

A LONG WALK



TO GEORGETOWN

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

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

In 1985, Medhin "Meddy" Tekle began her journey to America on foot, wearing a *habesha qemis*, the traditional Ethiopian long cotton dress and a shawl. "Blend in" is what she was told. With 200 *birr* (about \$20 U.S.) her mother had sewn in the hem of her dress and identification papers secured for her by the local Catholic church, Meddy set out at dusk, following

her paid escorts through wooded and mountainous terrain. At the end of the first night, she collapsed onto a makeshift bed of twigs and eucalyptus leaves. "The furthest I had ever walked was a mile, maybe," she said. They walked eight hours each night through low-lying podocarpus bushes and high-standing thickets of 500-year-old African junipers, with their long necks and airy bonnets. Night travel allowed them to elude government troops known to canvas the area for escapees. They slept during the sweltering heat of the day.

Born in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, a city in the northwest region of Ethiopia, Meddy was one of nine children. Raised by a loving but strict mother and a quiet but present father, Meddy and her eight siblings were close. They ate and walked to school together and fought, as siblings do. Most children in their village attended school, but for Ethiopian young adults, especially girls, the future was bleak. Until they married, ►

BY
ALICEA
JONES

PHOTOS BY
TODD
WHITE

“IT SOUNDED SO EASY. YOU JUST PAID THE MONEY AND THEY [SMUGGLERS] WOULD GET YOU TO AMERICA.”

A LONG WALK *from page 39*

girls lived with their parents and didn't work or have a career because there were no jobs. The 1980s was a time of famine, drought, and political unrest in Ethiopia. And college was an option only for those who maintained a 4.0 average in high school. Of Meddy's eight siblings, only two went to university in Ethiopia.

BIRTH OF A DREAM

Meddy had seen picturesque photos of the United States and dreamed about living there. Two of her siblings had already migrated to America. So, when she was 17, she decided to do what many people in oppressed countries do: escape.

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

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

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

Meddy remained at the rebel camp for a month. When they were sure of safe passage, the rebels loaded her and the other refugees in a truck and drove them to Gondar, a city close to the Sudanese border, where hundreds of tents

sprawled across a dry, flat expanse, like dusty pyramids. The border guards rationed Meddy a sack of flour, lentils, oil, salt, and a can of butter that she later learned the refugees used to make candles. She ripped the stitches from her hem and hid the 200 *birr* under her pillow.

LOST AND FOUND

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

One evening, a man who was staying in her tent knocked over a gas lamp, and the tent caught fire.

She remembers being dragged out of the tent, but it wasn't until morning that Meddy, still consumed with fever, peered up from her bed of compacted dry earth and realized that her money and identification papers had been eaten up by the fire.

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

It had been eight months since Meddy left home. Worried and needing to know whether she was alive, Meddy's mother sent her son Samson to search for Meddy. He tracked her to Khartoum,



Medhin “Meddy” Tekle

where he posted flyers in the district where he had learned she might be. A month later, Samson found Meddy. With the sponsorship of her brother and sisters and an airline ticket secured by the Catholic Church, Meddy landed on American soil on August 2, 1989, and lived with her siblings in Maryland.

She found a job sweeping floors at 7-Eleven. “I didn't speak a lick of English, so all I [did] was nod and smile,” she says. Meddy has worked for 7-Eleven for 22 years and is now franchise owner of the Georgetown store.

Watching Meddy work, one marvels at how this almost-five-foot-tall, thin-as-a-reed woman keeps up with such a busy operation. She monitors the eighteen-wheelers that fill the underground gas tanks, manages a rotating shift of employees, and makes sure that the shelves stay stocked with pick-up-and-go merchandise. Meddy is living the American dream: hard work and business ownership. Had she known at 17 in Ethiopia what it would cost to get to America, would she have still paid the price? Absolutely. ■