemed like a very long time. Then I lifted myself up and called my husband at work. "We need to leave."

I was so afraid. I didn't know why they wanted to kill my husband. I couldn't believe the violence we were facing.

Then I had a new fear, how could my husband love me after this? He is such a gentle man and has always been faithful to our marriage. I felt I had betrayed him. I had been taken by other men, by his enemies. Would he ever look at me the same way again?

We grabbed a bag with my husband's documents and all the money we had on hand from our savings and the capital from the kiosk. I threw in my gold jewelry as well. In total, the money was about \$2500 but all in Ethiopian birr. At 3 am we boarded a matatu heading to Addis. We didn't know where we were going. Maybe we should go to Hawassa and hide out, my husband suggested. But then we got down from the matatu at Adama and heard a conductor calling out for Moyale. My husband had a former colleague living there and gave him a call. Did he have any relative who might take us in and give the children a place to lay their heads? He told us yes, we should get to Kenya since no one would be looking for us there. Once we get to Moyale, we should keep going to Nairobi, and his brother would meet us there.

I believe that God can see your inner thoughts, and when things are very difficult, He can make a way. That's the only way I can describe our luck when we got near the border. We had found one man who offered to smuggle us across the border as long as we paid.

But we didn't feel good about him. Something was off. We told him we would pass on his services.

We decided to wait and see if there might be another way. At that time there was also this very serious conflict in that area among the Boranas. Even the UN came in. When we saw crowds of people fleeing, we just joined along. We didn't know if we were going towards Kenya or back into danger in Ethiopia. It turns out we were crossing into Kenya, with the border open to allow people to escape the fighting.

After some time, we came across a car taking people to Nairobi, and we got in the car. We tried calling my husband's colleague's brother, but he wasn't answering the phone, so we just asked people in the car to direct us to an Oromo neighborhood, and we got down there. After three days fleeing home, here we were.

We sat in a corner, trying to decide what to do next. We were so tired and dirty. We hadn't carried any clothes with us. My period even started while we were on the way, and I had no clean clothes to change into. There was a woman selling food there on the corner. I introduced myself and bought some food for the kids. We started chatting, and she asked if we had a place to stay. No. Even though she lived in a crowded house with her five children and her mother, she took us in. She went around to other Oromos and asked them to donate some food and clothes for us. I wept with relief that night. No more running.

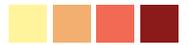
After only about five days, this woman heard about a friend, a fellow Oromo, who was leaving the country. If she wanted, she could take over their whole house, even the furniture was going to stay behind. So she moved there with her kids, letting us keep her flat so long as we could look after her mother.

She felt safer knowing my husband was a doctor and could treat the elderly woman when she became sick.

Since we were just taking over her lease, we didn't have to pay a deposit. Rent was KSh 10,000 per month, and we paid KSh 5,000 while the woman paid the other KSh 5,000 for her mother. We didn't know where to change our money into Kenyan money, so she went out and changed it for us. Even now, I can't believe her generosity. I believe God sent her for us.

We realized our money would run out if we weren't working. I was able to take a loan of \$200 from Heshima and bought pots and ingredients to start selling samosas. Sometimes I also do *injera* (Ethiopian flatbread made with teff), cakes, and sometimes these pastries we call *kureza*. I go up and down the streets of Eastleigh selling. By now people know me and that my food is very nice. My husband stays home with the kids. Once in a while Ethiopians who can't afford to go to the hospital come to see him for treatment. They offer him \$1 or \$2, just small tokens to say thanks. It breaks my heart to see this skilled professional sitting at home, especially when sometimes we are even sleeping hungry. Life isn't just about survival. You have to have your dignity, too. I hope that God will open doors for him so he can start working. He has gone everywhere asking for a job, but they say without a work permit, they can't help. I can see him losing himself the more he sits in the kitchen with me, like a woman.

I worry about my girls, too. You have to protect your daughters in this country. And with this corona thing, they have not been going to school. When they go out, they are hounded by boys. My husband has to constantly look after them. The trauma they have experienced still sticks with them. You would be sad if you saw them, and they were kids who were brought up properly.



*It breaks my heart to see this skilled professional sitting at home, especially when sometimes we are even sleeping hungry. Life isn't just about survival. You have to have your dignity, too.*

If you talk to other refugees, they will tell you they are scared of police and *kanjo* (city guards) and stuff, but that has not been the case for me. I had only one fear when we arrived in Nairobi: Will my husband hate me? I was not even thinking of anything else. In comparison, everything else seems like such a small problem. If we had not left Ethiopia that day, I am sure my husband would have been killed and that I would have committed suicide. That lady who took us into her house knew I was not okay, and she took me to a clinic that works with refugees. They helped me get some mental health services, and with time I have gotten so much better. I am so happy for that.

It also helped to join a group, like a chama, with about 30 other women. Heshima organized us, and we supported each other and saved together, at least before Covid. Now things are harder. I keep my money in a small piggy bank, and take it out to pay rent. I would prefer to save on M-Pesa, but they say we are not allowed to register with just our refugee IDs.

There's not much to save these days. Samosa sales went way down during corona. We were eating like half of the samosas and cakes I was making. There were just no customers. But things got better during Ramadan and Arafat. I'm still struggling to keep up with rent. Our friend hasn't been able to help

with rent during corona, so we try to get the full amount ourselves. It's a struggle now, and when I'm late, the landlords cut off our lights and our water. Even when I'm on time, they sometimes cut it off. I think they want us to leave. I heard they used to charge \$130, so they think they can get more if we leave. But they don't ask us for more. They just cut things and then tell us, "If you're not comfortable, you can leave." Lucky for me, I have a very good relationship with the watchman. I treat him like family. When they cut us off, I go and ask him to switch it back on for us. You have to be smart with how you treat people. Even now, we are living without water. Can you imagine, even in Covid, we have no water for washing hands!

Our power has been out a lot as well, and that is very difficult for me. I normally have to stay up until around 2am wrapping samosas. Sometimes if our lights are out, I ask to use a friend's kitchen, but you can't do that every day. It's a nuisance to others who want a clean kitchen and who are trying to sleep.

We struggle so much here, but at least we still have each other. My husband is my best friend. We face our struggles together. Maybe one day, we'll be relocated to Canada. Going home? I would rather die. How could I ever go back and look anyone in the eye? In that country, I was raped. I was treated that way in a country where once I was respected, where I gave birth. If there is any more "going" for us, it is going forward and farther away.



# Castles on sand



*Some refugees have remarkable stories of landing in Kenya with almost nothing and through persistent struggle and doses of good luck manage to build what seem—at least for now—self-sustaining livelihoods, against all odds. These stories of achievement show what may be possible for some, but also remind us of all that can be built on loose and shifting foundations. That reality is ever more acute as we write in March 2021, when the Kenyan government again threatens a mass eviction of refugees from Dadaab and Kakuma. Even these great refugee successes are castles built on sand.*





# Home is where you are

*We once lived in a semi-permanent home in North Kivu where my parents farmed five acres of land, growing potatoes and sorghum and rearing cows. My first experience with loss occurred when two of my siblings died in childhood. In 2007 when I was fifteen, my father died unexpectedly following a mining accident, his death marking the end of my education. I dropped out of school to help my mother on the farm. As the oldest, it was now my responsibility to take care of our family.*

Narrated by Joseph, 28, Kakuma

**I**n October 2013, fighting broke out between M23 rebels and government forces in Masisi. Many civilians, including my mother and younger brother, were killed. As we escaped towards Bunagana on the Ugandan border, my siblings and I became separated. When I finally made it to Bunagana, I waited five days, looking for my siblings, hoping they had made it out safely and were on their way here, but they never showed up. There were several men at the border and one of them, Jean Pierre, was from my village. Seeing him proved to be a blessing because Jean Pierre happened to meet up with Mr Musa, a driver he knew, who advised us to travel to Kenya where it would be safer. Mr Musa was kind enough to give us a ride in his trailer, a journey that took us four days to reach Nairobi. I was impressed by the tall buildings, the flyovers and crisscrossing highways, and the streetlights that lit up the night. However, my awe was mixed with fear; I was only twenty-one years old, with no family, and only \$30 to my name.

When we arrived in Nairobi, Mr Musa extended his generosity by paying for a night's stay in a hotel. The next day, we went to the UNHCR offices, then were taken to the Department of Refugee Affairs in Shauri Moyo to register as asylum seekers.

We asked if we could get the relevant documents that would allow us to stay and work in the city. Mr Musa had hinted that with the proper documentation, he could help us find work in Mombasa. But our request was denied. We were informed that refugees were no longer allowed to reside outside the designated refugee camps and that we would be moved to Kakuma.

That same day, we were transferred to the UNHCR transfer centre where we remained for three days. From there, we moved to the Kakuma reception centre where we stayed for two weeks while we waited for our housing allocation. Everything seemed to be happening so fast, and I had no say or control over any of it.

By November 2013, we were firmly in Kakuma, Jean Pierre and I sharing a three-by-six meter tent. On the one hand, it was okay because at least I was living with my friend, but the space was cramped. I wondered about the integrity of the tent. Could we really be safe in this flimsy structure? Kakuma itself was a desert; the temperatures were the highest I had ever experienced, often feeling like the sun was just inches from my head.

By February 2014, Jean Pierre had had enough. With no opportunities to work and the harsh environment, he slipped out of the camp and headed to Mombasa in search of a better life. I kept in touch via calls which I made using my neighbor's phone since I didn't have one. In June 2014, we lost contact. I called his number several times, but he never answered. Loss, it seemed, had no end.

*I had to forge ahead despite the challenges because I had big plans: to buy my own motorbike and also to get married. I left the likilimba and joined another with 13 members collecting \$650 every ten days.*

Back at the camp, life was a daily struggle. I missed Jean Pierre and envied his freedom. There was barely enough to eat: the food rations were a kilo each of rice, sorghum, wheat flour, and yellow peas, which was supposed to last me an entire month. Later we received a \$5 food voucher a month to supplement our rations, but even this, I found was like a drop in the ocean. I wondered how families were surviving on this if they didn't have additional income. I had to find a job and was lucky to secure one as a mason on a building site where I earned \$3 a day. It was back-breaking work, and the heat did not let up. After a long day of work, I would go to the camp football grounds and catch a few games. Something as simple as watching a game or going to church on the weekend helped me connect with others, driving away the loneliness.

Continuing on a path of self-improvement, I enrolled in a three-month English language course and when I wasn't in class, I took riding lessons from a friend who owned a motorbike. I paid him \$1.50 per hour with money I saved from the masonry job. By May 2014, I was proficient enough to start work as a boda rider, ferrying passengers and goods and making \$10 to \$15 a day. Since I didn't own the bike, I would then pay \$30 a week to the owner, spend \$3 a day of fuel and save the \$2 to \$7 I made in profit.



Without a driver's license, because none were issued to refugees in the camp, my route was limited to the camp and Kakuma town. It worked out well because the customers were not in short supply. In June that year, I joined a group of fourteen other drivers to form a *likilimba* (savings club) where we each contributed \$3 a day over a ten-day cycle, with one member collecting \$420 at the end of each cycle. With my \$420, I renovated my house, put up a fence around my compound, bought clothes, a new mattress, and some household items. I was even able to save \$70 in my M-Pesa account.

Though the boda job was a step up from the masonry job, it had its own challenges. We faced constant harassment from the police who often stopped or arrested us without cause or confiscated our motorbikes. Each time, we would have to pay them off to secure our release or the return of our bikes.

I had to forge ahead despite the challenges because I had big plans: to buy my own motorbike and also to get married. I left the *likilimba* and joined another with 13 members collecting \$650 every ten days. Thanks to the group savings, I was able to buy a used motorbike for \$850 and finally become my own boss. I liked the autonomy of setting my own hours, making as much money as possible, and after paying for fuel, I had a bigger profit.

The excitement of that moment paled in comparison to the day in February of 2017 when I married my beautiful wife. Our ceremony was simple; we went to the Refugee Consortium of Kenya office to register our marriage and later we hosted an evening party with fifteen of our closest friends to celebrate. Even though we didn't have a dowry, the hallmark of marriage in our tradition, our union was just as authentic and filled with love. Our first child was born in August 2018, and we have a second one on the way.

What a long way an orphaned boy from Masisi has come! In January 2019, I bought a new motorcycle for \$1180 and I now earn an extra \$25 a week from having an extra bike. My earnings allow me to take care of my family while also saving some money. After our baby is born, I intend to set up a small grocery shop for my wife so she can make some extra money. To do that, I need \$1500 starting capital, and so far I have saved \$900 through the *likilimba*. I hope to have saved up the balance so we can open the shop by March 2021.

In the future, I want to own five new motorcycles, then increase my savings to the point where I can build a wholesale shop in Kalobeyei settlement near Kakuma camp. Even as my family grows, I often think about the ones I have lost, especially the two siblings whom I last saw in 2013. I wonder if they are still alive and together, wishing that they were here with me. I wonder if, like me, they have families of their own. I think about how much more we would have accomplished if we were together.

I have a dream to own a large supermarket in the coming years, because the only ones around the camp are two small mini marts. I see this as my home now because there is nowhere else to call home. It's possible to make a home where you are. I've seen it with those who have been here for over twenty years. Many have been born here and stayed, marrying and starting families and only leaving the camp when they die. At 28 years of age, I might be here for the rest of my life or I might leave. For now, I'm doing the best that I can with what I have. Despite my incredible losses I have learned that joy can be found when you least expect it. It's the simple things like enjoying a loving wife or cradling my young son that make this place home.

Is there  
any way  
out?





*The earliest memories of my father were of a frail man who took countless pills and was in and out of hospital. I remember the number of clinics he would attend every week and the shrillness of his scream when the pain became unbearable in the night.*

Narrated by Fardhosa, 23, Kakuma

**M**y father was the first in our nuclear family to get on a plane. The first time he did, he went to Dubai for treatment, sponsored by my uncle. When he returned from that first trip, he was healthy again. He went back to work at the port, loading and offloading cargo. He brought home \$600 every month. This was split between his two families. He was polygamous, like many Somali men. His other family had five children that lived in another town in Somalia. His condition worsened abruptly, and, again, his brother took him to Dubai. This time, the cancer had spread from his liver to the rest of his body. He needed to go to the United States. No one could afford it. So, he came home, and sunk into his bed till he died when I was seven years old. It was my mother who carried the family from that moment.

Apart from the loss of my father, my childhood was filled with joy, laughter and endless wonder. In a family of six children, friendships come easily and play is bountiful. There was always food on the table, enough to fill our bellies and to keep for later.

“Fardhosa, would you like some more?” My mother would often ask me.

My mother was made for business. I know that she will one day run a revered retail business. She took on all the responsibilities

left behind by my father: rent, school fees, meals, clothes, and medication. She started a tea business in town that made her \$400 every month. Sometimes, she would be late with rent and fees but she always paid. My uncle would help at times, sending her a little money every time she asked.

Somalia was not the easiest place to live at the time. There was constant fighting, and we had to flee. The entire family planned, and in 2005, we left for Kenya. Some of our relatives had gone before us and promised that life in Kenya was better.

“There are schools, hospitals here, and they give us some money to get us started,” they said.

Staying home was a risk we couldn’t take, so we heeded their advice. From my town to Dhobley, at the border of Kenya and Somalia, it would cost us \$100 each. There were seven of us and not enough money. We couldn’t negotiate with the transporters. If we did, they would simply say, “There are many people who want to leave Somalia, just like you, and they have the money.” So, my mother paid using 80 percent of the money she had saved. The journey was long and security was a myth. We could be robbed at any time, and there were warlords manning checkpoints along the way. We needed to pay at each checkpoint to be let through.

We got to Jilib, and our luck soured. The driver lost control of the vehicle, and we were flung into a ditch. My mother fractured her clavicle and was admitted to a private hospital there. They treated her well and even threw in a discount, but still, it was way more than we could afford. The bill had amounted to \$800. With the help of the relatives we travelled with, we were able to clear the bill and proceed, continuing on without a single cent to our name.

We ate with other families on our pilgrimage, but we had to figure out how to pay our way past the checkpoints and get medication.

Through this sad, arduous journey, I questioned the place of tribalism, the reason for civil wars that brought us all to our knees, without respect for the common tongue we spoke.

We got to Daadab empty-handed, with nothing to feed us or keep us going even for a day. The journey had taken us ten days, past countless checkpoints and into my maternal aunt's arms. She received us at the bus stop and took us to the house where she and my four cousins lived. Once again, there was laughter and play and school for us all. We stayed with them for six months, sharing their rations for the first two months before getting our own ration card. In that time, their meals went from three a day to two so we could be accommodated. My mother went to the registration centre every day and queued till she got hers, and finally we could all go back to eating three meals a day.

My aunt's house was cramped with both families there. We began looking for our own place. There were many people looking to sell property, but we had very little money, so we moved to the slum at the periphery of the camp. The people who lived there were poor, mostly beggars. We stayed there till a

relative got resettled abroad and gave us his house. We were so grateful. Finally, our own place.

With the stability that came with having a home at the camp, my mother opened a retail shop at home. She got into a lot of debt with the wholesalers and dissolved the business when they began to threaten her. Our survival was now entirely dependent on the rations and stipend we got from UNHCR. Though it wasn't the best situation to live through, we appreciated not going hungry, missing school, or lacking healthcare. We were on our journey to prosperity.

After two years at Daadab, we were one of the many families instructed to move to Kakuma. We did not know the reason why, but we packed our bags and moved to a part of Kakuma that was desolate, leaving my aunt behind. The UN built tented houses for us, and we could still get our rations using the cards we got in Daadab. We missed our school and friends in Daadab.

At Kakuma, my mother enrolled my brother and me for tuition run by our neighbour. She motivated us to work hard. She always said, "It is you who will save us, you who will get us out of this misery, so study hard and pass. Get scholarships, and go abroad."

Mother got a job at the ration distribution centre. She was one of the people who would measure the rations for every family ensuring the weight was correct. It was a tiring job since countless families got their rations every day. She would get home exhausted, and my younger sister would lay a mat down for her to rest. Her monthly salary was \$40 which she used to pay our fees, get us medication, and supplement our food. She also paid for *duksi*, the Quran learning centre, and the money would be over soon after.



*At Kakuma, my mother enrolled my brother and me for tuition run by our neighbour.*

*She motivated us to work hard. She always said, "It is you who will save us, you who will get us out of this misery so study hard and pass. Get scholarships, and go abroad."*

Once my brother and I learnt a little English and Kiswahili from the neighbour's children, we were moved to public school. Fuji Primary was one of the best performing schools in the area. I spent six years there. There was encouragement from every corner from the boards of management to the students to our neighbours and in the end, my brother and I scored above 350 marks in KCPE.

We made it to Kakuma Secondary School. It produced both the top and the bottom students at the camp every year. I believed I wouldn't do well in school because I saw way too many people come back home with terrible grades. My morale went down. I was highly unmotivated and fell in with a crowd that was equally disillusioned. That's the power of negativity. It takes you by the collar and drags you down with it. My brother, on the other hand, kept studying hard, and believing that this was his road to success. He passed; I did not.

My mother was angry at me. I could not look at her with a straight face. "I'll get an old man to marry you, Fardhosa, then you can give birth to child after child and live here in the camp forever!" She did not mean it. She never did marry me off. Instead, I got

a job in 2017, at the age of 20. It was at the main hospital at the camp ran by an agency called IRC. I made \$60 every month.

I also enrolled at the Don Bosco Centre where they teach adults computer studies and technical skills like construction and tailoring. I completed my computer course after a year. My brother got a job teaching math and chemistry at a secondary school. There, he made \$60 every month.

Since he had passed his exams, he got a scholarship called DAFI run by the Windle International Kenya. They take students to Kenyan Universities and he was taken to Kenyatta University where he is pursuing his degree in medicine. He is in his third year now. From the scholarship, he gets \$500 every semester for food and accommodation. He sends \$200 to my mother. It has made her life easier.

We have a little more than we had when we first arrived at Daadab. My four siblings are in my old public primary school. My mother still reminds them to work hard like my brother on whose shoulders the entire family's future rests. He works hard at school and hopes that he will get a Windle International scholarship that takes students to England for their Masters.

I am twenty-three now, years older than when I left Somalia and still living in a camp. My hopes for relocation have fizzled almost to nothingness. The camp is a dead end, and I see no other move to make but to get married. Maybe I will be relocated before then, maybe not. Still, every day, I wonder if there is any way out for me.

# Keeping her spirits up





*I entered the world a Sudanese, born in Kenya. It's strange to have your identity tied to a place you have never seen. I have never been to Chukudum but I have heard stories. Stories of my war-torn motherland that could no longer keep my parents and older sister safe. I have heard stories of my maternal grandmother, a chang'aa (homemade alcohol) seller, who taught my mother to brew.*

Narrated by Sally, 25, Kakuma

**M**y father told me about Sudan, where he sold gold while my mother traded in cows and sheep. My family was lucky. They were able to save up and move towards peace. They pocketed the \$200 they had saved and began their pilgrimage to Kenya in 1992, paying their way through with the little Sudanese money they had.

My family arrived in Kakuma with fellow travellers, hopeful that their time at the camp would be cut short by relocation. They had dreams of resettling in Canada or America but first, they would work to give their child a better life. My parents got a stipend every month, something small to help with food and essentials. They got food rations too from organisations working at the camp.

My father worked for the National Council of Churches of Kenya (NCCCK), building houses in the camp. He was good at it. It didn't pay much, but it put food on the table and allowed him to save a little at a time. It is in those houses that my twin and I were probably conceived. We were born in 1995 at IRC hospital and soon enough we were in school. Our parents were uneducated, and

while that made it difficult for them to get work with the NGOs, they were enterprising. Soon, they would have the money to pay school fees for us at a good school just outside the camp.

We went to Kalobeyei Primary School, a Kenyan government school that performed well in those days. We made a lot of Kenyan friends there. Having the three of us at this school was a huge sacrifice for my parents. When I was in Class 5, I remember my father saying, "The teachers at the refugee school are soldiers from Sudan, Somalia, and Congo. They do their best, but they don't offer the same quality of education as the trained teachers in Kenyan schools." So, he took us to Kalobeyei. It cost \$70 per term for each of us. The total, \$210 was not easy to come by at the camp, especially not for my parents. They worked hard.

In 2002, my father started a *nyama choma* (grilled meat) business with his savings from his NCCCK work and what he had left from Sudan.

"He started with about \$8.50 only!" Mum says.

He bought meat from the Turkana people, roasted it, and sold it at a profit. He did well.

“What’s meat without a little chang’aa?” My father asked my mum, “They go well together. Customers will come for chang’aa and eat meat or come for meat and drink chang’aa...”

That was the conversation that got my mum to pay a visit to the Somali businesspeople who kept shops at the camp to stock up on molasses and yeast to brew her first batch of chang’aa. Despite the challenges that came with the business, there was good money to be made. Alcohol, especially cheap alcohol, was in high demand at the camp. That remains true today. So, their business grew. We helped sell chang’aa during our school holidays. That’s how we’d get pocket money, books, and maybe new clothes at Christmas.

We’re all grown up now. My twin sister works for an NGO in South Sudan. It’s a good job. They pay in dollars. She gets \$800 per month and sends some home. I have never left Kakuma. I would love to see what Nairobi looks like or maybe get relocated. If that doesn’t happen, I’ll go find a job in South Sudan. I can’t do that now because my children are still young, and there’s still war in Chukudum. Just last week, the village was raided, people were killed, and their livestock stolen. That’s no place to raise a child.

In 2014, I responded to an ad looking for a teacher. I went for the interview and was informed via SMS that I had been successful. I worked as a protection teacher for an NGO. I taught the children brought into the centre. Some had been rescued from child marriages while some were children of mothers rescued from abusive situations. Most of us at the camps face social concerns. We need a place to seek refuge and that’s what the NGO is.

I prefer working with children more than with adults. The job was good. It helped me take care of my child and save up to start my own chang’aa business. I opened an Equity account with my manifest so I could receive my salary. It was \$52 per month. I bought 18 kilos of sugar and a kilo of yeast at \$18 from the Somali shopkeepers and firewood worth \$2 from our Turkana neighbours. It’s easy to make a profit with this business. Life is not easy at the camp, and people want to take the edge off. They don’t have a lot of money for branded alcohol so chang’aa works for us all.

From that initial investment, I made thirty litres of chang’aa. The first five litres of the batch is the most concentrated and highly priced. We call it Number One. In the beginning, I sold that for \$15. It’s gone up now and goes for \$20. Then there’s the Number Two. I get about twenty-five litres of this. It’s less concentrated. I add five litres of water and I have thirty litres to sell. I used to sell five litres of Number Two at \$4.50. Now, each litre goes for \$1. From 2014 to 2018, I made \$42 every three to four days. When I deducted my capital, I made a profit of \$22 on each batch. Since 2019, I have made \$50 worth every three to four days. Giving me a profit of \$29 with every batch. See, it’s not bad.

I am mostly a wholesale trader, but whatever amount a customer wants, I sell that to them too. Retail requires too much waiting around, and it’s too risky. The police are always on our case. They raid your home, they break things, hurl mattresses looking for money. Many people save their money under their mattresses. My mother pays protection to the police. Every month, she pays \$20 for all of us since we do it as a family business. Sometimes, their bosses want more. They arrest us, and we have to pay \$50 to be released. We can’t stop them then.



*In 2014, I responded to an ad looking for a teacher. I went for the interview and was informed via SMS that I had been successful. I worked as a protection teacher for an NGO. I taught the children brought into the centre. Some had been rescued from child marriages while some were children of mothers rescued from abusive situations. Most of us at the camps face social concerns. We need a place to seek refuge and that's what the NGO is.*

Even with the risks involved, my business has helped me save. I save \$30 a month after I buy food and medication for my children and pay \$4.50 for Zuku TV. That takes about \$90 every month. My savings helped me buy two big brewing barrels, a big one and a small one which I got for \$35 and \$20 respectively I was also able to buy a brewing pipe for \$60. I make a little extra money renting my equipment out when I'm not using it. I never lack customers looking to rent my equipment. I can even rent to two people a day at \$1.50 each. I make between \$70-90 a month in rental income.

This business has been a blessing for me. I got laid off from the NGO during my maternity leave because of Covid-related budget cuts. Still, with my business, I have something going that will allow me to take my firstborn

to a private school outside the camp next year. I live with my parents in a *mabati* (iron sheet) house I built myself. The UNHCR ones were old and collapsed every time it rained. We have a TV, Zuku, and a solar panel, all of which I bought with my savings.

My mother is our bank. She doesn't trust the banks, and opening an account is complicated anyway. You have to use the manifest. Sometimes, my uncle in the US sends money for our grandfather. He sends via M-Pesa. I had registered my line with the manifest, but whenever he sends a lot of money, I have trouble getting it, because refugees aren't supposed to have a lot of money on their M-Pesa accounts. I'd have to take my documents to Safaricom for them to sort out the issue. Viola, my friend from school, helped me register a line with her Kenyan ID. Now it's easier. My uncle sends up to \$500 every few months. Since there's no M-Pesa in South Sudan, my sister just sends cash with a friend when he comes to visit Kakuma by bus.

I have Bamba Chakula too. It was introduced by WFP in 2018. You use your biometrics to register and every month, you get \$5 to your M-Pesa to use for food at selected stores. Since the lockdown, they have been giving food every two months in double rations.

This is the life I have known. Still, I hope for a better life for myself and my two daughters. I hope they won't spend their whole lives here in the camp like me.

# My mother, my hero



*I was born in South Sudan, and I lived in Lorema with my twin sister, three other siblings, and our parents. My parents were small scale farmers, raising a few heads of cattle and growing food. Most of the food was for our own consumption.*

*Lorema, as with much of South Sudan, was wracked by frequent droughts and famine, with protracted civil wars making our lives very difficult. Many families were displaced by the conflict and the hunger. In 1998, my parents bundled up their young family, taking with them only the things they could carry and fled on foot.*

Narrated by Millicent, 24, Kakuma



**W**hen we arrived at the border, we boarded a vehicle that took us the rest of the way to Kakuma.

My father got us as far as the border then had to return to Lorema to look after my grandmother. She was too old to make the journey. It was several years before I saw my father again. My mother described to me how difficult the journey to Kenya was. We suffered bouts of diarrhoea and we were severely malnourished. At many points in the journey, she wasn't sure that we would survive. When we got to Kakuma, we were immediately hospitalized and enrolled into a feeding program. There were so many children like us who were clinging onto life. Once we made a full recovery, we moved into the house assigned to us by UNHCR. It was a mud house with iron sheet roofing and a fence of trees that circled it.

We didn't hear much from my father, and mother was now solely responsible for us. To earn money, she would make mandazi using the flour and cooking oil she received from the food rations. She would then sell them, earning about \$1 on a good day which wasn't much at all. I don't know how, but she kept going.

When I was four, I started school in the camp. The school was free for all the children residing in the camp, making it possible for my siblings and me to attend. I enjoyed going to school, learning, and making friends. We also received a meal at school which was also a great incentive to keep going. Learning came easy to me though my twin sister struggled and was held back one class. I did well enough in the national exam to qualify for a scholarship for my secondary education. The scholarship was offered by an NGO that worked in the camp and targeted refugee girls who had a minimum pass mark of 230 in the national exam. I scored 292!

In 2005, my younger brother fell ill but was unable to get treatment in Kakuma. My mother made the decision to take him back to South Sudan believing his chances were better there. When she asked me if I wanted to go back or stay, I decided to go back thinking that we would return in a month's time. My older sister and cousin stayed behind. When we got back to South Sudan, I was surprised to learn that my father had remarried and started a new family. Mother remained stoic, keeping whatever she was feeling inside. The relationship between my mother and my father's new wife was not a cordial one. The new wife was abusive towards my mother while my father looked on passively, not wanting to get involved. While my father was establishing his new family, he neglected my mother as she struggled to raise their children in the camp.

When my brother recovered, my father's continued lack of interest in us made the decision to return to Kakuma in 2006 an easy one. There was also school to go back to. I graduated from secondary school in 2016, then enrolled in a technical institute to study agriculture. After I completed the course, I received another scholarship from the Danish Refugee Council and enrolled at the Masinde Muliro University satellite campus in Kakuma. I took a certificate course in Disaster Management and Humanitarian Assistance, which I completed in 2018.

Given my life experience as a refugee, studying this course felt almost like a calling. I have a job now working as a clerk in an NGO youth programme and earn \$60 per month.

I have a savings account in the bank where I put away \$15 per month, spending \$30 per month on groceries and \$15 to support my two brothers through school. I don't have an M-Pesa account though I know how to use one. Because she has struggled with ill health

*I save \$180 per year and spend \$90 per year on my brothers' tuition. My plan is to return to South Sudan and get a higher-paying job and accelerate my savings.*

since 2015, my mother no longer sells mandazi. My older sister has children now, two beautiful girls, and works as teacher in the same organisation as me, earning \$60 per month. I visit her as often as I can. My twin sister also has a daughter. She lives with my mother until she can afford to get her own place. My father came to Kakuma in 2017 to visit us then returned to South Sudan a short while later. I didn't think he cared much about us; his visit left me confused. Owing to the poor cellular network where he lives, we don't have much contact.

I would like to enrol in a diploma program but it costs \$1400, an amount I simply can't afford at the moment. I save \$180 per year and spend \$90 per year on my brothers' tuition. My plan is to return to South Sudan and get a higher-paying job and accelerate my savings. My goal is save the \$1400 required for the diploma. If I remain in the camp, I'm not likely to get a job that will pay me more. I also want to be able to help my mother set up a business so she can be self-sufficient again.

My family means the world to me as do my friends, my work colleagues, and the youth I work with. They give me emotional support, so important given the environment in which we live. Most of all I'm grateful for the sacrifices my mother made and continues to make to ensure we have a better life. When I think about her fleeing her home to come to a place where she didn't know anyone, having no resources and having to take of children by herself, I can't help but be proud of her. She inspires me to do the best I can and to continue to chase my dreams.



# \$ave the best for first

*The world needs saving. My country needs saving. You know what else needs saving? Money. To save yourself from pain, discomfort and stress; save your money. I am where I am because of saving my resources, being very selective of how and when I spent the little money I used to get after we had to flee our home and become refugees in a foreign country.*

Narrated by Suleiman, 35, Kakuma

**I**t has been a long and painful journey to today, speaking to you, but I believe it was all for a reason. Life is not perfect now, not yet, but it is so much better than it was not too long ago. There have been many, many downs, but also a lot of ups. It all comes down to a lesson my father taught me—or at least influenced—when I was younger. That is this story.

When I was a child, like most children, I had no financial responsibilities. All my needs were covered by my parents, specifically by my father. In our society, it was the father's responsibility to put food on the table. My father owned big trucks which transported goods around my country. We never asked Dad who gave him the trucks he owned, but sometimes my mother would tell us stories about my paternal grandfather's wealth from all the livestock he had.

My father used to give me around \$2 weekly for allowances. I thought that it was out of love, but later I realized that he wanted to teach me how to manage the money. He wanted to teach me how to save. Since all my basic needs were covered, I saved my allowance bit by bit to buy myself toys. I could never have enough of those. No matter how expensive a toy was, I knew I could get it if I saved.

On one fateful night, when I was about 17, heavy artillery bombardment and shelling started in the middle of the night. Our house shook like it never had before. We hid under our beds and waited for morning. We were scared but we knew we had each other. The next morning, we discovered that part of the house had been demolished. That part of the house was our parents' room. They were both dead.

Although I was a teenager, I was the eldest in a family of four and I suddenly found myself solely responsible for my three siblings. I

didn't know where to start. After the funeral ceremony, there was not a single penny to provide food for us. Fortunately, neighbours came together and made contributions to help us restart our shattered lives. Some of my relatives began the process of claiming the big trucks we thought Dad owned. To our dismay, we found out that he was a partner in the company and not the owner. Only one truck was actually his, and after endless arguments, we never even got that. I was running out of options and had to find a source of income to help my family.

I got a job selling petrol from a nice woman who lived in our neighbourhood. She paid me \$20 a day, which I used to buy groceries for the family. Since I was an enthusiastic and hardworking kid, I gained the trust of the customers to the extent that they would give me tips, which was not common practice. I made a lot of money for the business as almost all the cars in the city used to buy from our petrol station after they heard my story. The business flourished, and I got a raise. This meant I could repair our damaged house where we were still living. Repairing the house cost around \$1000 which was the highest amount of money that I had ever spent.

Our lives became better, thanks to the reliable source of income I had. I could pay school fees for two of my siblings. The third one, my sister, took care of basic necessities for the family. She was magnificent. She cooked and cleaned for all of us and somehow found time to attend a private school where she learnt languages and basic arithmetic. One major problem that affected our lives was the lack of government in the country. Robbery was rampant, and I lost large amounts of money in several incidents as there were no working banks, which meant I had to keep my savings at home.



*My business is growing and so are my savings. I will be ready to restart our life afresh once we are relocated. Of all the things my father taught me, saving has been the most valuable and I will surely pass it on to my children.*

Despite the robberies, we had nowhere to go. This was the only life we knew. One day, out of the blue, the woman I worked for suggested leaving Somalia for the refugee camps in Kenya. It was a difficult decision to make. I pondered the effects of uprooting my family from all they had ever known and taking them into a new unknown land. I consulted with my sister, and together, we decided to leave. After a long, arduous journey, we reached Kakuma Refugee Camp. We had no one to receive us or money to start with. The UNHCR gave us two tents, food and plastic containers for collecting water. We would have to start from scratch.

The woman I used to work for made us a deal. She would provide financially for myself and my siblings as we went to school. My siblings and I got enrolled in a nearby primary school where I got the chance to restart my education. Unfortunately, this wonderful woman was taken ill, and the finances dried up. I applied for and got a job as a security officer for one of the aid organisations in the camp. The job paid \$60 a month, and I was grateful because it enabled our survival. I continued working as a security officer and going to school for some years. Because of the dual responsibilities, my grades suffered, and I missed out on scholarships after completing secondary school. This was

disheartening as I saw some of my friends who passed get those scholarships. I was bitter and felt that I had wasted my years in school.

Sometime later, a renowned local businessman asked my sister's hand in marriage. It would have been foolish to refuse the offer, I thought. The man helped us build a big house made of iron sheets and provided us with cooking oil, wheat flour, rice, spaghetti, and other nice things. We could go to his shop and take all the essentials we needed for the house. On top of that, he gave me a job at his shop and paid me \$300 per month. Remembering the lesson from my father, I saved two-thirds of my salary for two years. The diligence paid off. With over \$5000 saved over the years, I joined a group of businessmen who used to sell food and began a fruitful partnership. We would transport grain and livestock to the neighbouring communities, a flourishing business that made a profit of about \$1500 per month. Out of this, I continued to save two-thirds every month.

In 2015, I got married. My wife lives in Nairobi with our three kids, and I pay for all their necessities like the rent which costs \$300 per month. I visit them frequently, but I cannot live with them because I have a lot of customers here in Kakuma, and I am afraid that if I go to Nairobi, I will lose out to the stiff competition in the market. I do not want to lose the goodwill that I have worked so hard to build. Maybe one day, when I feel I have done enough, I will move to Nairobi.

I have been lucky enough to establish two more shops and even employ some workers. Unlike Somalia, Kakuma has better security and a functioning banking system. My two youngest siblings also have shops in the camp now. We live a relatively comfortable life here now as we wait for resettlement by the UN.

*I would like to go to America because I always hear from some friends that in America you can earn a good living and it is a very wealthy country.*

Resettlement is the hope that all the refugees at the camp have. You don't apply, you are chosen and called for an interview. If you pass the first interview, you will proceed to the next stage where a certain country will sponsor you.

These countries include the USA, Canada, Germany, Sweden, and Ireland. If a country sponsors you, you go for a medical exam and then get your visa and exit permit processed. I would like to go to America because I always hear from some friends that in America you can earn a good living and it is a very wealthy country.

My business is growing and so are my savings. I will be ready to restart our life afresh once we are relocated. Of all the things my father taught me, saving has been the most valuable and I will surely pass it on to my children.





# To lose is to find

*I have done many things in my life but never did I imagine that I would rear crickets for sale. Who knew cricket eggs had economic value? Not I, not till I got here. I was born in 1975 at the Royal capital of Burundi, the ninth of twelve children: five girls and seven boys. Nine of us are still alive.*

Narrated by Ciza, 45, Kakuma

**M**y mother was a teacher and my father, a territory administrator since the 1950s. We had fifty cows, some of which died during the 1993 crisis. We lived well, in a palatial home with a big green compound replete with avocado, guava, passion, and pawpaw trees. When my father retired in 1985, we moved to Bujumbura. The move made no sense to me. I had only spent 11 of my happiest years at the Royal Capital. I was leaving all that behind.

In Bujumbura, we lived in the house my father built, a six-roomed house made of stone and roofed with clay tiles. It wasn't as beautiful as the house at the Royal Capital, but I learnt to like it. Since my father was retired and my brothers were older and working, my father's pension and my elder brothers' contributions kept us afloat.

I left home in 2003 and moved into the hostels at the Université de Burundi where I was an undergraduate student. It was then that I began making my own money. From a temporary job I got teaching high school French, I made around \$55, monthly.

Oh, the parties we would have, and the nice clothes we wore! My friends, siblings, and I would go out. We were stylish kids back then, so the money also came in handy when it was time to buy clothes. I only started to think about saving in 2005 while in my final year at school. I knew I needed to rent a house after graduation and that it would need to be furnished. Into the savings account I opened at Banque Populaire, I began to deposit 50% of my earnings.

Teaching has always been more than a passion for me. I did not sit and wonder



what to do after graduation. I moved back home to live with my parents and continued teaching. I mostly taught in private schools where I was paid \$68 monthly and earned extra from coaching private students. Each student would pay about \$22 per month. My students increased gradually from four to eleven students who paid a total of \$250 per month.

My father died in 2007, leaving me with the Royal Capital home that I loved. I looked for a job close by so it would be feasible for me to make the shift and settle in. The government offered me a position as a national school teacher in 2010. My monthly salary was about \$100, which I saved in my Banque Populaire account. See, I was planning for marriage, and I needed to be as prepared as I could be. The only money I spent was from the students I coached. Again, I started with seven students in their final year. The students paid \$15 each month.

At this time, everything was falling into place. I was following my passion, living the life I always wanted. My students were increasing rapidly. I had 21 students within a short time. During holidays, I would even need to hire a 30-seater tent, because the student numbers just kept growing. I would hire a tent and some chairs for \$63 and set them up in my compound. At the end of the month, I would be left with \$300 after paying for the tent.

There was always something to celebrate.

Natalie and I got married in February 2011. We had known each other a while, since high school in fact. There was a huge celebration. My family brought three indigenous cows as dowry. These came from my father's estate as was customary. The entire budget for my wedding and the reception party was \$4000. The money I had been saving came in

handy. I contributed \$1500, and the rest was contributed by friends and family.

My life was complete. I was doing what I love, living in a house I love with a woman I love, and we had been blessed with a beautiful daughter, Denise, in July 2012. Work was also going well and I got a promotion.

“You can now call me Mr Headteacher.” I announced to my wife one fine day in January 2013.

My monthly salary went up to \$200. Now, I could save big, and every month I put away \$130-\$150. The job came with allowances which I used to support my family and myself. My wife set up a shop at the extension along our fence in 2014. It was a general shop that cost \$900 to build and stock. Out of the initial stock that cost \$700, the profit was \$14 in the first three months. As people become familiar with the shop, her profits grew. By the end of the year, she would make a profit of about \$75 per month.

There was a growing sense of stability with Natalie's business taking off, my promotion, and the coaching services I offered. My friend Jermaine and I began toying with the idea of building our own secondary school. He worked in the county government at the time. We laid out our plan. It would take us eight years to accomplish. We began to save towards buying about five hectares of land in 2015, the same year our second beautiful baby girl was blessed to us.

The political situation became volatile in 2015. Propaganda against the Tutsi spread like wildfire. The ruling party had been primarily made up of the Hutu for quite some time. Despite the persecution propaganda, we went ahead and bought the land in 2018. four hectares at six Million francs (about \$3050 today).

All this time, the situation had not been of any particular threat to my family and me, but soon enough, it drew closer. We heard stories from neighbouring towns and felt the threat heating up. In 2019, it was certain. They were after us, the Tutsi, especially the government officials and individuals with high social standing. Now, being born of royal descent and having influence in my community put me and my family at risk. I was among the targeted people in my area, and I was going to protect my family with all I had.

“There’s an urgent meeting I must attend,” I told Natalie.

“Where will you be going?”

“Bujumbura.”

“For how long?”

“I will not be sure until I get there.”

I did not go to Bujumbura. Instead, I escaped to Ngozi, near the Rwandan border, in April 2019 with the \$400 I had saved at home. No one should save all their money in a bank, especially when the country is unstable. They may be forced to make a dash like I did and survive a while without being tracked. For three months, I stayed away from my family with no communication whatsoever.

My wife ran her business as usual. She had an answer for anyone who asked after me. I was on a work trip. Jermaine and I were preparing a grant document to garner support from the government to help us begin construction of the school. As this was a community contribution to development, we would get further ahead, faster, with their support. In those three months, Jermaine and I lost contact. I changed my number so there really was no way to reach me.

In July 2019, I returned home, not to stay but to take my family away. A hired car ferried

me from Ngozi to my home then to Kanyaru border with my family. The driver went back to Burundi after dropping us at the Rwandan border. That trip cost me \$96. It took us three days to travel from Kanyaru to Nairobi. We arrived one morning in July 2019 at 7 am. Everyone knows that the police are the best people to give you directions when you are new or lost. We sought the help of a policeman at the bus stop. “Sir, we’re refugees. We have just arrived from Burundi. Do you know where we can be helped?”

He quickly got us a tuk-tuk which took us to the Refugee Affairs Secretariat (RAS) offices in Shauri Moyo where we spent the day before being driven to the Kangemi Transit Centre in a UNHCR vehicle with our movement passes in hand. Three days later, we began our journey to Kakuma.

“Did you know you were going to Kakuma?” A fellow refugee asked.

“No. I only knew there was a Nairobi in Kenya.” I said waving the pass at him, “The only time I have seen the name Kakuma is on this movement pass.”

My wife had with her the little money she had saved from the shop. I had not checked on the savings I had at the bank since fleeing. With me, I only had my cell phone.

We arrived at the Kakuma reception centre that same evening and spent four long months there. Every time we asked when we would get settled in, they said they were waiting for our information from the RAS office in Nairobi. The food was bad, we lived miserably, and our children kept falling ill.

While at the reception area, we saw an advert for a Human Rights Course in Geneva University, offered by Inzone Kakuma. My wife and I applied.



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We got into the six-month-long programme. Luckily, they provided our transport to and from the campus.

In late November, 2019, we were finally allocated a place in Zone 2. It was a single-roomed tented house with an iron sheet roof, three by six meters in size. We continued with our course, and started to grow a kitchen garden beside the house to supplement the WFP rations and Bamba Chakula.

We made friends within the community and at Inzone. Our children would play together. Our Somali neighbour loved our vegetable garden and pointed us to an NGO that supports basic home projects. I went to the office to get some information, they came for an assessment, and offered me support.

They gave *sukuma wiki* (kale) seedlings and introduced me to cricket farming. For someone who never gave the chirping crickets a second thought, I have taken to the business quite well. Six-months in, I

sell both mature crickets and cricket eggs. One plate of cricket eggs goes for 50 cents while a plate of mature crickets goes for \$3-\$4. The NGO buys the eggs for incubation to help other farmers begin the business. My main customers for mature crickets are the Congolese who eat them as meat while others make biscuits from them.

My sister lives in Australia now, and, every so often, she sends me \$150 through World Remit to my M-Pesa account. My biggest expense is feeding my family and getting them medical care. Food is expensive here and so is medication. Still, I save about \$12 every month on my M-Pesa account.

Since getting to the camp, I have not managed to get a job. It doesn't help that schools are closed due to the pandemic. I would love to write books someday. That is my main aspiration after getting out of this camp and possibly being relocated to Australia where my sister lives. She was lucky, she did not have to pass through the camp. She was unified with her husband who was there already. She has been of great help, gathering the immigration forms we need to fill and sending them via email to me with written guidance on how to fill them.

I have lost contact with everyone in Burundi, but every once in a while, I get messages from my brothers in France and South Africa and my sister who fled to Canada years before I did.

Though I left everything behind, a home I loved from childhood, a life, and livelihood, I have hope for my future and that of my family. We will rear the crickets and farm here as long as we are to stay. When we leave, we will be on to better things and you can call me Mr Ciza, the author, then.





*That poem today lives in the heart of my mother and my other six sisters. My mother was born and raised in a small remote village in the southern part of Somalia, and at the age of sixteen, she got married to my father. Though this was not an arranged marriage, probably it was not her dream to marry at an early age.*

By Zamzam Abdikadir Juma, Winner of the FIND Essay Contest

**W**ith war, drought, and famines everywhere inside Somalia, my mom couldn't realize her dream of being a doctor. In late 1996, after ten days of labor pains with no doctor, a beautiful baby girl was born. No one could have imagined that either the mother or the child would survive. However, anyone could notice the relief, smile, and happiness from the mother's face when she received the news that she gave birth to a healthy baby girl.

You can't imagine this is my story. I am the firstborn girl-child, and many within the community were disappointed that I was not a boy. In Somali tradition, when a boy is born two goats or camels are slaughtered. One goat for the mother to celebrate the occasion. There was no celebration when I was born. No one dared to hand the newborn to my father; he was expecting a boy.

No one could feel my mother's pain during her ten days of labor, and just because she gave birth to a girl, all her struggle and pain was forgotten. My journey into the world itself was a dream collapsed.

I was born in a "music zone." This is what I call the sound of gunshots that peppered my ears throughout my childhood in Somalia. We were living as a family, together with my grandparents, my maternal aunt, and uncles. Our small house seemed beautiful with my both grandparents around. I was my grandparents' favorite grandchild, and I used to hear the stories of great heroes like Queen Araweelo from my grandmother. My grandparents were more than anyone else; they were the keepers of family stories and the stories of the generations who came before.

At the age of eight, I was used to the violence. Whenever there was a nearby shooting, people would curiously run towards it so that they could see and witness who died.

In every shooting or war, the livelihoods of families were stripped away.

Safety and happiness have no room for Somali people living in Somalia; fear and peril became our only friends. I never wondered when they said "Home is always sweet" or that the wounds of fear would heal like a drop of rain in the desert. In three days people forgot those who died, and the normal journey of living continued. Society pulled the walls of life. They carried on their daily lives.

Children went to schools and *madrassas*, where every Somali child goes to learn the Quran. My mother told me I started madrasa around three years old. While learning the Quran is viewed as mandatory, the reality is that household chores and parental views keep many girls from learning any academic things.

By the age of eight, I looked like the most grown up, mature, and reliable girl you have ever come across. I would wake up at the first light of the day and prepare morning tea for the rest of the family. By 6:30 am, I served breakfast for everybody and then got ready for the *duksi* (madrasa schoolhouse). I was not talkative nor a troublemaker like other girls. I was quiet, poised, and calculated. I would then join all the other girls without a book under my arm, a blotch of black ink on my hand. I started living the same way other girls live.

On Friday (Thursday and Friday is weekend in Somalia), girls divide their time between the normal regular chores and laundry. I was washing the clothes of the house by hand, and my young sister was washing dishes when we heard a group of women outside our compound saying that our father was getting married again, and in our imagination we started to think what that would entail.



*By the age of eight, I looked like the most grown up, mature, and reliable girl you have ever come across. I would wake up at the first light of the day and prepare morning tea for the rest of the family.*

With my hands full of foam I came running and asked my mother if the news was true and she confirmed yes. “Your father has been with this woman for almost a year, and I got the news today that he is getting married,” my mother said in a low and sad voice. Part of me felt sad for her, knowing well what she had been going through just to prove that she was the best wife for him and perfect mother to us.

The next day when I came to the madrasa, my friends started their gossiping about us, and one of the things they were saying was “No man wants a woman who is always giving birth to girls.” They started calling my mother names: “the girl factory,” “the cursed one,” “the barren.” Those names hit my mother on the head much harder than a heavy stone. She refused to let us see her pain.

In front of us, she was always smiling, loving, caring, and most importantly a mother who proudly said she had beautiful daughters equal to any boys around. In the same year that our father was getting married again, my mom was pregnant with her fifth child, another girl. As usual, everyone hoped a boy would be born. As sisters, we just hoped our mother would get through the birth in good health.

One morning as we were in the madrasa, we were interrupted by a teacher who told us we would not be going home that day. We would stay in the madrasa, since it was a “safer” place. They didn’t tell us what was

happening, but we knew there must be a problem somewhere.

An hour later, I saw my mother coming towards us, crying and screaming “Run! Run! Run!” I ran towards her and she hugged me and pulled me running towards our house. On our way running, a bomb exploded near our house. Gunshots started. We had to shift directions due to the gravity of the shootings. Reaching our house, another bomb exploded, and the walls of our house collapsed. In my open eyes, I saw my grandparents being injured. Blood was everywhere. I started crying. That was my last day in my home country.

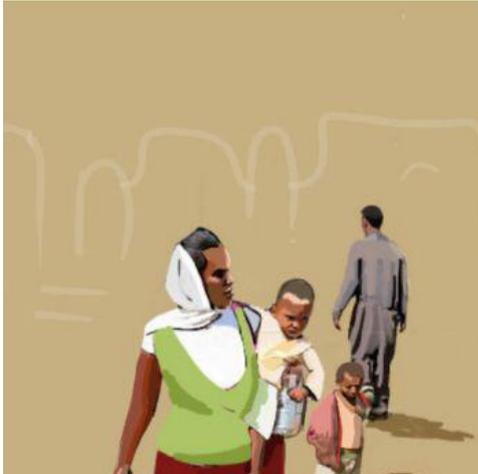
I took nothing other than my tiny hijab full of blood. We left behind our father, our grandparents, relatives, and friends. I still remember my mother carrying a baby on her back. We were walking, but I didn't know where we were going. In a rough journey of one full month by road, we finally ended up in Kenya’s highest populated refugee camp. We were given shelters and food to eat. My ears were relieved to no longer hear the sounds of gunfire. I was thrilled to be starting my dream of getting an education.

The next 13 years were full of challenges and commitments. Today, I can say that I am resilient. I am happy that I am writing my own story, and I can proudly say that I am a refugee. I sometimes wonder why people regret this journey, because I believe if I had not ended up in a refugee camp, I would have never experienced education, freedom, peace, or stability. Today no one can say that I am less than the boy that my father wanted.

Every human being is unique and every woman and girl deserves honor and I believe they are honored when they were given the wings to fly by educating them and giving them equality. For some of us, it took a war to learn our lives were indeed worth living.







Refuge? is a compelling collection of first-hand accounts of refugees living in Kenya, telling their own stories of the disruption of war, the challenge of flight, and the ongoing struggle to rebuild a life in Kenya under enduring uncertainty. These stories were collected through Tufts University's Finance in Displacement (FIND) project, which trained community-based biographers in Kakuma, Mombasa, and Nairobi to capture their own stories and those of neighbours and friends. Each story offers a new way to understand the circumstances—sometimes dramatic, and sometimes more subtle accumulations of loss—that lead so many in the region to flee their homes looking for safety, school, and new beginnings. They provide a behind-the-fence view into what it really takes to restore one's dignity and find a sense of purpose and financial independence as foreigners—refugees—in Kenya, often isolated in Dadaab and Kakuma. Together they ask us to reflect on what it means to provide refuge and what it takes to restore hope.

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